



Village of Niles

Strategic Plan and Goal Development Update/Realignment 2021

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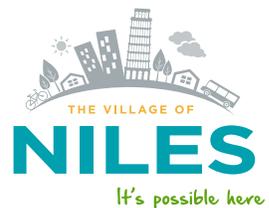


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Executive Summary

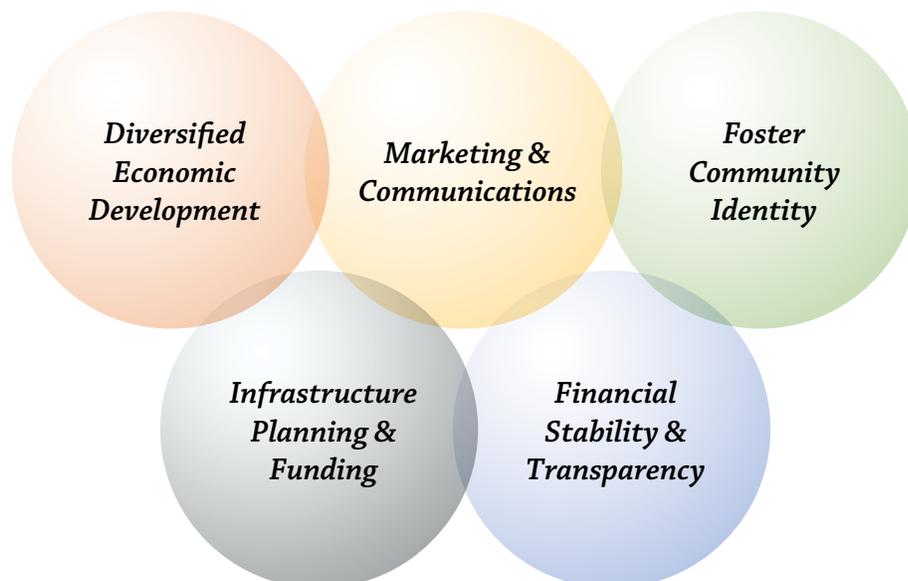
Strategic planning helps to guide an organization’s future better than making decisions issue by issue. The Village of Niles (“the Village”) engaged the Center for Governmental Studies (CGS) at Northern Illinois University (NIU) to facilitate a strategic planning update/realignment workshop with Board and senior staff members in October of 2021 to review and update the Village’s strategic plan. The 2021 strategic planning workshop provided a positive atmosphere for the Board and senior staff members to revisit the accomplishments and priorities from the previous plan, work together to collaboratively review and update the Board’s visions for the future, and develop new or revised strategic goals to determine where the Village wants to go as an organization in the next few years.

Strategic Goals

After a series of environmental scanning discussions regarding the Village’s visions for the future, significant and anticipated changes within the different departments/functions, past accomplishments, and a review of the Village’s current strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and challenges, participants were asked to review and revise the Village’s short- and long-term goals. After an updated list of goals was developed, participants were then asked to classify each goal according to a matrix model of time and complexity. Agreed upon criteria were used to classify a goal as short- or long-term and as complex or routine (please see full report for defined criteria). For a full review of all the strategic goals and priority levels, please refer to the full report.

Strategic Priorities

The key strategic priority areas identified as an outcome of the strategic planning process were carried over from 2020 to the 2021 Strategic Plan. The strategic priority areas identified during the process (in no particular order) are illustrated below along with a brief explanation of each priority area.



Diversified Economic Development

Economic development is a vital tool in creating a thriving community and enhancing revenue streams. This is especially important for the Village of Niles, which depends heavily on a diverse sales tax base and much less on property taxes as compared to surrounding municipalities. It is important for the Village to identify diversified development and redevelopment opportunities to support the Village's financial stability and add to the quality of life for all community members and visitors. No matter the size of the development, follow-through and completion of projects will be critical.

Infrastructure Planning and Funding

Physical infrastructure is the building block of any community. It is critical to plan for, and adequately fund, infrastructure improvement projects to ensure sustainability, high-quality delivery of core services, and improved quality of life. In an ever-changing world where technology allows people more options for where they work and live, meeting the needs and expectations of potential and current residents and businesses is even more important.

Marketing and Communication

It is important that the Village of Niles markets and communicates its unique character, variety of service offerings, and community assets to attract and retain residents, businesses, and visitors. Through marketing and high-level engagement efforts, Niles can demonstrate its value in building a sense of community and belonging for all community members, which will help set it apart from other surrounding communities.

Foster Community Identity

The Village of Niles prides itself on being a place a diverse population of residents and businesses call home. Diversity, equity, and inclusion are essential elements in creating a community where everyone feels welcomed. Adding to the quality of life, the Village strives towards promoting and supporting arts and culture as well as creating physical and digital gathering spaces to break down barriers and develop a sense of connected and engaged community.

Financial Stability and Transparency

Maintaining fiscal strength and stability is key for any organization, public or private. Routinely undertaking financial assessments to understand the Village's current financial profile, recognize changing trends, and identify opportunities for revenue enhancements and/or cost-cutting measures is vital to give elected officials a high level of confidence to make tough decisions. This type of financial stewardship will allow the high level of service that Niles is known for to continue.

Introduction

As an organization, the Village has followed a regular process of establishing goals for the Village government and the community it serves. The Board and senior staff gathered again in 2021 to review progress made and continue to move forward towards their future vision for the Village of Niles. As part of the 2021 process, the Board and senior staff collaboratively worked together to review the previous Strategic Plan’s outcomes and results and evaluate the current operating environment to revise and establish strategic goals to guide the Village over the next 3-5 years. As was discussed during the workshop, executive-level retreats and strategic planning sessions are a staple of good governance and leadership for progressive organizations. The value of such processes continues to be recognized by policymaking boards and executive staff in both private and public organizations. The Village of Niles continues to place itself among the special class of organizations that engage in regular, formalized strategic planning and goal setting initiatives (Figure 1).

The Village is experienced with strategic planning and has seen the benefits of this strategic approach to guiding the Village’s future. The 2021 workshop again provided a positive setting to methodically, strategically, determine where the Village wants to go as an organization, a community, and a government. This important undertaking will serve the Village’s residents, partners, and stakeholders well into the coming years.

Keep in mind that the judicious use of the Village’s limited resources (including financial resources and professional staff time) is key to good results. These high standards can place a strain on the organization, as excellence requires adequate staff time, expertise, and resources. In the end, quality policies and quality implementation equate to tough choices in setting priorities and in allocating resources. Only a limited number of goals and objectives can be effectively managed and implemented at any given time. In a very realistic sense, clear and stable priorities must be maintained if the Village desires to stretch its resources as far as they can go.

Figure 1. Strategic Planning Model*



Model created by G. Kuhn

**Model generally represents the steps that are taken for this type of initiative.*

Outline of Workshop

Leadership Exercises and Discussion Sessions

The planning effort discussion sessions all employed approaches that were highly participative and interactive. The process was informed by the environmental scanning components and the identified strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and challenges for the Village. The workshop facilitators utilized a group discussion approach called ‘Nominal Group Technique’ where the facilitator assured participants had equal opportunities to speak and share opinions. During the workshop sessions, individuals had the opportunity to generate and share their ideas, as well as participate in group activities allowing them to weigh alternatives and refine their thinking through dialogue. As ideas were shared and debated, the group worked steadily toward a consensus regarding organizational values, purpose, future directions, and priorities.

Introduction Exercise

Visioning and Important Topics Discussion

Participants engaged in exercises designed to stimulate conversation regarding the changes and accomplishments achieved since the previous strategic planning process in the fall of 2020. Workshop participants were asked to answer the following questions: “What has changed the most?” and “What is something amazing that has happened within the past 12 months?” This was a brainstorming exercise—all thoughts and ideas were encouraged and shared. No evaluative or judgmental debate was permitted during this session. Below is a summary of those answers.

Exploration of the Village of Niles

Significant Changes in the Past 12 Months
More cohesive and open Board, better dialogue with staff
Leadership and staff turnover (elected and administrative) [5]
Change in Finance Commission Chair
Perspective of IT that it requires organizational support, especially from the Board
More open and transparent, improved communication across all levels of the organization (e.g., between the departments and Board); support from leadership
Supply chain issues — buying trucks, project materials, delays
Staff changes bringing new and positive energy
Trustee involved on development projects stepped down to allow staff to do what they need to do
Fitness center was going to be transferred to the YMCA but didn't, so need to realign and open and see how that looks post-Pandemic
Quickly adapted to new leadership and embraced it. Found new ways to engage with the community — virtually (e.g., Zoom)
Bring everyone back together at work but needing to balance with meeting residents that are still virtual - increased participation
New team, new manager
Team is being rebuilt; everyone is working together as a team

**Note the number in brackets indicate how many participants agreed with the statement*

*** Note: the results are the combination of board and staff input during the exercise.*

Amazing Accomplishments in the Past 12 Months

Built a new police garage, Howard Street project - separate bike trail, pedestrian walkway
Technology advancements, moving in a positive direction with IT and with Board support
Getting started to do something amazing, well-run/honest organization - committed staff on doing the right thing
Live remote broadcast for the first time (e.g., 4th of July parade)
New Chevy dealership - big revenue generator
ARPA, Federal money to help assist community members with bill payments (e.g., water bills)
IT Assessment done to help new director know where to start and identify issues, gaps, needs, etc.; all departments/staff are dedicated
Solved a 30-year-old homicide through sound investigational detective work. Try to reduce pedestrian/cyclist crashes/accidents - main priority
Howard Street construction project - meets a lot of the strategic goals and community needs - infrastructure, identity, economic development, new lighting, stormwater component to mitigate flooding
Infrastructure planning and improvements are moving forward
Perception/image of Niles - incorporating arts & culture - support from leadership on this. Everyone came together during the pandemic to use resources to support the community - vaccine administered to over 1,000 seniors
COVID Clinic - everyone came together; opened the senior center and see people coming back
Golf Mills development is gaining momentum/movement and is going in a positive direction
Board support for integrating the fitness center into the Village
Being back in-person and interacting with residents - both internal and external (e.g., Family Services)
New and current leadership has taken ownership of the plans and future direction
Streetlight project, worked well with surrounding community to move in the same direction as a region, shared information, improved communication/collaboration
Great Board and team leaders - all rowing in the same direction, team embraces change and are here to do the right thing and support/help each other - across departments
Good/positive environment/organizational culture, arts & culture, intergovernmental collaboration, enhanced quality of life - feel good to live in Niles

** Note: the results are the combination of board and staff input during the exercise.*

Environmental Scanning — Surrender or Lead

Participants were introduced to a leadership exercise entitled “Surrender or Lead.” Participants were asked, in small groups, to respond to a series of structured questions designed to initiate discussion and reveal hopes, perspectives, challenges, opportunities, and possible barriers based on the collective view of each participant’s group. The groups’ responses were recorded and are reported below. The **bolded** and underlined sections are key phrases that the group provided in response to the exercise’s open questions and prompts.

Team #1

1. We want to **continue and expand great services and keep low taxes**, but **be fiscally responsible**.
2. We need to **identify cost saving opportunities and new revenue sources** because **costs continue to rise**.
3. If it weren’t for **internet retail and the pandemic**, we would **likely have more revenue**.
4. We have to finally **make changes/progress** or **get off the pot**.
5. **Golf Mill and new revenue enhancements/economy** will have the biggest impact on the Village over the next 3-4 years.

Team #2

1. We want to have a **strong identity as a unique village**, but **we don’t know who we are**.
2. We need to **become a destination community** but **we don’t have destination-worthy venues**.
3. We need to **embrace the arts and culture movement and give it more teeth** but **it needs to be transformational**.
4. We have to finally **decide what makes us different – what we want to be known as**.
5. [left blank]

Team #3

1. We want to **make progress**, but **change can be slow**.
2. We need to **prioritize** because **we need to start somewhere**.
3. If it weren’t for **motivation to change**, we would **be stagnant**.
4. We have to finally **take the first step**.
5. **Leadership and support** will have the biggest impact on the Village over the next 3-4 years.

Team #4

1. We want the **public to recognize the name “Niles”**, but **we don’t have an identity that people recognize**.
2. We need to **upgrade our housing stock** because **we want to attract families**.
3. If it weren’t for **“additional” services**, we would have **less financial burdens**.
4. We have to finally **educate the residents on those services and the costs**.
5. **Redevelopment of TIF Districts** will have the biggest impact on the Village over the next 3-4 years.

Goal Review, Update, and Development

With the preceding sessions creating a sound foundation for goal setting, the final session included a review of previous goals, and a healthy group discussion of revised, refined, or new goals and action items needed to achieve the future visions as expressed by the group. The Village's leadership team reviewed the goals developed from the prior strategic plan and provided the Board with the related updates and action items. During the goal review, the group was asked if the Village wanted to retain the goal, revise the goal, or remove the goal due to it being complete or no longer relevant. The group was then asked to provide any new goals.

Open Group Discussion and Consolidation of Goals

This final phase of the discussion served as the forum for Board and staff members to discuss, evaluate, and debate the ideas and goals offered by each participant in the previous sessions. Participants were asked to give their opinions, evaluations, and judgments of the worthiness and value of different policy objectives. Participants were also asked to confirm each goal as short- or long-term, especially where similar goals were developed.

Post-Workshop:

Goal Prioritization and Board Ranking Exercise

After the workshop, the NIU-CGS project team worked with the Village’s administrative leadership to incorporate the goal revisions and newly developed goals into the priority dashboard.

The following illustration presents the dashboard of *high, medium, and lower* priority levels for the short- and long-term strategic goals based on the consensus ranking exercise conducted by the Board during the 2021 review of the 2020 strategic plan and goals (Figure 2). The goal priority dashboard demonstrates the most important strategic goals, tasks, and objectives for the Board and staff to address in the months and years ahead.

Figure 2. Strategic Goals — Priority Dashboard

Short-term Strategic Goals 2021	Priority Level
Identify revenue enhancement strategies to fund operations, long-term capital, and retirement benefit needs. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Continue to provide high-quality services at competitive tax rates. • Identify strategies to mitigate impacts of e-commerce through economic development. 	High
Complete the Golf Mill Shopping Center redevelopment agreement.	High
Identify incentives and strategies to attract developers for development and redevelopment opportunities throughout the Village and specifically in the TIF Districts.	High
Develop and implement marketing strategies to promote the assets of Niles to visitors, residents, and businesses. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Create mission and vision statements and affirm/modify as needed. • Explore, identify, and implement the “identity” of Niles and what makes it unique. 	High
Update inventory of pedestrian safety concerns and opportunities in the Village from the 2014 Bike and Pedestrian Plan.	High
Develop a Village-wide facilities improvement plan with identified funding strategies which may include, but is not limited to: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • New fire station, including an identified new location. • Salt dome. • HVAC screening at Village Hall. • Determine collaboration strategies with the teen center and historical society. 	High
Develop and implement an external communications plan for the Village.	High
Explore and determine development options for Touhy Triangle	High
Create a 22nd Century technology infrastructure model. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Evaluate flexible staffing models to enhance responsiveness and Village interaction with community members on a digital platform. • Explore adding a “virtual” Village model. 	High
Explore strategies to expand, and increase utilization of, the home incentive program (e.g., waive permit fees, offer guidance and assistance). <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Develop an incentive plan to specifically draw families to the community (e.g., first-time buyer assistance). 	Medium
Explore strategies to be a competitive employer and enhance the workplace environment. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Undertake a classification and compensation study on a regular basis, every 2-3 years. 	Medium
Expand the Arts and Culture Master Plan study to include incentives for businesses to embrace and promote arts and culture.	Medium

<p>Develop and implement a capital improvement plan, including prioritizing infrastructure projects and developing funding strategies.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Continue with the implementation of the 2016 entrance and roadway signage program. 	Medium
<p>Identify opportunities to partner more with existing businesses, including incentive programs for improving aging infrastructure, providing guidance on programs available, and continuously seeking feedback from current/potential businesses.</p>	Medium
<p>Develop and implement an internal communications plan to ensure compliance and consistency with the Village’s brand.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Establish a digital gathering place to enhance information sharing across the departments. 	Medium
<p>Explore strategies to use vacant parcels/storefronts for temporary uses, such as art installations.</p>	Lower
<p>Evaluate and determine next action steps on the Village’s environmental impact plan.</p>	Lower

Long-term Strategic Goals 2021	Priority Level
<p>Implement the identified revenue enhancement strategies to fund operations, long-term capital, and retirement benefit needs.</p>	High
<p>Implement economic development strategies aimed at attracting new retail development, offering experiential entrepreneurial incubators to residents and businesses, and enhancing development around the potential train stop.</p>	High
<p>Finalize Grainger plans, select developers, and complete builds to improve Touhy Triangle redevelopment.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Include a development plan for a town center/gathering space. 	High
<p>Complete corridor and aesthetic improvements, including bridges, tree canopies, and streetscaping.</p>	Medium
<p>Implement pedestrian safety improvements identified in the inventory to enhance walkability for pedestrians and cyclists throughout the Village (e.g., Waukegan and Caldwell).</p>	Medium
<p>Enhance community pride by maintaining and building on the “human element” of the Village.</p>	Medium
<p>Identify strategies to unify the community and enhance neighborhoods throughout the Village.</p>	Medium
<p>Implement the Village facilities improvement plan which may include, but is not limited to:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • New fire station • Salt dome • HVAC screening at Village Hall. • Determine collaboration with the teen center and historical society. 	Medium
<p>Continue to evaluate and implement the stormwater master plan.</p>	Lower
<p>Add at least one new communications platform to enhance community engagement (e.g., “meet people where they are”).</p>	Lower
<p>Incorporate environmentally-friendly initiatives into government practices and community initiatives (e.g., increase green space, green fleet, green infrastructure, and tree canopy).</p>	Lower
<p>Implement the strategies developed around the Arts and Culture Master Plan to ensure that the arts are incorporated into various aspects of the Village.</p>	Lower

Conclusion

The value of the strategic planning process will only be realized if it is used as an active working guide to both the Village Board of Trustees and staff leadership as the issues explored during the strategic planning process are pursued. It is designed to capture the content of the discussions and to assist the Village in developing implementation plans for their prioritized goals.

In the Village's ever evolving operating environment, adapting to changes in demographics, community trends, technology advancements, best practices and development opportunities will be paramount. The strategic plan is meant to be a road map for the Village with the flexibility to adapt to those changes. Therefore, it is recommended that the Village continue to undertake a regular review of the strategic plan, its goals, and implementation schedule to identify the need for updates to ensure the Village consistently recognizes and meets the changes in community needs and expectations.

What is apparent from the exchange of ideas and dialogue during the environmental scanning and strategic planning workshop is that the Village is fortunate to have progressive leadership and a management team that is looking ahead and committed to strategic thinking and planning.

We wish you well with the ambitious years that lie ahead.

Handwritten signatures of Greg Kuhn and Jeanna Ballard. The signature for Greg Kuhn is on the left, and the signature for Jeanna Ballard is on the right.

Greg Kuhn and Jeanna Ballard, Project Coordinators and Session Facilitators