

# Vermilion County - Planning a Brighter Future - 2025

## ECONOMIC HEALTH AND WELL BEING

Promote programs offered through Vermilion Advantage and DACC, for example the Getting Ahead Program, to encourage social mobility and a strong workforce

Start a Second Chance Jobs Program to help break the cycle of poverty and dependence

Increase the levels of communication, cooperation, and problem solving among communities and with the County Board, enhancing greater economic development opportunities, as well as opportunities for access to identified services the public needs

Increase opportunities for communication and collaboration that will ensure our youth are connected to career opportunities for their futures

Establish and grow an enhanced self-image of Vermilion County, and then share that within and beyond our borders, capitalizing on the potential economic development those opportunities create

Promote / Enhance / Expand our natural resources, including Lake Vermilion, Kennekuk, Kickapoo, Forest Glen, Woodyard, VC Museum, Rail to Trail, golf courses, ice rink, and then raise awareness within our borders and beyond

Encourage creation of new, local community and countywide events while better promoting existing events including Hoopston and Rossville Christmas light displays, Sweet Corn Festival and activities across the county - promotion within county borders and regionally

Work with the Mayors' Council to encourage community connections and localized promotions of our natural resources, targeting our residents as well as visitors

Work with Convention and Visitors Bureau to increase the promotion of our parks and natural resources within and beyond our borders regionally, statewide, and nationally

Utilizing outstanding Institutions like DACC to establish a First Class Education System in the County

## **MAINTAINING A SAFE AND HEALTHY ENVIRONMENT**

Find the resources to ensure law enforcement at county and local community levels have the tools they need to keep the public safe

Create increased early intervention opportunities to identify and provide services to those needing help before they enter the system through increased collaboration and communication between schools, law enforcement, the criminal justice system, and agencies

Engage in honest, relevant dialogue about the lack of local mental health services to meet existing needs and how to find needed funding

Explore opportunities to engage the public in creating a safer and healthier county community

Focus on viable opportunities to improve the overall mental and physical health of the people of Vermilion County

## **COUNTY UNITY AND IMAGE**

Enhance connections to opportunities to grow the spirit of volunteerism in Vermilion County

Create a Volunteer Database for ease of connecting organizations with volunteers

Grow and enhance our local community connections, developing unified bonds of strength among our independent communities and our people

Create opportunities for regular communication with faith leaders and schools across Vermilion County

Increase the connections between the County Board and the VC Mayors' Council

County Board Members, Elected Officials, Representative Bennett, Representative Hays, Senator Bennett, Mayor Eisenhauer, members of the media and distinguished guests. I appreciate your attendance on this important day for our county. When my term began as chairman, it coincided with a very new, young, and enthusiastic county board taking over. This enthusiastic group approached me early on with the idea of doing things different, being more proactive and engaged, planning for the future, tackling some of the big problems the county faces, and getting our County government off the sidelines. That enthusiastic group of board members met together as an ad hoc committee and made the decision to design a strategic plan for the county for the next decade. A plan for items we can address over that timespan to improve what is already the best community in downstate Illinois. The process for the plan went like this. Our committee of dedicated board members met and after thorough discussion listed the strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats of our county. Next we took our message to the public and asked for your input, and you responded. The feedback we received was substantial and yet there was a great deal of agreement. The third step in the process was to do an analysis of all our County departments to gauge what we do, where we need to improve, and where the board can better allocate our resources for maximum effect to achieve a better standard of living. Finally all of the data and input we compiled over all these steps were used to build solid, achievable goals for Vermilion County for the next 10 years. Goals to help with economic development and jobs, goals for a safer community, and goals for stronger health and wellness. The following is a description of what we came up with. In some instances there are items on our list that can immediately be addressed, in other instances some items are currently being worked on by our great organizations in the County and it will be the job of our County government through strong leadership to break down the barriers and silos between efforts to foster a spirit of collaboration in fixing these problems. In short, from now on we must begin working together at the challenges that confront us. Lastly some of our points will focus on being able to operate effectively to solve problems in a new landscape where resources are scarce and old funding sources are gone. This is a challenging time where the problems we face grow more challenging while the resources we have dwindle,

however scarcity breeds innovation and we will succeed and prosper no matter what challenge may come our way.

The number one subject on everyone's mind in the County is jobs and unemployment. While our economy has changed since General Motors, we have made great strides and are home to some wonderful companies. Great efforts continue to attract new business to the area while we focus on succeeding in the current climate. Organizations like Vermilion Advantage lead the way with its nationally recognized workforce development program, and during our SWOT analysis a strength of the County that topped almost everyone's list was Danville Area Community College. The College not only is a gem, proficiently preparing area youth for 4 year University's, but also leads the way as a pipeline for young people entering the lucrative trade professions, and also strives to be a model of diversity focusing on attracting and graduating minority students. The County is committed to the college and is here to offer any assistance we can during a trying time for DACC. The County supports and encourages DACC's efforts of the "Getting ahead program" at Fair Oaks housing complex, a program designed for people living in public housing who aspire to improve their lives, to help them with skills for the work force or to seek higher education. The County Board will assist in finding employment opportunities for graduates of that program. In addition we will form a jobs working group, which already exists in its embryonic stages. The County Board Chairman, Tom Gregory our Director of Probation, Dr. Angele Burns from Community Action, and the HR Department at Mervis Industries have been meeting with other employers in the County to promote a second chance jobs program for Probation clients. A program designed to assist nonviolent probation clients turn the corner and become productive citizens. What our probation department offers is a program that can be tailored to an employer's specific need and a support team accompanying a new hire to mitigate the employer's exposure to risk. The jobs working group will be expanded to include a team who's goal will be to design a system to funnel at risk

youth into the great job training programs offered by entities like DACC and Vermilion Advantage. The goal here is to break the vicious cycle of poverty and dependence by ensuring a greater number of youth get on the path to success. A job is critical for a person's ability to progress by gaining the feeling of self-worth and accomplishment, solidifying the words of President Reagan when he said the greatest social program is a job.

An overwhelming strength that our County has is our natural resources and our beautiful parks, our Lake Vermilion and rivers, plus added attractions like our wonderful golf courses. We have horse trails and hiking, bike paths and mountain biking. Our mountain bike trails were voted the best in the state last year. Vermilion County is a virtual outdoor recreation paradise. All of these things will soon be coupled with the City's efforts to redevelop the riverfront and the East Main Street corridor. All of this and we are centrally located between major metropolitan areas on a reliable interstate roadway. It is time to capitalize on these advantages. Vermilion County has long sought a new economic identity. Why could we not be the next Wisconsin Dells or mini Branson. An effort must be undertaken through promotion to bring in outside dollars and turn our area into a major destination. First the County has engaged experts in high speed internet access and communications to evaluate the networking needs of the County and to prepare and to compete for a highly competitive USDA Rural Development grant for rural internet access. We must improve the network in the Middle Fork valley north of Oakwood. This will allow us to approach developers about constructing lodging in the Kickapoo, Kennekuk vicinity and with another major goal of better utilizing the Conservation Districts new education center as a destination for major meetings and retreats. Improved communication in this area would increase economic activity in the I-74 corridor, building a burgeoning tourist industry from Oakwood to West Danville.

Secondly, we must promote ourselves. If you live in Orland Park or Naperville and your summer weekend travel choices are between Baraboo,

Wisconsin, Galena, or St. Joe Michigan, why isn't Danville on your list? If you live in these areas, it is a fair bet you may not even know about Vermilion County. We need a campaign supported by the County, the City, Vermilion Advantage, the Convention and Visitors Bureau and other interested parties designed and ran by highly qualified professional marketers to get Vermilion County on that list. Further efforts need to be made to market our area as a premier destination for living, touting our #1 cost of living ranking in the nation and our wonderful amenities from these previously listed to things like the summer sounds concert and the McFerren Park Christmas lights, and our close proximity to the University of Illinois.

One of our greatest barriers to becoming a premier destination for living is our good but disparate education system in the County. It is imperative that we set up a strong working group, to be comprised of education professionals and experts in the County with the goal to get Vermilion County in front of the education evolution and keep it there. The group will explore ways to share resources between districts and use the great infrastructure already in place through programs at Danville Area Community College to modernize the Vermilion County Education system and make it a positive example of the future of education. This will give our kids access to a world class education allowing them to be competitive with students from major metropolitan areas when they reach a 4 year University, and that will allow in turn our communities to be competitive with communities like St. Joe, Odgen, and Mahomet as a place for young professionals to live. This working group will further explore how to create a more effective education system on fewer resources and how to better work together for our future generation. The County already has an effort underway through Logan Cronk, the Vermilion Advantage shared resource planner to apply for a Telemedicine/Distance learning grant from USDA Rural Development. This grant would allow for the purchase of teleconferencing equipment that could be used to create a virtual classroom to provide subjects currently not available at our smaller schools. The equipment could also be used to utilize psycho-therapy resources that are currently scarce in the area for a behavioral health program for

our troubled youth at all of our area schools, a problem student population that grows in all communities in our nation.

Working groups of experts are critical to figuring out the solutions to problems, and the County stands in support and ready to assist efforts already underway. The United Way, Presence, and the Vermilion County Health Department have undertaken the formation of working groups to address teen pregnancy, obesity, and substance abuse. A group of concerned mental health professionals has likewise done the same to address the suicide epidemic and other gaps in mental health services. The County strongly supports the efforts of the United Way and Presence and will help facilitate any group or effort at addressing these serious issues.

As we analyze what we currently do really well as a County, the thing that tops the list is professional law enforcement. Our Sheriff's Department although they are kept moving by a large geographic county, does a highly professional and exceptional job. This being a solid strength with a time in our history where providing public safety is more and more difficult one VC2025 goal for the next decade is to allocate a larger percentage of our budget to law enforcement and the prosecution of criminals in our justice system. In short we will rely on our strengths in law enforcement to make life difficult for the bad guys in our County. If a County board's main job is a judicious allocation of resources and public safety is the number one priority of local government, then this board will enthusiastically full fill its duty.

In an effort to assist law enforcement, and unburden them from dealing with people in need of mental health services extensive talks have been started with area mental health providers in the County on possible solutions to gap in

mental health services for our populations at the PSB and in our probation programs. 708 Board Director, Jim Russell has taken the lead in these efforts. Grant funding solutions are being explored. Mental health resources are found to be scarce all over the nation. We can't sit idly by and wait for the solution to fall in our lap. Someone has to be at the forefront of solving these problems, why shouldn't it be Vermilion County?

In much the same way we seek creative ways to utilize mental health services, so we must take a new approach to being effective in our efforts to address public health issues with scarce resources. This will involve partnerships with hospitals and medical providers as well as other organizations. The County recently initiated such a partnership that is forming between the Health Department and Cooperative Extension to provide health education, and their efforts will continue. Efforts will need to be made in the future to help educate people on how to effectively utilize the health care system and where they may possibly seek coverage. Efforts will be undertaken by the board to support the hard working, professional staff at our Health Department.

Finally, the greatest asset our County has is the people who live here. Our citizens never fail to pitch in to raise money or dedicate themselves to a noble cause. Beyond that, we have a great number of wonderful organizations working to make a difference in the community. The County will create a central volunteer database to make it easy for organizations to find the manpower they need for their causes. Working together in coordination, there is nothing we can't accomplish. At last, all of this great input came from you, the citizens of our County. Far too often when we attended village meetings soliciting input, we heard that we were the first County officials ever to come to a village meeting. It is our job to stay in touch with the citizens and keep the lines of communication



open. Therefore, we will institutionalize the process of meeting with the public by continuing to visit village meetings on a regular basis and we will hold regular town hall meetings at places throughout the county. We will make it our business to stay on top of the County's needs.

When President Kennedy challenged the nation to get to the moon, he said "We choose to go to the moon and do the other things, not because they are easy but because they are hard." President Regan said, "all we have to do is believe in ourselves and in our ability to do great deeds." It is time that we here in this county start to believe in ourselves again and in our ability to be great. It is time to do the hard things because they are the things worth doing, and God willing this will be the first step in a great journey to a brighter future and heights yet unknown for our County.