Ashland, like other small Metroplex communities, faces challenges to preserve small town life while opening up to growth. Elements identified in three growth scenarios included a passenger rail transit station near the Highway 6 scenic corridor and codes that require houses to conform to a “front porch” aesthetic with street trees and narrower setbacks from the street to create a more human-scaled environment.
Opportunities

The team identified a number of opportunities, including Ashland’s close proximity to Interstate 80 and Nebraska’s two largest cities, the unique/historic character of the downtown and local shopping, strong schools, and regional tourism and recreation destinations. Other favorable factors include:

- Historic, small town appeal that can be preserved, enhanced and expanded through zoning and planning.
- Ideal location for a commuter rail stop. Ashland has one of the longest average commute times of any town or city in Nebraska.
- Potential as an alternative agricultural economic center. The town is located near some of the best agricultural land in the state (Todd Valley).

Challenges

Ashland needs a strong identifier to draw people to the community. Blight along Highway 6 entrance and lack of a strong entry portal further compounds identity problems. There is a perception that the community lacks diversity and that sharp divisions exist between long-time residents and “newcomers,” many of whom commute. This “Us vs. Them” mindset (also geographic, dividing the “north” town from those south of Highway 6) and lack of a unified community vision inhibits the town’s ability to raise development capital and promote an aesthetic standard for the community’s residential and commercial buildings. Other issues include:

- Floodplain that limits growth, poor location for industrial zoning.
- Infrastructure/technological incapacity to address opportunities.
- Housing challenges including uncontrolled sprawl development (trend toward a decentralized core/low-density westward growth) and lack of affordable housing.
- Loss of small town atmosphere and character due to the effects of nearby urban growth, including leakage of local retail to larger urban markets.
- Lack of communication/coordination between town and county jurisdictions.
- Proposal for a huge lake development that would displace Ashland. Introduced in the 2005 Legislature, it was strongly opposed by residents and failed to garner enough votes for a study. However, the idea persists among certain interests.

Having identified opportunities and challenges, the Ashland team offered three scenarios for sustainable growth and development:

RECOMMENDATIONS

Small communities like Ashland must become vocal and proactive in their approach to challenges and opportunities related to urban growth or risk having the costs of growth imposed upon them. The team suggested these immediate steps:

- “Expert” presentations to city officials and planning board.
- Open House/Town Hall meetings on planning and growth issues.
- Greater media awareness of issues.
- Find champions to promote Ashland’s vision both locally and regionally.
- Strategic grant writing and other steps to raise funds for community improvements.
- Foster unity & understanding among residents and create food-based urban/rural coalitions.
Scenario A preserves and builds on neighborhoods northwest of downtown. A commuter train/bus station (possibly a reuse of the existing historic train station) on Highway 6 encourages and defines various commercial development and celebrates Ashland’s railroading heritage.

New and revived commercial development along Highway 6 and Highways 63/66 conforms to the existing community aesthetic and human scale.

Commercial and industrial development at the Ashland-Greenwood exit is controlled to create an attractive, highly visible entry “portal.”

On the edges of Ashland, agricultural and natural terrain interacts with and “flows” into the community while new residential areas east and south of Highway 6 conform to the existing topography and to historical and cultural sites and preserve and protect fragile tallgrass prairie and other related Platte River valley ecosystems.
Scenario B focuses on aesthetic design treatments of neighborhoods and highway corridors, suggesting specific codes to encourage a “front porch” aesthetic with street trees and narrower setbacks from the street to create a more human scaled, pedestrian environment. Highway corridors make generous use of “greenbelt buffers” such as street trees and other plantings, and include old-fashioned streetlights and other landscaping elements to conform to an historic small town aesthetic and enhance the pedestrian environment.

In Scenario C the new single-family residential area is contiguous with existing residential areas. It includes compact, mixed use residential and commercial neighborhood centers that feature townhouses and apartments, low-rise businesses, parks and schools. These do not compete with downtown retail, but rather serve immediate neighborhood populations and encourage more walking/bike trips. Floodplains would be designated natural areas or parks and industrial uses concentrated in a compact zone near Highway 6 and the rail line, as would a “park and ride” transit hub near a proposed train station or bus stop. A new direct road to I-80 was suggested at the west end of downtown.
The Ashland charrette team recommended, clockwise, from top left, a front porch aesthetic for new and existing neighborhoods; a passenger rail and bus stop possibly located in the existing historic train depot; the development of several mixed-use, neighborhood centers to encourage walking and biking for daily needs; the preservation and extension of natural areas, habitat and small scale farming activities near the town environs.

Maintaining a sense of small town life and protecting environmental and cultural resources while opening up to growth opportunities characterized the overall goals identified by the Ashland charrette team.

The following sustainability indicators are suggested as measures of progress towards those goals:
Environmental
• Survey of all environmental assets.
• Environmental assets/natural resources designated for protection. “No-build” zones designated.
• Ashland’s greenness enhanced through new green spaces, streetscapes, and public recreation facilities.

Socio-cultural
• Heritage/history sustainable and publicly accessible.
• Community-wide vision of Ashland’s future.
• Development principles that will enhance the mixed-use, walkable, bikeable character of an “urban village.”

Technological
• WIFI facilities to cover the entire community.
• New incentives/installations for alternative energy.
• Ashland connected to region via multi-modal transit systems.

Economic
• Community Economic Development Coalition enhanced with sustainable principles and strategies for administering from the perspective of the Five Domains (E/STEP).
• Package of public funded incentives to encourage developers to follow the community’s Development Plan.
• Specific strategy of economic assistance for the development of affordable housing, “urban village life-style”, mixed uses, and locally owned businesses.

Public Policy
• Comprehensive Plan revised to include new sub-area plans for development projects, and add new protections for land, water, energy, materials, and locally produced food systems
• Cross-county, cross-jurisdictional alliances to provide mutually beneficial and smart-growth patterns of land-uses, especially at portals to the I-80 corridor.
• Codes and ordinances to support “green” construction and development on all new building.

Indicators for Ashland include the creation of cross-county, cross-jurisdictional alliances to provide mutually beneficial and smart-growth patterns of land-uses, especially at portals to the I-80 corridor.