Ashland, Nebraska.

Great schools. Charming main street. Quiet neighborhoods that recall simpler times.

But like many other small communities that lie within the Interstate 80 Corridor or within the orbits of Omaha and Lincoln, Ashland faces myriad challenges as it seeks to preserve the best of small town life and culture while opening up to opportunities offered by rapid urban growth.

By 2050 it is estimated that as many as 250,000 commuters will travel from towns like Ashland to jobs in Douglas and Sarpy counties alone.

How will towns like Ashland keep up with housing demands and infrastructure costs and address growth pressures on farmland and historic and natural areas?

How can small communities like Ashland join with other communities to take on regional growth challenges and transform them into opportunities for preserving and enhancing quality of life?
Water is a constant that defines the history, culture, environment and future of Ashland and Saunders County, known for its Platte basin wellfields that supply Lincoln with most of its water and are now meeting the increasing demands of the expanding Omaha metro.

The Platte River forms the northern and eastern boundary of Saunders County. The river has been both a uniter and divider for the region, serving as the state’s major east-west transportation corridor while also symbolizing a political divide that dates back to territorial days. South and North “Platters” vied for most everything, including the right to locate the capitol in their territory. When the railroads came, the south was the Burlington’s sphere of influence, and all north of it the Union Pacific’s.

At one time, the Platte River flowed across the county from the northwest corner diagonally to the southeast corner at Ashland. Today this old riverbed is known as the Todd Valley, a picturesque expanse of farmland that varies from six to eight miles in width, its greatest length being about thirty miles. It has a gently rolling to undulating topography and contains numerous marshy depressions.

Ashland lies between the edge of remnant Eastern Deciduous Forest and the Great Plains. These “in-between” areas usually exhibit much greater species richness than either of the bordering habitats, and as such are very attractive to wildlife. Dependent species in the Platte valley near Ashland include sandhill crane and bald eagle, and at least three species listed as endangered—the piping plover, least tern, and pallid sturgeon.

Beyond the woodlands, the tallgrass prairies of eastern Nebraska have been so exploited and fragmented that less than 1 percent can be found in their original form and diversity. Riparian forest—open woodlands and forests that grow on the valley floors near rivers and creeks and serve as transition places from water to land and from forest to field—is found along the Platte and Missouri rivers. These areas are also suffering degradation and severe species loss due to the affects of damming and water use.

**Human Settlements**

The first inhabitants doubtless saw possibilities in the abundance of the Platte and Missouri valleys—prime areas for hunting, for collecting seeds and roots, for growing crops, and for transportation and trade.

Just as in the days of prehistoric seas and glacial
movements, water was the critical element in defining place and location for early human populations. Indeed, the name “Nebraska” is born of water, derived from the Oto Indian word “nebrathka,” or flat water, in reference to the broad, flat Platte valley, which served as a primary route for a great network of trails in prehistoric times.

The Ashland Archeological District features evidence of dwellings that may date back 10,000 years. It contains sites attributable to both the Oneota and Central Plains traditions; interior and exterior cache pits of the Oneota, Central Plains, and possibly Lower Loup traditions; and burial sites that probably represent Plains Archaic, Plains Woodland, Oneota, and Central Plains traditions. Materials found throughout the district suggest that processing of locally available stone might have been one reason for the concentration of activity occurring in this area over a considerable period of time.

It has been said that Nebraska was a highway before it became a state, bringing life to early settlements like Ashland.

A rock-bottom ford across Salt Creek at Ashland, and the plentiful supply of water and wood, attracted the first European settlers in the late 1840s. "Saline Ford" was a low-water crossing on a limestone ledge that attracted the Ox-bow Trail (a branch of the Oregon Trail), Settlers' Road, and Military Road.

Many names were suggested for the new settlement that sprang up at the crossing, including Saline Ford, Flora City, Troy, and Washington City. Around 1856 to 1858 Ashland was named the territorial seat of Calhoun County, later the seat of the renamed Saunders County.

In 1870 a courthouse was built in Ashland. Because of frequent floods along Salt Creek, most businesses had moved away from the old Main Street to Silver Street, named by those who had begun their businesses with profits from the silver mines of Colorado and Utah.

In 1873 Ashland lost the county seat to Wahoo. A local history blames the loss on a lawyer from Wahoo who, weary of making trips to Ashland, paid the janitor of the courthouse to leave a side door open so that the records could be removed under the cloak of a cold and dark December night.

Many of the first settlers to the county came from Illinois,
Missouri, Iowa, and Eastern States and included settlers of Irish and English descent. The population increased rapidly between 1865 and 1870, when many German and Swedish immigrants arrived, followed later by Czechs.

**Railroad Speeds Growth**

The rivers and their tributaries gave life to many of the early communities in the region, but the railroad was the lifeline that would feed dramatic population growth.

The completion of the Union Pacific Railroad in 1869—with Omaha serving as its eastern terminus—and the entry of the Burlington and Missouri Railroad at Plattsmouth fed the first wave of rapid population and economic growth into the region. During the 1880's, Omaha developed into the nation's leading meat-processing center while Lincoln grew to become a hub of government and education.

Ashland also boomed. The rail line from Plattsmouth to Lincoln via Ashland was completed in 1870 and brought new settlers and in turn more homes, lumber, tools, and household goods. Early businesses included Swifts Ice Plant, Chickering Piano Company, a broom factory, brick kiln, cigar factory, harness factory, two flour mills, a limestone quarry, and a sand and gravel pit. In 1887 a second rail line from Omaha was completed and a branch line extended across the county from Ashland to Schuyler.

By 1900 Omaha had more than 100,000 residents, and Lincoln boasted 40,000. Saunders County exceeded 21,000 residents, a number that would decline and not again be achieved until present times. Ashland and Saunders County are now among the fastest growing towns and counties in Nebraska.

**Water is the Lifeblood**

A 1983 history titled “Saunders County: Yesterday and Today,” attributes the life of its communities to the presence of the Platte River, and notes that “the Platte has a charm which has nothing to do with politics, irrigation, power or any other economic use. Farmers who till the soil of its fertile valley feel it. Picnickers from town have discovered it. It is known to the fisherman angling for channel cat. The duck hunter gets a "snoot" full of it while he shivers behind his willow blind. Here nature has fashioned out of water and sand and silt and alluvial banks, a paradise of scenic loveliness.”
Today the City of Ashland bills itself as a city "on the grow" with a rich history and a spectacular future. The official Mayor’s Welcome to the town predicts that Ashland will “emerge in the 21st century as one of Nebraska's premier communities.”

The town boasts a strong housing market, a high rate of new construction, and highly publicized new developments such as the Iron Horse Subdivision (and golf course) east of town and the Sabre Heights Subdivision to west of town as the focus of current housing growth.

Three of the most popular tourism attractions in the state are nearby at Interstate Exit 426, including the SAC Museum, Mahoney State Park, and the Wildlife Safari. Also nearby are Quarry Oaks Golf Course and Platte River State Park.

But there are challenges that must be overcome both within and outside of the community:

- The town welcomes growth and development, but what types of growth and development?
- Like many small communities that welcome new residents, old ways and standards clash with new ways. What are the new community values?
- How can commuters become involved in the life of the community. How can Ashland leaders avoid an “us vs. them” mentality that sometimes occurs between newcomers and established residents?
- What is the town’s “image”? Growing faster than Lincoln or Omaha? Higher median incomes? Excellent schools? A community with “green” sustainable values?

In addition to proximity to the big city lights, many find the smaller towns and rural areas in the Metroplex attractive for the natural beauty of a countryside favored by adequate rainfall, a temperate climate, rich soils, and seemingly plentiful surface and ground water supplies.

However, intensive, extractive farming practices that require excessive use of chemicals and fertilizers have left soils depleted and degraded in places and also have polluted water supplies. Development can also degrade these resources, as formerly fertile lands are covered with scattered housing sites, roads and parking lots. As pavement and rooftops replace vegetation, flash flooding becomes a bigger problem, as does water pollution. Communities that lose control over development patterns also face loss of green space, farmland, and community.

- Critical ecological systems are in the path of rapid growth.
- Economic growth will not occur without attention to quality of life and the environment.
- The region’s most valuable natural resources — water, wind, fertile soils, and a 4-season solar climate — are underutilized.
- There is no shared vision of preferred regional growth patterns or land use policies. The community rallied against the proposed “Lake Nebraska” (see map on page 10), yet has not defined a clear alternative proposal for its own future.

**growth challenges**

- Municipal and county governments have very different, often conflicting approaches to planning and public policies.
- Water resources are spotted and uneven in quality/quantity.
- Infrastructure needed to support growth is lagging behind growth pressures.
- Agricultural and urban growth interests are in conflict.
- Region does not see itself as a unit of common economic interests; competitive tensions exist between communities and threaten growth.
Ashland residents will need to confront the growing dichotomy between populations and water supply in the Metroplex. In Nebraska, the greatest supply of groundwater (the Ogallala Aquifer) occurs in the sparsely populated counties in the western half of the state. Will the community seek to work with other communities for regional solutions to water quality and quantity issues, as well as issues involving urban sprawl, economic development, technological innovation, and costs associated with infrastructure?

**Existing plans and policies**

The Ashland Planning Department oversees the overall development of the City of Ashland and its one-mile zoning jurisdiction. Both the Ashland Planning Commission and Ashland Zoning Board of Adjustment fall within this department. The guiding document is the Ashland Comprehensive Development Plan, last updated March 1998. All Building Permits are issued by the department.

Planning Commission members are appointed by the Mayor to serve three-year terms. All appointments are subject to approval by the City Council.

**Zones Within Ashland’s Jurisdiction**

There are 9 different zones within Ashland’s jurisdiction, and two overlay districts. These zoning ordinances have been made in accordance with a comprehensive plan “to promote the health and general welfare of the community; to lessen congestion in streets; to secure safety from fire and other dangers; to provide adequate light and air; to promote the distribution of population, land classifications and land development to support provisions for adequate transportation, water flows, water supply, drainage, sanitation, recreation, and other public requirements; to protect property against blight and depreciation; and to secure economy in governmental expenditures.”

- TA - Transitional Agriculture District
- R1 - Low Density Residential
- R2 - Medium Density Residential
- R3 - High Density Residential
- RT - Residential Transition
- B1 - General Commercial District
- B2 - Downtown Commercial District
- B3 - Highway Commercial District
- I1 - Light Industrial
- PUD - Planned Unit Development Overlay District
- HPD - Historic Preservation District
The Transitional Agriculture District is perhaps most critical in guiding future growth beyond the town's edges and rural areas within Ashland's jurisdiction. The Transitional Agriculture District is established for the purpose of preserving agricultural resources that are compatible with adjacent urban growth. It is not intended for commercial feedlot operations for livestock or poultry. Because the areas are not in the identified growth areas for the community, the district is designed to limit urban sprawl.

Among permitted uses are agricultural farms, truck gardens, greenhouses, pasture, plant nurseries, orchards, apiaries, mushroom barns, grain storage facilities, and the usual agricultural farm buildings and structures; Farm dwellings for the owners and their families, tenants, and employees; Public parks and recreation areas, playgrounds and conservation areas including flood control facilities; Single family dwellings; Churches; Stables and riding academies.

Permitted Special Uses may include overhead and underground utility main transmission lines and radio, television and communication towers and transmitters; Wastewater treatment facilities; Private recreation areas and facilities including country clubs, golf courses (but not miniature golf), and swimming pools; Public and private schools and colleges; Home occupations or professional offices, but only when conducted by residents living on the premises; Garages for the storage, maintenance and repair of public vehicles; Airports; Veterinarian's offices and hospitals, and boarding kennels; Raising and care of animals; Hospitals and institutions.

The intent of R-1 Low Density Residential is to provide for large lot residential and compatible uses while maintaining reserve land for planned expansion of intense urban development; to facilitate planned extension of municipal services; and to permit residential use of land where, because of forests, unstable land, or other natural land features, intense development is not in the best public interest.

Beyond Ashland's one-mile jurisdiction, Saunders County's comprehensive planning document identifies the following goals for future land use: 1) agricultural preservation; 2) clustering or concentration of new developments; and 3) use of environmental data to manage growth. A transitional agricultural zone has been established as a buffer around the communities, where no livestock confinement operations are allowed.
Environmental data will be considered when reviewing requests for new acreage developments along the Platte River. The County also recognizes the need to improve housing within their communities, especially to meet the needs of their aging population. Due to Saunders County location directly outside Nebraska’s two highest population centers, the population and density will likely continue to increase in future decades.

In the latest census estimates, the population of Saunders County was counted as 20,500, with a median age of 38. The low population density of 26.3 persons per square mile reflects the abundance of agriculture, a major industry in the county. Nearly 50 percent of Saunders County is considered prime farmland. Non-farm housing developments continue to grow in rural areas resulting in conflicts between owners of rural acreages and the agricultural producers, often due to odors from livestock confinement facilities.

Saunders County has nearly seven square miles of public lands owned by the University of Nebraska for field research. The Nebraska National Guard and U.S. Military Reservation are also owners of public property in eastern Saunders County in close proximity to the UNL research fields.

OPPD and NPPD provide electricity to Saunders County. Three separate companies supply propane for the county and Wahoo Sanitation collects the solid wastes.

Saunders County participates in regional transportation planning. Their major north-south transportation corridor is Hwy 77, and the east-west route is Hwy 92.

**Previous Studies of the Area**

**JCI/Saunders County (1998):** The Joslyn Castle Institute for Sustainable Communities (JCI) conducted a study of Saunders County in 1998 that examined growth pressures on the county due to its proximity to I-80 and Nebraska’s two largest cities. The study called for the development of zoning that would guide sustainable growth.

**Lower Platte River Corridor, The Bluffs Region:** This 1998 Charrette by the Lower Platte River Corridor Alliance offered a vision of the river corridor as Nebraska’s foremost attraction by focusing on unique natural resources of the river and striking a balance between preservation of rural character and economic development.
The charrette vision saw a mix of housing and shopping opportunities in existing towns, preservation and enhancement of the historic character of Ashland, Louisville and South Bend and maintenance of the corridor’s scenic beauty. Recommendations included zoning ordinances to provide for conservation residential and cluster subdivisions, encourage compact, new urbanism principles in future town growth, preserving natural habitat and the development of hiker/biker trails.

**Nebraska Ordnance Plant, Mead (eight miles north of Ashland) Superfund National Priorities List Site:** The 17,000-acre Nebraska Ordnance Plant site near Mead operated from 1942 to 1956 as a munitions production plant for bomb loading lines. Current landowners include numerous individuals, corporations, the University of Nebraska-Lincoln, U.S. Army Reserves, and the Nebraska Army National Guard. Approximately 400 people obtain drinking water from wells located within three miles of the site. The Nebraska Department of Environmental Quality conducts regulatory oversight of the Mead site through a three-party agreement with the Environmental Protection Agency and the United States Department of the Army.

**Seeking Solutions**

Solutions for any small town in the Metroplex begin with a definition of that community and what it wishes to preserve, build upon, or change. What you may discover is that long-term, sustainable solutions are not possible without first acknowledging that all communities in the region, large and small, rural and urban, share a common fate.

Cooperation is the key to ensuring adequate and safe water supplies, stewardship of the land, and the sharing of infrastructure and technology costs that will be necessary to ensure steady economic growth and the ability to compete with other regional economies.

No matter how attractive you make your community, if the community down the road suffers from blight, neglect or poor planning, your community will also bear those costs in the long term and see diminishing returns on its investments. When communities share problems as well as solutions, the benefits for all will be greater.

A culture of cooperation will all ensure that future generations will inherit the Good Life, rather than our debt.
Coordinate planning with other cities, towns and counties in the region. Conduct regular conferences, meetings, and workshops for exchange of information and ideas.

Identify and publicize examples of best practices to be used as models for creating healthy and sustainable communities.

Establish a consensus of the region’s most fragile natural, social and historic environments. Create strategies/mechanisms to protect these environments.

seeking solutions

Define policies that clarify or limit acreage development, protect rural lands for food production and natural habitat,

Coordinate reviews of water-related policies to ensure equitable access to clean water for agriculture, municipalities, industry and wildlife.

Encourage energy conservation and alternative energy production through effective planning and green building techniques.

Encourage healthy lifestyles and rich living environments with compact, walkable communities.

Create food-based, rural/urban coalitions; foster understanding of interdependencies of communities & natural systems.

tip: ideal outcomes should provide multiple solutions rather than one big solution; regional significance will be discovered through a multitude of potential concepts that make your charrette site more livable, sustainable, and environmentally appropriate.
Environmental

Social/Cultural

Technological

Economic

Public Policy

5 domains checklist
1. What was the most positive aspect of the workshop in your opinion?

2. If this workshop were to be held again, what three changes would you suggest to make it more effective?

3. Was the time for the workshop too short, too long, or just right?

4. What do you see as an immediate action item you can undertake in terms of sustainability after participating in this workshop?

5. Should any topics have been added to the charrette?

6. What additional training would be useful to you?

7. Other comments?

Name (Optional)