



## MEMORANDUM

TO: Jennifer Levitt, City Administrator, City of Cottage Grove  
FROM: Chad Weinstein and James Fischer, Ethical Leaders in Action  
DATE: February 5, 2023  
RE: Outcomes from 2023 City Leadership Retreat

### Introduction

The Cottage Grove City Council and senior staff met January 28, 2023 at River Oaks Golf Course and Event Center for the city's annual leadership retreat. As you know, the process and goals for this retreat differed from those in recent years. Rather than focus on specific strategic initiatives or explicit organizational development objectives, our aims for this retreat were to stimulate broad, visionary thinking about the long-range future of Cottage Grove, and in the process to strengthen relationships and integrate new staff leaders into the leadership team.

The agenda consisted of a series of exercises and discussions to stimulate creativity and insights about Cottage Grove, building to an ideation process to generate a limited number of "big ideas" worthy of future development. Our intent was to be flexible in order to create the best possible discussions. Following was the order of the day, as implemented:

- Introductions
- "Looking Back to Look Ahead" – a staff-led reminiscence about Cottage Grove thirty years ago, twenty years ago, and today, leading into a vision of tomorrow.
- Brainstorm: why do people come (or return) to Cottage Grove?
- "Lessons from Downriver" – Jamie Fischer used the story of Ulysses Grant and the Battle of Vicksburg to discuss how leaders can combine innovation and persistence – and take large but calculated risks – to achieve worthy objectives.
- Big Ideas and Big Questions – participants shared their big priorities for Cottage Grove, and big questions with strategic implications. This exercise clearly generated themes for big ideas, which were discussed in breakout sessions.
- Breakout Session – Discussing each Big Idea.

A concluding exercise allowed each participant to share their final thoughts for the day. We officially concluded at 3:05 PM.

This document is respectfully submitted as our final deliverable in this engagement. It is intended to document the outcomes and to capture as much of the spontaneous input from the retreat as possible. It includes:

- Notes from the "Looking Back to Look Ahead" and related exercises.
- Discussion of the "big ideas" generated in the afternoon exercises.
- Next Steps

Each is described as presented below.

### **Notes from “Looking Back to Look Ahead”**

Much of the morning was spent reflecting on Cottage Grove’s past, and what we can learn from it. As the discussion progressed, we capture the following statements of themes or significant insights:

- We can be the largest small city in Minnesota.
- This is about culture.
- Informal outdoor recreation holds fond memories for people.
- Very local issues often drive political involvement.
- There are many positive memories of unique local venues such as Jerry’s restaurant, After the Gold Rush (“the Rush”), and the UA theater.
- Underestimating growth had future costs (for example, failure to fund an adequate sewer necessitated a duplicate line years later).
- Owner occupied housing predominated in the past; will it in the future?
- What will the 2053 council think about our decisions?
- Under investing 20-30 years ago cost us (city AND taxpayers) but we also do not want to build “Bridges to Nowhere.”
- City and public attitude toward business has changed for the better. Residents and even City officials, including elected officials, used to make it hard to start businesses in Cottage Grove.
- “Who you know” used to be too important. There was favoritism and backroom decision-making.
- Current city systems are built for speed, in part as a response to the past. We need to make sure that we can also show hospitality and openness, and that we don’t cut corners.
- Costs like housing and education have far outstripped income growth.
- The tax base is increasingly diversified.
- We will want to have infrastructure for future technology.
- Communication with citizens remains critical.
- We can’t let politics get in the way of doing the right thing. This is especially true when working with other cities.
- Stay resilient, don’t give up, remain focused on the big goal willing to adjust shorter term objectives if necessary.
- Leaders need to be confident, but not cocky and stay mission driven.

### **Reasons people come (or come back) to Cottage Grove (ideas generated in discussion):**

- Lower cost of land
- More opportunity
- A sense of nostalgia; it is “home.”
- Love of outdoors

- Schools
- Neighbors who get together and socialize
- People feel safe.
- People feel welcome.
- Proximity to amenities
- Our shoreline
- Opportunities for growth; more “rungs on the ladder.”
- There is a culture of community, supportive and helpful with strong volunteerism.
- A noted limitation is the lack of suitable housing like apartments.
- An important question is how to broaden that sense of community to invite all residents in.

Taken together, the above insights set the stage for the ideation work undertaken in the afternoon.

### **Generating Big Ideas and Big Questions**

The morning discussion made it clear that, to its residents, Cottage Grove has always been special. So, it is up to today’s leaders to ensure that this legacy continues into the future. Participants all completed and posted cards containing big ideas for helping Cottage Grove to thrive. From the cards, the following “big ideas” emerged and were discussed in small groups. Overall, these ideas sought to answer the broad question of what would make Cottage Grove thrive in the future as a unique place that fosters strong communities. This vision stands in contrast to being “just another generic suburb.”

#### **Big Ideas:**

- Creating a City Center
- Expanding Support for Business
- Fostering Inclusive Community
- Accentuating the Natural Environment

Each was discussed by a small group. The results of those discussions are noted below, including a statement of the compelling “why” or purpose behind each big idea, and notes from the breakout groups’ presentations.

#### **Creating a City Center**

This topic appeared on multiple cards, and has come up as a theme in development and planning discussions for years. Recent interest by some developers in Cottage Grove has added emphasis to this topic of late. The “big whys” behind this idea are:

- Bring crowds to the City for events.
- Create a center for residents and businesses.
- Create a recurring destination for visitors.

- Sell the benefits of Cottage Grove to others.

Notes from the discussion:

- It should contain an entertainment venue, indoor and outdoor, which may not have to cost taxpayers.
- There could be a square for events (arts, food trucks, festivals, etc.) with restaurants and shops, more than chain dining and retail.
- Unique, designed to draw more than just CG citizens.
- Must have mass transit access.
- Council must confirm that there is a market for it; adequate demand and strong enough attractions to build it and sustain it, with broad enough appeal for the long term.
- There is already a lot going on in CG, but it is spread out. This location could concentrate those events in one place in CG, easy for all to access.
- Can we connect existing nodes to the city center, for example a pedestrian bridge across Hwy 61 as well as mass transit?
- Big ideas will need business support and the political will to financially support the efforts. Council would need to communicate as a collective team, unified in one voice, to advance this project. This will require political courage to acknowledge while countering those opposed.
- It would not be easy or cheap; we would need to innovate, but the hometown feel would be worth it. There would finally be one spot that defines CG.
- Entertainment should be the focus, because it brings crowds which would support the venue and the businesses around it.

### **Expanding Support for Business**

In the morning discussion, it was noted that in the past, CG government was not supportive of business. In recent years that has changed entirely, with both policy and processes aligned for growth. At the same time, it was also noted that it is one thing to stop being unsupportive, it may be another thing to focus intentionally on being business-friendly. The “big whys” for this idea are:

- Expand and diversify tax base. This is building on current momentum.
- Good jobs are also a key benefit of business that the City should promote.
- Think critically about the kinds of business we want to attract.

Notes from the discussion:

- Industry can be the focus going forward because of the success with retail with a larger vision defined in terms of a diversity of business: retail, manufacturing, warehousing and logistics, etc.
- How to bring more in? Transportation, jobs for families, build a synergy of positives.

- Consider creating a chamber of commerce division for industry; maybe connect with trade associations.
- Collaborate with developers.
- Engage with 3M and electric vehicles.
- Develop a plan that does not predict perfectly, but helps us to prepare for opportunities.
- Bring together DEED, Great MSP, Washington County Business Development, Excel Energy, and others.
- Prepare to develop a master plan for the 500 acres from 3M, explore markets for more opportunities, don't just focus on infrastructure.
- How do we promote business owners living in CG?
- We must continue to be intentional with our master planning.

### **Fostering Inclusive Community**

A great deal of the morning discussion centered on the many ways people have experienced a sense of community and connection in Cottage Grove. It was cited as a major reason people returned, and many participants noted that a spirit of connection and mutual support continues to thrive in Cottage Grove. As our community continues to become more diverse as a population, what can civic leaders do to assure that new residents and business community members feel connected and that the community is seen as a welcoming place. Indeed, the “big why” is based on the following definition of inclusivity:

- A diversity of opportunities to be welcoming of everyone.

Notes from the discussion:

- One task will be related to mission statements, statements of intent regarding inclusivity.
- Connect with the Discover Cottage Grove processes.
- Educate and inform people in Minnesota and beyond about Cottage Grove
  - Electronic communications
  - Print
  - Displays
- Listen to members of our communities. Our goal is to assure that people feel invested in being a part of Cottage Grove in addition to their other affiliations and feelings of connection.
- Link to businesses. Make it clear that we are both established, and new and fresh.

### **Accentuating the Natural Environment**

The natural environment of Cottage Grove also factored heavily into the positive memories of participants, and among the key assets that differentiate our City. Discussion also included how

to identify and break down barriers to accessing CG's natural resources, now and in the future. The "big whys" for this idea are:

- Driving direct usage of natural amenities by the people of Cottage Grove and visitors.
- Make nature a cornerstone of CG's marketing and messaging.

**Notes from Discussion:**

- Meet recreation interests, accommodate preferences.
- Nature should be the cornerstone of the city's marketing with multiple connections to and from places that are distinctive to CG.
- The focus on the natural environment will pay more dividends than it will cost to build.
- There will be a PEI (Positive Economic Impact).
- We can take advantage of existing parks by promoting them.
- Maximize the direct usage of our natural resources.
- Be conscious of the proximity of nature space to other amenities.
- Consider Cottage Grove from the perspective of a potential VRBO renter. We are so close to the Mississippi River and multiple national, state, and regional parks. Any one of these attractions creates a compelling destination.

**Additional Big Questions**

In addition to the above "big ideas" that emerged from the ideation exercise, council and staff members also generated some worthy questions:

- How important is mobility and transportation?
- Will any Highway 61 expansion include mass transit options?
- How do we maintain level of service in a growing community?
- How do we increase productivity getting more results with fewer people?
- What does it mean to be a "Smart" city?
- How are we moving toward fulfilling all the needs for additional facilities?
- How do we recruit and retain the best employees; what can we offer them that others don't have?
- How much growth in our public safety staffing should we plan for based on projected growth?
- How can we use our river access?
- How do we diversify our business park (is there an over-reliance on warehouses)?
- Given the increasing median age of our city, how do we get more affordable senior housing?
- How do we stay a step ahead of our competitors?
- How do we foster/maintain community as we grow?

- Keeping CG safe, clean, and fun comes at a cost; how do we create that feeling of value more universally?
- How do we ensure people and nature connections are a priority in a high-tech world?
- How do we invite and encourage diversity?
- How do we measure resident satisfaction efficiently?
- How do we plan AND execute the vision?
- How do we bring the residents along on this journey?

**Other comments and notable observations:**

- CG has become much more business friendly since 2008.
- How much capacity for business growth remains?
- Has the City identified a “built out” date?
- Is there a future for medical or educational campuses?
- How do we respond to demographic changes?
- How do we maximize quality of life?
- People want to be the largest small town, but we don’t have a traditional “downtown.”
- The availability of land in CG is a definite asset.
- We need to continue to manage the bandwidth of our staff.

As staff teams begin to work on the Big Ideas, these questions may also be relevant.

**Next Steps**

Staff directors will consider these “big ideas,” propose measures and actions that the City might take in light of them. As noted above, while these ideas were generated by a spontaneous process, they also map remarkably well to the City’s established strategic priorities. Thus, recommendations could include new initiatives in the future, or additional insight to inform work already underway.