



# Corridor

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## VISION NORTH IOWA UPDATE

**NEARLY 160 CITIZENS SHARED** opinions about this region's economic future at four local workshops in June. Part of the Vision North Iowa project, the sessions helped planners gather information in order to craft a common goal for economic development here.

Vision North Iowa is a collaboration of the North Iowa Corridor Economic Development Corporation, Mason City Chamber of Commerce, Clear Lake Area Chamber of Commerce, and several community partners. TIP Strategies, based in Texas and Washington, has been engaged to guide the process.

The public was encouraged to attend one of the Economic Visioning and Community Values Workshops held in Clear Lake and Mason City. Jeff Marcell, senior partner with TIP Strategies, said these gatherings are part of a "Discovery" stage. The team is learning as much as possible about the region, by gathering statistics; taking surveys; conducting workshops; examining existing industries; and analyzing the four quadrants of strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats.

The "Opportunity" phase will distill this information into a common vision of what local citizens want for the future of North Iowa. The "Implementation" phase will prioritize goals; define action steps; and assign roles for a strategic plan to grow the region over the next five years. The final report should be completed this fall.

Chad Schreck, President/CEO of North Iowa Corridor, said, "We were excited by the level of participation and opportunity to get people together to

talk about what matters most to our people, and what they feel we should focus on for the future. The goal now is to continue building this type of engagement and inclusivity into all that we do to ensure consensus on the best actions to work on together."

Marcell said the public workshops helped ensure individual voices were heard. The planners want a better understanding of local values regarding the community and economy, in order to build consensus and create a shared vision.

Ashton Allison, project lead with TIP, led participants through several sobering statistics that affect the area's economy. "It's no secret that the population has dropped slowly and surely in the region," Allison said. In the past 10 years, Cerro Gordo County's population went down, while Iowa and the nation grew. Most of that was due to more people moving out of the county than in, according to Allison.

The county also dropped in median income, number of young adults, education level achieved, and total employment. The median age is 44 and rising, he said.

At a Clear Lake workshop, Marcell reminded participants of Newton's First Law of Motion: "An object at rest stays at rest and an object in motion stays in motion with the same speed and in the same direction unless acted upon by an unbalanced force."

"So what happens if we do nothing?" Marcell asked those gathered in the Surf Ballroom. "The good news is we are doing something about it."

Participants were randomly assigned to tables led by moderators. TIP leaders asked a total of seven questions. Each person at a table was asked to speak, then that group agreed on a consensus answer which a moderator typed into an app displaying results on a large screen. Questions included: "What are the most important issues facing North Iowa in the next five to 10 years?" and "What are top three qualities that define the character of the population in North Iowa?"

Having worked in nearly all states, Marcell said his overall impression so far is that North Iowa has much to be proud of.

"The opportunities and strengths in Cerro Gordo County community far, far outweigh the challenges," he commented. "The infrastructure is exceptional. You have great geographic proximity between two major markets. North Iowa Area Community College: many communities would give their right arm for that. And the John Pappajohn Entrepreneurial Center is doing phenomenal work, it's such an incredible strength. There's great leadership in the organizations serving the communities, in individual elected and public leaders. Everyone is passionate about the community.

"This community is pretty hard on itself. There's not as much appreciation for the wonderful things that exist in this community," Marcell said. "Collectively, there's a lot to celebrate here, and it's not just a Mason City or Clear Lake thing. The most important thing is to get it right, to produce a five-year economic development plan that serves the community."

