

City of Decatur, Illinois



“PRIORITY GOALS”

for

2023 – 2025

Decatur City Council

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The Priority Goals outlined in this report are the result of a special planning retreat of the Decatur City Council held on August 18, 2023 at The Decatur Club. The previous biennial plan has been revised to reflect new directions provided by the City Council.

Although the strategic plan changes every two years, past and current iterations reflect: 1) that many initiatives are multi-year or continuously ongoing projects; and 2) there is comparative consistency, continuity, and agreement about the council's broad goals moving forward, and that goals #1 and #2 remain the city's highest priorities. Additions to the 2023-2025 plan from previous plans include: a) a list of quantifiable performance outcomes to measure future success; and b) a vision statement.

Achieving the council's goals is not entirely the responsibility of municipal government—many goals, in fact, cannot be realized without close partnerships and cooperation with other entities. But this document articulates where the city is willing to lead, and what many of the most realistic strategies and initiatives should be, to make Decatur better.

VISION STATEMENT

The city of Decatur will be identified regionally as a compassionate family-friendly community with a sustainable commitment to better physical and mental health, vibrant business districts, and a citizenry that cares for one another by creating opportunities for people to succeed.

PRIORITY GOAL #1

Community Revitalization

OVERVIEW: Some Decatur neighborhoods have fallen into decline. What were once attractive and well-maintained, mostly owner-occupied, neighborhoods now experience urban blight. A significant number of properties in blighted urban core neighborhoods have transitioned to rentals, and in too many instances, landlords do not make investments in properties adequate for long-term maintenance; the number of vacant and uninhabitable houses is still too great. An exodus of population and commercial activity contributes directly to deterioration.

Appropriate interventions differ from neighborhood to neighborhood; and neighborhood revitalization is a long process. For this reason, the City Council has settled on a list of targeted strategies and methods of measuring progress toward future recovery. In this way the council and the rest of the city can see what strategies are the most successful and those strategies that do not work.

Forward progress has been made over the past four years toward this goal; but much work remains. The City's strategic roadmap has four key pillars:

1. Demolish whatever must be demolished because it cannot be salvaged
2. Repair and rehabilitate whatever structures can reasonably be salvaged
3. Use more aggressive code enforcement, property inspections, registrations and other enforcement strategies to improve the local building stock
4. Leverage private investment in the urban core with selective development of "catalyst" projects that are large and visible enough to spur adjacent improvement

Using neighborhood revitalization metrics developed by staff in 2019, the city measures the effectiveness of the city's efforts, evaluates progress trends and shapes new policy strategies. The following five metrics were used in 2019 and are used as performance measures moving forward:

- Changes in equalized assessed valuation by neighborhood
- Comparative condition of the housing stock by neighborhood using the structure-by-structure evaluation methodology developed for this purpose in 2019
- Percentage of lots/area in each neighborhood that are vacant and unused
- Comparative crime statistics by neighborhood
- Percentage of homes that are owner-occupied by neighborhood

Key Implementation Strategies (details for each strategy have been committed to writing and are available separately):

1. Repurposing land, envisioning alternative land uses, creating the kind of new and rehabilitated housing people want.
2. Give greater attention to corridor projects and other infrastructure improvements to catalyze community redevelopment
3. Incentivize people to remain and invest in the urban core.
4. Leverage private developer investments in the urban core to expand new land use opportunities
5. Integrate crime prevention strategies into community business and housing revitalization to advance safety and diversity initiatives

PRIORITY GOAL #2

Grow, Enhance, and Better Prepare the Local Workforce to Meet Current & Future Demands

OVERVIEW: There is an urgent need to develop a more effective approach for preparing and enlarging the local workforce to meet regional workforce requirements and ensure employers in all secure the workers they need.

There are numerous agencies in Decatur and Macon County currently providing workforce development services. But despite a multi-agency commitment to advancing workforce development, good paying jobs go unfilled due to lack of sufficiently prepared applicants.

The city and its partners should help employers find the labor and the skills they need to be successful because large employers often make expansion and new development decisions principally based on the availability of a reliable labor force. The city is committed to providing its citizens with diverse work opportunities to fit its diverse population.

Key Implementation Strategies:

1. Move forward with the recommendations from a county-wide study identifying gaps in the current workforce ecosystem.
2. Secure grants and formal commitments to fund and participate in more extensive workforce development training, and enlarging recruiting with trades.
3. Incorporate changing generational work ethic issues, provide wrap-around services, remove barriers to employment, help employers with varying work expectations, and strengthen equity and equality of access into the workforce and motivate people into sustainable employment situations (i.e, resulting higher employee retention rates).
4. Advance workforce development by stressing Decatur's overall quality of life features so that employees make long-term decisions about living in Decatur, because it is important that employees select Decatur as a place to live AND as a place to work.
5. Incentivize new and rehabilitated housing that especially appeals to younger workers, and other strategies to attract and retain more workers to Decatur.

PRIORITY GOAL #3

Take Downtown Decatur to the Next Level, because a Healthy Downtown Benefits the Whole City; and select other commercial districts for revitalization

OVERVIEW: The City of Decatur has made significant investments in its Downtown. The improved infrastructure has induced private investment in new restaurants, specialty shops and office buildings. Several building owners have opted to upgrade their properties by improving facades and investing in building rehabilitation. The City Council acknowledges, however, that the central business district has not yet reached its full potential to attract more commercial activity, urban residential living, entertainment and destination venues, etc.—all of which helps Downtown gain strength and grow outward into adjacent distressed areas to create a more well-rounded ‘live-work-play-learn’ environment in the city’s center.

The City Council will continue efforts to make Downtown Decatur stronger and more vibrant, and to also apply the same redevelopment mantra to other unique commercial districts like the Oakwood District, because a healthy urban core, and healthy neighborhood shopping areas, are important indicators of local economic health. The following are specific objectives the City Council plans to pursue:

1. Provide financial incentives for development of Downtown residential projects.
2. Use a structured development strategy incorporating market analysis, new policies, public art, fresh designs, & tourism promotion to drive additional economic vitality and create “buzz.”
3. Collaborate with and support the owners of the Lincoln Theater project and the Barnes-Citizen Buildings, and other anchor redevelopment sites Downtown.
4. Determine the best long-term uses for existing civic center and public open spaces downtown; select others to run events in these spaces.
5. Assist others in attracting professional and/or retail and housing uses into unoccupied spaces to attract and cater to a broad cross-section of the community.
6. Revise the downtown parking scheme to meet new downtown parking needs.
7. Connect new and existing development partners to grants, site information, new financing options, modern signage and uniform façade ideas, and provide other technical assistance to move projects forward.
8. Based on changing needs and land uses, update the Downtown area’s boundaries and the incentives available in this area, and then decide which options can be implemented in other Decatur commercial districts.

PRIORITY GOAL #4

Select New Technologies to Improve Municipal Service Delivery, Create Efficiencies, and Enhance Access to Information and Services for the Citizens of Decatur

OVERVIEW: So-called “Smart Cities” are communities that deploy technology to solve problems, enhance service quality and improve efficiency. Due to financial constraints, the city must select wisely from the many technology enhancement options now available to municipal governments so that only the most cost-effective solutions, and those most suited to Decatur’s needs and goals, are considered. Cost-benefit analyses should be conducted for large technology projects before they are approved and deployed to verify that the advantages warrant the cost and outweigh potential liabilities.

Key Implementation Strategies:

Develop a technology plan for the city of Decatur identifying and illustrating the impact of available new municipal technology and whether it can add value to city’s service delivery and the lives of Decatur citizens; and then use these tools to connect policies with measurable performance outcomes.

1. Create a review process whereby staff can continue to monitor and evaluate emerging technologies of relevance to Decatur and link them to performance outcomes and progress reports tied to strategic goals.
2. Staff will research, identify and recommend technology applications most likely to bring added value to municipal problem-solving in these areas:
 - a. Crime reduction applications: neighborhood cameras & worn body cameras, other technologies to help law enforcement solve crimes.
 - b. Artificial Intelligence deployed information-gathering mechanisms that can connect with traditional and non-traditional communication platforms to receive and disperse more and better communication to/from citizens.
 - c. Create a more modernized website and a “Decatur App” directing citizens and visitors to special events, businesses, downtown parking spots, visitor and guest services, and add better transaction portals to improve the municipal customer interface experience.
 - d. Incorporate EV charging into various commercial districts and other locations in accordance with the 2024 EV Plan.
 - e. Investigate and implement other new technologies designed to increase citizen engagement, and streamline interactions between residents and City officials, to connect with underreached population segments.

PRIORITY GOAL #5

Be more innovative in securing the city's financial security; enhance & expand utility assets to strengthen economic development

OVERVIEW: Decatur has experienced a decline in population as more people leave the State and the city. This directly impacts several categories of General and Special Fund revenues, as well as revenues distributed by State and Federal governments to social service agencies in Macon County.

The city of Decatur's budget has structural flaws (unsustainable public safety pensions, service delivery plans based on a larger population, high amounts of deferred maintenance, etc.) that require the city to vigorously pursue operational efficiencies, find new revenue sources, aggressively pursue annexation to drive up census numbers, and revisit whether or not existing service-delivery levels should be maintained "as-is" or modified to keep the city on a sustainable financial trajectory. Financial innovation requires going outside normal and historic practices.

Key Implementation Strategies:

1. Make long-term investments in utility infrastructure targeted to attract new employers that need the utility assets Decatur has to offer.
2. Examine and implement, as council directs, new revenue streams that will offset the need for future spending cuts and slowly shift reliance away from property, food & beverage and utility taxes. These include:
 - a. Exploring city operation of utilities not under the city now
 - b. Examining ways to monetize the large silt pile located east of the lake and created by the dredging project, and monetizing other city assets
 - c. Auditing existing tax mechanisms, not to increase taxes generally, but to make them more equitable, efficient and evenly applied
 - d. Develop a sustainable plan to finance neighborhood revitalization at existing levels.
3. Increase the local tax base with large new and rehabilitated housing developments, and bring new workers to Decatur, and new businesses of all sizes.

PRIORITY GOAL #6

Collaborate with others in ensuring integrated and wholistic management of city-owned open spaces, transportation corridors, and especially Lake Decatur

OVERVIEW: The City has a long-term obligation to manage Lake Decatur so that it is a safe, clean, and a resilient water supply for the rest of the 21st Century. This means the city will need to take steps to more proactively manage the Upper Sangamon River watershed to reduce silt, sediment and nitrates flowing into Lake Decatur, engage in a program of shoreline protection, and regulate recreational uses of Lake Decatur so that they do not undermine water quality and watershed management objectives of the city. These goals and objectives should be integrated with efforts to: 1) maximize use of adjacent and adjoining assets, including those owned and operated by the Decatur Park District, the city, and others; 2) create more non-motorized transportation corridors as per the 2021 Regional Bicycle Master Plan; and 3) enlarge the city's water supply options.

The City and the Park District have collaborated in the past to develop a long-range plan for improvements in the Lake Decatur/Nelson Park/Scovill Park & Big Creek areas, and river-front zones below the dam. These documents need to be updated to reflect changed conditions, new projects added in recent years, and revised strategic directions.

Key Implementation Strategies:

1. Increase Decatur's water supply so the community has more drought resiliency and is able to attract more employers that need reliable water supplies.
2. Implement recommendations of a Lake Management Plan so that the quantity of sediment, silt and nitrates entering Lake Decatur is significantly reduced, and adopt other strategies designed to assure good water quality and watershed protection.
3. Continue collaborating with the Park District and private entities to incrementally develop a full-service marina in Basin 2 so a greater number and diversity of people may access and enjoy Lake Decatur.
4. Enhance the appearance of transportation corridors leading in and out of Decatur; and add more railroad/street grade separations for safety and traffic decongestion, and add more 'way-finding' signage.