Community Needs Assessment Survey
Blue Hill, NE
November 2012

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In partnership with
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Introduction

On January 10, 2012 the City of Blue Hill passed Resolution 2012-1, requesting that the South Central Economic Development District (SCEDD) assist with a community needs assessment survey of their community. During the summer of 2012, Lee Ostdiek, City Council member, notified SCEDD that they were ready to move forward with the survey. Funds and volunteers for this survey were provided by the City of Blue Hill, Blue Hill Community Club, Blue Hill Community Schools, South Central State Bank and Glenwood Communications.

Methodology

Based on the utility list of households provided by the City Clerk, a survey was delivered to each household within the corporate limits of the city. Twenty-seven residents not within the corporate limits of Blue Hill also participated in the survey.

In 2012, several focus groups were formed and led by fellow Blue Hill citizens. These groups met and identified key benefits as well as areas of concern. The issues identified were utilized to develop survey questions that would be most meaningful to the members of the community and its leadership. Questions within the survey addressed the following components of community development:

- Community & Infrastructure
- Business & Economic Development
- Child Care & Education
- Housing & Neighborhoods
- Health & Human Services
- Demographics

Volunteers, trained by SCEDD staff, personally delivered and picked up surveys during the week of September 16th thru the 23rd. Each survey had an attached cover letter and envelope. The cover letter explained the reason for the survey and the necessity of answering each question honestly and completely. The envelope was for each resident to seal their survey to ensure confidentiality. A copy of the survey and instructions are located in the appendix.

The community displayed a strong turnout as 406 households within the corporate limits received a survey. Of those 406 households, 356 households returned a completed survey while 10 houses turned out to be vacant. The return of surveys resulted in a response rate of 89.9%.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Total Households Surveyed</th>
<th>406</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Less Vacancies</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total Deliverable</td>
<td>396</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total Returned and Scanned</td>
<td>356</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Response Rate</td>
<td>89.9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vacancy Rate (households inside Blue Hill)</td>
<td>2.5%</td>
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Results

Community & Infrastructure
The citizens of Blue Hill have consistently expressed a desire to increase the amount of small businesses and households in their community. Private development is naturally attracted to communities with strong capacity to provide quality public services to include: clean water; reliable wastewater systems; quality road system; strong emergency services; consistently enforced local laws; and a competent and professional police force. Community service and infrastructure issues identified by the 2010 focus groups dealt mainly with street and sidewalk improvement, the removal of vacant and dilapidated properties, the condition of the swimming pool, and local law enforcement.

The survey questioned residents about their perception of the community’s public services and appearance. Emergency services ranked highest as the percent of respondents rating fire protection and the local EMT squad as excellent or good was 90% and 77% respectively. City parks and recycling were rated overall as good. Control of loose pets and quality of law enforcement received the lowest rankings as two thirds of respondents rated each of these as fair or poor.

In addition to city services, the questionnaire asked about the overall appearance of the community and residential areas. Eighty percent of respondents rated the general appearance of their community as excellent or good and 72% rated the appearance of Blue Hill’s residential areas as excellent or good.

The condition of streets, sidewalks, and the swimming pool were also rated by respondents. Two-thirds of respondents rated the swimming pool in excellent or good condition and one-fourth rated the pool as fair. One-third of respondents rated the streets and sidewalks as excellent or good condition, nearly half as fair, and one in five rated them as poor.
Residents that did not have a paved street in front of their home were asked if they would be willing to pay $7 per lineal foot of their frontage for curb and gutter construction if the City of Blue Hill paid for the paving portion. A total of 257 respondents answered this question; the majority (60%) would not be willing to pay. However, 103 residents indicated a willingness to pay for curb and gutter.

Residents were questioned about whether or not the city should annex property in order to support residential development. Over half of those responding felt the city should annex additional land.

The city’s ability to enforce nuisance codes was evident, as 83% stated the community has definitely or probably made progress removing nuisance items from inside the city limits. Regarding the clean-up of vacant and dilapidated properties 81% stated the city has probably or definitely made progress.

Residents were asked to rate the need for select projects in Blue Hill; a majority of respondents stated that street paving and curb and gutter construction are definitely or probably needed, 86% and 80% respectively. The need for downtown curb and gutter was indicated by 66%. There was less support for recreation projects, new trails were definitely or probably needed by 53%; the new swimming pool was only supported by 35%, while 65% stated it was definitely not or probably not needed.
When asked what types of housing is needed in Blue Hill, respondents could select multiple answers. Affordable housing and apartments were selected 150 times each as the most needed type of housing in Blue Hill. Market rate housing was the next most popular choice with less support for rental retirement housing.

Of the 358 respondents that voiced an opinion about expanding Maple Street to Highway 281, over half (57%) were in favor. Of the 364 that responded regarding the City investing in surveillance/security systems for high activity areas such as Main Street and the ballpark, 50.5% were in favor while 49.5% were opposed, creating a pretty even split.

Respondents were asked about funding to support community projects. The first of these questions was regarding the city’s 1% sales tax. Currently, the sales tax generates revenue to support the following services:
- Street Improvement (85%)
- Library Building Fund (5%)
- Community/Senior Center (5%)
- City Parks (5%)

When asked whether or not the city sales tax should be renewed, 374 residents responded; an overwhelming majority supported renewal (327 or 87%) while only 47 (13%) did not. When questioned about their willingness to make tax exempt donations to improve Blue Hill, 44% (159/361) stated they would be willing.
State and federal agencies often provide financial and technical assistance to cities in order to support community development. This assistance generally requires a match from the community. As a source of matching dollars, respondents were most likely to support fund raising and private sources, and least likely to support taxation, especially property taxation.

Responses regarding the adequacy of recreational programs for all ages indicated that all age groups probably had ample supply of recreational programs and facilities. Fifty percent responded that activities for preschool, elementary and senior citizens were definitely or probably adequate while only 42% indicated the same for adults. Junior/senior high school age activities were probably or definitely not adequate according to 57% of respondents.

When asked how they felt about Blue Hill, seventy-five percent of respondents felt positive or very positive about their community while a very small percentage, 5% (17) reported a negative feeling.

**Business & Economic Development**

Residents were asked a series of questions to gauge their perception of the local business climate as residents, consumers, and employees. The information gathered can serve as a foundation for economic development efforts.
Residents felt all three types of economic development efforts are important, with 96% stating the creation of new businesses definitely or probably should be the focus and 86% echoing the same support for forming a plan for job creation and expansion of existing businesses.

When questioned how to utilize buildings on Main Street, residents were allowed to select multiple choices. Residents strongly preferred the downtown be used as a business district. Office, living and meeting space received significantly less support with a museum receiving the least support.

Over half of respondents buy the majority of their groceries, gas, prescriptions, hardware, and building materials in Blue Hill. Over half also utilize the local banks and beauticians. Residents who see a doctor outside of town slightly outnumber those who utilize a local doctor (51% compared to 46%).
Residents were then asked to estimate how much of their income is spent on goods and services outside of Blue Hill, including online transactions. The results were split at almost 25% each. The smallest amount of respondents claimed less than 10% of the purchases they make are outside of Blue Hill while the largest amount claimed they make 30-50% of their purchases outside of town.

As customers, survey respondents were generally satisfied with the hours of operation of local retail businesses. Sixty-eight percent indicated the local business hours were good or excellent while only 7% felt that the community’s retail businesses kept poor hours.

As potential and current employees, residents were questioned about their perception of the local job market. A strong majority of residents in Blue Hill felt that the availability of local job opportunities is fair to poor. Earlier in this report, over half of residents responded that their overall feeling about their community was positive. This is an indication residents live in Blue Hill for reasons other than local employment opportunities.

**Childcare & Education**

Blue Hill can be considered a bedroom community that is home for many families employed in nearby, larger communities. For this reason, components of the community that affect children are important to Blue Hill’s current population as well as the young families the town hopes to attract. Blue Hill has a community (kindergarten through 12th grade) school whose leadership was represented during the focus groups and survey process. In addition to childcare, several questions about the school were asked in order to understand the relationship between the school and community.
When asked if they used childcare on a regular basis, 10% (35) responded yes. Therefore, the community can assume that 35 households in Blue Hill have children between the ages of 0-4. The majority have been able to find childcare in Blue Hill.

However, at least a quarter of households take their children to another town for childcare, suggesting at least 11 households in Blue Hill, spends a third of their week outside of the community.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Blue Hill Childcare Spots</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Type of Care</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Childcare Center</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Childcare I Facility</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Preschool</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Preschool Openings</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Infant-7th Grade Openings</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total Spots</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Nebraska Department of Health and Human Services, November 2012

Extra consideration should be taken as to how the community can connect with these young families. Families that participated in the 2010 focus groups noted an unmet demand for childcare existed in Blue Hill. A summary of licensed spots in Blue Hill is provided. Blue Hill has 1 licensed Childcare Center (min, 13 spots) and 2 Childcare I facilities (max, 8 spots).

In the previous question, 35 households said they use childcare on a regular basis. Depending on the number of children in each household, a shortage may exist in the community as more households use childcare than there are spots in Blue Hill. Twenty local childcare consumers responded that local childcare is very or somewhat difficult to find. The largest proportion of consumers claimed the task of finding local childcare is very difficult.
Households were also asked whether or not they had children in school (K-12). A total of 83 respondents answered yes, representing a quarter of the total that responded (338).

Of those with children in school, 87% believed the school employs quality teachers. More than 80% also felt the school definitely or probably uses technology effectively and the school helps all students reach their potential.

All households were asked about the future of their school district: nearly 100% felt that maintaining the school is essential, over 90% were positive about the school’s relationship with the community, and 79% replied that the school district should look for ways to share programs.

Residents were asked if they would support a levy increase to fund school programs and improvements and the results were cross tabulated to determine whether or not having children in school affected answers. Regardless of children in school, a strong majority (over 70% of households without children in school) of respondents stated they would definitely or probably support a levy increase.
Residents were also questioned about what educational opportunities they would like to see made available for adults. Respondents could select more than one option; computers programs were the top pick, but many areas had sufficient interest.

**Housing & Neighborhoods**

Housing availability in Blue Hill is an important issue as residents in different stages of life have different needs. In addition to the traditional single family home, providing housing choices assists in recruiting and retaining residents.

Asked if the school should develop a mentoring program like the TeamMates model, more than three-quarters of respondents said yes. Only 21% were not in favor, and comments indicated not everyone was aware of the TeamMates model.

Residents were also questioned about what educational opportunities they would like to see made available for adults. Respondents could select more than one option; computers programs were the top pick, but many areas had sufficient interest.

**In which education programs would you participate**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Program</th>
<th>Number of times each choice was selected</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Computers</td>
<td>123</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wellness</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cooking</td>
<td>95</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Photography</td>
<td>80</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>EMT Training</td>
<td>76</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Entrepreneurship</td>
<td>62</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Quilting</td>
<td>51</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Geocaching</td>
<td>35</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In order to determine housing tenure, residents were asked if they rented or owned. Less than one-third of respondents live in rental housing. The vacancy rate was established by the number of vacancies identified through the survey process. A vacancy rate of less than 3% is considered extremely low and represents a very tight housing market.
Generally, affordable housing is defined as housing for which occupants pay no more than 30% of their income. Overall, about one-third of respondents are spending more than half of their income on housing. This third could be considered “cost burdened” by the amount they pay for housing. Answers received from the housing affordability question were cross-tabulated with answers received from the tenure question. Slightly less than half of those that rent in Blue Hill (34) and one-quarter of owners (65) are paying more than half of their income for rent and utilities. This indicates a shortage of affordable housing may be an issue in Blue Hill.

![Chart showing percentage of residents paying more than 50% of income toward housing](chart)

Residents were asked to rate the condition of their current housing. Overall, 10% (34) of those that responded said their home was in need of major repairs. The ratings were cross-tabulated with tenure. According to those that answered, over one third of owner occupied housing structures are in need of moderate to major repairs while less than one fifth of rental units are in need of similar repair.

![Chart showing percentage of residents rating the condition of their home](chart)

Answers from residents rating the condition of their residence were cross-tabulated with answers from residents stating how much of their income they are paying for their housing. Those that are currently paying more than half of their income for housing are also more likely to be living in units in need of moderate to major repairs.
Information was cross-tabulated to determine how many home owners considered low-moderate income lived in homes that were in need of repair. Thirty-one homeowners, eligible and willing to apply for owner occupied rehabilitation assistance, are living in units in need of major to moderate repairs. Residents were also questioned about properties they own that could be demolished and redeveloped. Seven property owners responded, which implies there are seven lots that could be redeveloped in Blue Hill.

Survey respondents that rented their home were asked if their current rental unit met their needs. Earlier in the survey, 93 respondents said they rented, but only 83 responded to this question. Of those, 92% said their current rental unit meets their needs; only seven said their rental does not meet their needs. Renters were also questioned about how much they could afford to pay for rent each month. Of the 83 respondents, six out of ten renters cannot pay more than $400 per month for rent while almost one-fifth (17%) could afford to pay more than $600 per month. Nearly one-fourth of renters can afford to pay $400-$600 a month for rent.
In order to better understand whether the current housing stock in Blue Hill is meeting the needs of its residents, renters were asked if they preferred to own. Out of the 84 respondents, one-third (28) replied that they preferred to own.

Those renters that stated they preferred to own were asked about the biggest barrier preventing them from ownership. Nineteen renters stated lack of down payment and lack of available housing as barriers to homeownership. Nine listed lack of available building sites as a barrier.

For owners: have you considered changing your residence

Owners were asked if they preferred to upgrade or downsize their current residence. Earlier in the survey, 264 respondents claimed they owned their home; 272 responded to this question. Of that total, 76% (206) stated they were not looking to upgrade or downsize their housing. Over 10% (31) claimed that they would prefer to downsize and slightly more (35) indicated they would like to upgrade.

For those owners that would like to make a change, lack of available housing was more to blame than a lack of available sites to build. However, 25% of owners did indicate lack of available building lots was definitely the reason they were not able to change. Lot clearance or annexation could create the available lots needed to accommodate those looking for new building lots.
**Health & Human Services**

During the question selection process, representatives indicated that community based services were a need in Blue Hill. For this reason, survey volunteers created a section intended to capture the issues that residents feel should be addressed.

Residents were asked if certain services were adequate to meet the needs in Blue Hill. More than 80% said that nursing home, medical, and emergency services were probably or definitely adequate in Blue Hill. Just under half stated that in-home, family support and mental health services were probably or definitely adequate.

Residents were then asked if they utilized the local medical clinic in Blue Hill. More than half of the 379 residents that responded stated that they do see the professional staff at the medical clinics in Blue Hill.

The results of the next three questions regarding adequate planning for growth in the number of elderly, isolated and special needs residents, the need for additional transportation, and the need for a neighborhood watch were pretty evenly divided. Slightly less than half felt additional public transportation was needed. Cross tabulations showed households with disabled persons were more likely to see a need for additional public transportation.
When questioned about the need for additional support services to assist Blue Hill’s community based special needs residents, over 200 respondents replied that additional security/accountability was needed in Blue Hill. At least 190 respondents felt that monitoring and supervision, workday activities and community connection opportunities needed to be increased.

**Demographics**

The core of every community is its people and solid community development goals are based on the current and future characteristics of its population.

Although Blue Hill is a regional community serving the needs of many families in the surrounding area, this survey is mainly represented by the population living inside Blue Hill. As stated at the beginning of this report, this survey was primarily completed by those living inside Blue Hill’s city limits.

Households were also questioned about the number of persons in their home considered developmentally or physically disabled. Slightly more than one-fourth of the households answering this question reported having at least one member with a disability.

Respondents were asked to identify the age of their head of household. The largest representation was age 45-54 while the smallest (3%) had a head of household aged 19-24. However, the age of households in Blue Hill is pretty evenly distributed between decades from age 35 to 84.
Residents that have lived in the community for more than 20 years represent the largest number of households in Blue Hill. However, the second largest number of households represented has only been living in Blue Hill for 1-5 years.

Residents living in Blue Hill less than five years were asked to describe their reasons for moving to the community; multiple answers could be selected. ‘Other’ was the most popular reason selected by 69 respondents. Small town was top specific reason, followed by job, available housing and retirement.

Almost all households answering the question about education completed, 93%, had at least a high school education. More than half had an associate degree or some college and 26% had at least one college degree. Eight percent of those responding had a graduate degree.

To determine eligibility for federal funding, respondents were asked to provide the number of persons in their household and their annual income. Income guideline amounts for households are provided by federal sources for each county. Based on federal guidelines for conducting income surveys, household size and income information were collected from 242 randomly selected surveys. A total of 59.5% households within Blue Hill met the threshold, equating to 51.6% of individuals. Based on this information, the City of Blue Hill is eligible for some types of federal funding as over 51% of persons met the income threshold guidelines.