Prairie Township Strategic Plan: 2015 - 2020

Prairie Community Improvement Corporation
Strategy and Purpose

The Prairie Community Improvement Corporation was created by the Prairie Township Board of Trustees as a private-nonprofit corporation dedicated to positive development in Prairie Township. This strategic plan is an outline created by the PCIC to help guide the community toward prosperity through the remainder of this decade and into the next. It builds on the success of the community’s previous strategic agenda, which was the community’s guide from 2005 until recently. This agenda, which was overseen by the Prairie Township Board of Trustees, resulted in successful projects such as the West Broad Streetscape, the Prairie Township Community Center and a significant increase in law enforcement coverage in the Township. It is envisioned that this strategy will be adopted by the Prairie Township Board of Trustees, which will work with the PCIC, local institutions and businesses to make its recommended actions a reality.

Priorities for Community Advancement and Development as Outlined by the Prairie Township CIC for use by the Prairie Township Board of Trustees, the Prairie Township CIC and their partners
History

Originally founded in 1819, Prairie Township was an exclusively agricultural community before the early 1900s. Small settlements, such as Alton, Galloway and Rome were platted and grew into small villages. Then, during the 1910s and 1920s, larger housing subdivisions were platted in eastern Prairie Township along interurban streetcar lines that ran along the National Road, now West Broad Street. Many of the lots within these subdivisions developed over the next few decades through the Second World War/1940s.

Eastern Prairie Township saw a major suburban growth surge in the 1950s and 1960s, with the development of Lincon Village. This surge saw the construction of commercial development along West Broad Street and thousands of multifamily and single family dwellings to the north and south of this corridor. By the 1970s, development in the east had settled down to a relative trickle, but development of Lake Darby Estates and the area now know as Village Park continued to ensure that a steady pace of growth continued in the Township.

It was also during this timeframe that the City of Columbus began requiring that new developments that wanted to connect to its system annex into the City. Development after the 1970s has primarily been residential development divided between subdivisions built on lands annexed into Columbus in the east and development in the Lake Darby/Westpoint area in the west. In recent decades, concerns about protecting water quality in the Big Darby Creek watershed has restricted development in the western portion of the Township.
Setting

This development history has created a Prairie Township with an urbanized eastern pocket, the Lincoln Village area that is cut off from the remainder of the Township by areas that developed later after being required to annex into the City of Columbus. This area is transected by West Broad Street, which serves as the area's "Main Street." Along with various retail establishments, this corridor is also home to Doctors Hospital and various schools, which trace their roots back to this area's original 1960's/1970's growth surge. This "Main Street" corridor is bounded on the north and south by the neighborhoods that were built as part of Lincoln Village and the earlier streetcar subdivisions. The area is bounded on the east by Columbus' 1-270 beltway, which has an interchange with West Broad Street. This interchange serves as the eastern gateway into Prairie Township.

As noted, the housing/building stock of this area is rather dated. In addition, because of the age of the neighborhoods and, perhaps, because of the compact size of the 1950's and 1960's era homes, there is a good sized senior population in this area. In addition, this area and surrounding areas of Columbus are seeing growth of Latino and Somali communities. The need for updating and redeveloping this aging urban area is a primary focus of this strategy.

Housing in the western portion of the Township is not as old, primarily built from the 1970's into the early 2000's, and is spread out across a relatively rural landscape. It also does not include the commercial and other employment-oriented land uses. Big Darby watershed protection policies have slowed development and contributed to the creation of significant protected open space in this area. In addition, Big Darby Watershed Accord plans, formulated in cooperation with Columbus, Franklin County and other area Franklin County local governments call for limited, environmentally sensitive development within Prairie Township. The primary component of this growth is the "Big Darby Town Center" or "Conservation Community," but open space subdivisions area also designated in part of western Prairie Township.
Finally, as the eastern portion of Prairie Township was built out, surrounding areas were annexed and developed as part of the City of Columbus and the western subdivisions fell into place, provision of many services and facilities fell behind. The volunteer-based civic infrastructure of the Lincoln Village area could no longer keep up with demand as growth continued and the number of parents with time to donate dwindled. This has left a shortage of local services and facilities, recreation for example, that are commonly provided in urbanized communities.
Strategies

This strategic plan is based on three strategies:

IDENTITY: BRING PEOPLE TO PRAIRIE TOWNSHIP BY PROJECTING A CLEAR, POSITIVE IDENTITY.

INVESTMENT: TAKE ACTIONS THAT INCREASE INVESTMENT IN THE WEST BROAD STREET CORRIDOR AND IN OUR MATURING NEIGHBORHOODS.

COMMUNITY: CREATE COMMUNITY BY CREATING PLACES, PROGRAMS AND EVENTS THAT BRING PEOPLE TOGETHER.

Strategy I: IDENTITY

Prairie Township is diverse both in terms of its population and its geography. In addition, people are often confused as to whether they’re in Prairie Township or an area that has been annexed into Columbus. (This is a confusion which is further exacerbated by the fact that Prairie Township and these areas share a number of needs and attributes.) While a range of neighborhoods, landscapes and people can be components of an attractive community, they also make it difficult for a community to rally around an identity. Such an identity, if achieved, can be a source of community pride and can be used to represent the community in a positive way to the outside world.

This strategy proposes to create a positive identity for Prairie by projecting a positive image through three “Community Front Doors.” All of these “Front Doors” are well along their way to completion. The basis of this strategy is to continue these efforts, and use the fruits of these efforts, to maximize their impact as a positive identity “builder.”
Front Door #1: West Broad Street Corridor and Streetscape

Prairie Township has received a grant and invested in design for an overhaul of the West Broad Street streetscape from I-270 west to Hilliard-Rome Road. This streetscape will include landscaping, street trees, mast arm traffic signals, stamped asphalt crosswalks, upgraded street furniture, enhanced bus stops and bike lanes, as well as items such as National Road replicas. Prairie Township logos in certain crosswalks and street furniture and light pole banners. This very much enhanced corridor at the main entrance into the community, with its high level of design and nods to the local community and its heritage, is an excellent way to project image and identity for the Prairie Township Community. In addition to working to implement this project as laid out with ODOT, this strategy should be expanded to enhance the corridor between Hilliard Rome Road and the Community Center, within the City of Columbus, to provide an important connection of two “Community Front Doors.”

Front Door #2: Prairie Township Community Center

The Prairie Township Community Center is opening at the beginning of this strategic planning window. Therefore, this “Front Door” is focused on using the Center to build community identity and pride. The strategy here is to create events and a place that is the “community’s living room.” This high profile facility will stand out as a symbol of the community, whether people exercise and attend classes regularly, occasionally or just drive by. The space, some of which will be well suited for hosting a wide range of community-related meetings will be of a quality that will project a positive image and instill pride in the residents of the community. A range of programming, some of which might relate to the community’s past and identity, will add to the ability of the Community Center to be an effective “Front Door.”

Front Door #3: Prairie Township interactive Website

Prairie Township has just upgraded its website. This website has a wide degree of functions that allow the township to build communication networks and interact with the public and other organizations in a wide range of ways. As for the Township functions, the website will be used as an interactive message board for the community and others. It will also include an economic development outreach component. Finally, the website will be designed to maximize the amount of business that the public and others can conduct with Prairie Township without having to go to its offices or call. Importantly, this is done in an attractive, easy to use format. Communication functions of the website will be expanded through the use of a Prairie Township Facebook page.

In addition to a place to do business with the Township, this website (and Facebook page) should be linked to our partners in the community and beyond. This will be done in a way that allows us to build an enhanced virtual image of our community.
Strategies

Strategy II: INVESTMENT

Overall, commercial and residential development in Prairie Township is decades old and starting to show its age. West Broad Street and the infrastructure in its right-of-way are also showing their age and in need of improvement and updating. Over the years, as some of the luster has worn off of these areas and the focus of development and money have moved to elsewhere in Central Ohio, investment in the modernization and upkeep of properties has fallen flat. As often happens, instances of increased blight and crime have accompanied this lack of investment.

ODOT is on the verge of implementing long-standing plans to do an overhaul of Prairie Township’s section of West Broad Street, as well as streetscape improvements that were added as part of local efforts. These efforts, along with the provision of the Community Center, sports complex and spending to eliminate blight, represent major public investments in the area. These investments of public funds must be preserved and built upon in order to insure a healthy local economy, a high quality of life and to bolster property values.

The community will work with businesses, apartment owners and home owners in order to translate this public investment into more private investment. Improvement of business signage and facades and incentives for business growth along the West Broad corridor are two ways to do this. Providing standards and incentives that would result in owners of apartment buildings investing in their property is another. Also, helping homeowners to invest in their homes, resulting in a high quality of life while maintaining property values, is an important economic goal, as well as overall community goal. Finally, continuing to beef up law enforcement in the area is important in ensuring investment in the area. All of the above improve the overall quality of life and bolster investment in property, which supports a strong local business economy.
The following actions will advance investment in the community:

Work with the Franklin County Sheriff and the Franklin County Commissioners to open a substation in Prairie Township.

The CIC will support the Township in its efforts to work with the Franklin County Sheriff and the Franklin County Board of Commissioners to put a Sheriff's substation in place in eastern Prairie Township. Continued Township investments in safety services, to go along with investments in area infrastructure (including the streetscape and Community Center) are an important foundation on which to increase private investment. These investments are intended to provide for a higher quality of life and the businesses, residents and private investment that come with it.

Update zoning and development requirements in the West Broad Street corridor to ensure that private investment complements public improvements in the area.

Zoning guidelines in Prairie Township have not seen a significant overhaul in their thirty year history. As they are written, permitted uses and layouts are too general. Often this results in the regulations being too open, (the long list of permitted uses on every "General Business" parcel), or blindly restrictive, (setbacks that are based on assumptions about building automobile-centric development). Updated, planned zoning districts that do not permit nuisance uses and allow for updated site design are desirable. Also, adding aesthetic standards and/or incentives would be a way to actively seek private investment that builds on the streetscape. Reviewing the residential zoning districts so that restrictions do not impede investment in area housing stock is another aspect of this action.

Aggressively pursue development solutions that address blighted properties and nuisance uses.

The Township, the CIC and other organizations will work together to advance redevelopment that results in the elimination of blight and nuisance uses in and near the West Broad Street corridor, as well as in the residential neighborhoods. This effort will employ tax incentives, grants and loans, and narrowly targeted maintenance requirements to encourage private investment, while the Township, CIC and others directly take on other projects as need and opportunity arise. Specifically, local partners will work with County agencies and others in order to establish tax incentives and criteria for their use. In addition, local partners will work with County, State and Federal programs to provide low interest grants and loans for business and residential redevelopment and improvement. Direct work on physical projects will be ongoing as partners identify high priority sites and opportunities.

Provide low interest loans and grants for business façade and site improvements.

The CIC Board will work with the JEDZ Board, the Township and others to define and fund programs that continue and build on its sign program. These programs will encourage proactive improvements/upgrades to signage, facades and sites, as well as dovetail with enforcement of upgraded design guidelines to direct businesses toward investment in the aesthetics of their site.

Provide low interest loans and grants for home improvements and additions.

The CIC, the Township and their partners will identify sources for, and means to deliver, low interest loans and grants that, when put in place, would result in significant investment in the Township's housing stock. These funding incentives will focus on providing homeowners with incentives to upgrade the primary systems of houses, as well as to construct modifications and additions. These incentives will be targeted to owner-occupied houses.
Strategies

Strategy III: COMMUNITY

Prairie Township and abutting areas of Columbus have developed such that in recent decades the housing is either older or being built as entry level or “starter” housing. While Lincoln Village was an excellent example of planned community design for its time period, later development followed a helter-skelter pattern. The development of community groups and associations that dated back to the Lincoln Village era was largely stretched thin and dissipated over a generation or two. Similarly, as development expanded beyond the initial eastern Prairie/Lincoln Village core, public facilities and service provision was not adequate.

The combination of a significant regional concentration of less expensive housing, fading civic “infrastructure,” a low-density, unplanned layout and minimal public facilities and services are challenges that must be addressed in order to ensure a high quality of life in this community. In fact, the failure to take on this challenge will result in the further erosion of the very existence of the area as a community in any real sense. Some work has already begun that will address these factors, and strategies I and II in this plan help to build on that work. However, further effort needs to be made toward this goal by putting in place an environment that lends itself to creating a sense of community and belonging.
The following action areas are designed to help create an environment that will encourage a sense of community and belonging:

- Establish community athletic and activities programming that bring the community together.

The new Prairie Township Recreation Department, along with the new community center and sports complex, will provide individual classes, as well as leagues and programs, which will allow individuals and families the opportunity to enjoy such activities within their own community. Through its Recreation Department, the Township, in partnership with various leagues, businesses, institutions and others in the area, will use these venues as settings for a wide range of activities that not only provide opportunities to learn, be fit and improve one’s self in general, but to do so within the context of the community. This helps to build relationships and attachments that benefit everyone, including the community as a whole. While the community center and sports complex will serve as springboards for these activities, they will expand to other locations throughout the area over time.

- Work to provide services that will fill needs that allow seniors to live in Prairie Township’s neighborhoods.

The CIC, the Township and their partners should build on attributes that have helped this community to attract and retain older residents in order to continue to do so. While it’s impossible to put your finger on why, there is a concentration of older residents in eastern Prairie Township. This no doubt has something to do with the age of the housing and when these residents moved into area neighborhoods, as well as the size, cost and layout of the housing. Many residents of eastern Prairie Township moved into the area in the 1950’s, 60’s and following decades have “aged in place.” In addition, the relatively compact, often single story, floor plans of the housing in this area makes it convenient for aging empty nesters. Preserving and improving this housing stock, as well as providing support to older residents that helps them to stay in these homes, will be a community objective. Exploring ways to advocate for and/or deliver the new and enhanced services will be the first step under this strategy. This effort will complement efforts to improve housing, which relates back to action areas under Strategy II.

- Improve and provide community spaces where people can congregate.

In addition to the new community center and sports complex, Prairie Township currently has six neighborhood parks spread out across the area. In addition to programmed and other formal interaction, these places will/do serve as places for people to bump into one another and experience informal interaction. This kind of interaction can add to the attractiveness of a community, but is hard to come by in areas that are automobile-oriented. The CIC, the Township and their partners will enhance the existing and planned facilities listed above and create and take advantage of opportunities to create more. Maintenance and safety are important ways of maintaining the desirability of existing facilities. The partners should also look for opportunities to create new places where people can gather in conjunction with the streetscape, such as pocket parks and temporary vending areas. Such opportunities should be sought in other areas, as well.

- Improve, redevelop and build the community, as opportunities arise, so that so that people can get around on foot and/or on a bike, as well as more easily by using transit.

Over time, the CIC, Township and their partners will look for and create opportunities to make the developed areas of Prairie Township more walkable. This means not only having sidewalks and other facilities to walk on, but having them in places where people want to walk and near places where people want to go. This effort is related to enhancing and creating gathering places because those are often the types of places people will walk to. Making businesses and institutions accessible by foot is also desirable. The partners will look for opportunities to locate gathering spots so that they encourage walking, while encouraging business development that is not solely oriented toward automobile traffic, but also friendly to walkers.