

The Intentional Tourist

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by Jarrod McCartney

Towards the end of last year, the Red Cloud Heritage Tourism Advisory Committee got together for two strategic planning sessions. The committee consists of myself, Dennis Hansen, Jay Yost, Wade Maudlin, Destiny Madigan, Ashley Olson and Kina Elliott, though Kina wasn't appointed until after we completed our planning sessions. These sessions will shape the direction of my work in the community for the next few years. While we won't produce a formal plan until the end of our present collaborative agreement in June, we did identify some core areas of focus. In short, I will be focusing on: 1) *amenity development*, 2) *creating and executing a robust national marketing strategy*, 3) *identifying and obtaining funding* for multiple projects including funding our own office, and 4) *community aesthetic improvement* (i.e. beautification).

So what does all of that mean? For amenity development, it simply means we want to create enriching experiences for visitors that will compel them to stay longer. As part of these efforts, we would expect the quality of life for locals to improve as well. To that end, we would like to explore establishing a cooperative for local arts and crafts, provide space for a business incubator, display public art and improve green space, push forward plans to create a recreation trail, create guides for visitor trip experiences and packages for them to purchase, and even the long-term development of river-bottom land recently donated to the Willa Cather Foundation into a recreation site. We also want to see continued development of the Red Cloud Creative District (i.e. more activities, programming, and funding) and we want to create special experiences for visitors at Hotel Garber.

A fundamental part of making all of this work worth it is getting more people to visit. To that end, we will be leveling up our efforts to promote Red Cloud, Webster County, and the region to major markets like Denver, Kansas City, and Chicago and will be working with the National Willa Cather Center to promote Red Cloud nationally and even internationally. We want to develop more opportunities for immersive tourism, like writer's and artist's retreats. We want to finally create a visitors guide. We also want to work more with our neighbors to promote Webster County, South Central Nebraska, and North Central Kansas. This means partnering with other tourism sites for day trips around the region with the hopes that Hotel Garber will serve as their overnight stay. We would be interested in expanding our vision for tourism development and working with partners in Adams, Clay, Nuckolls, and Franklin, Smith and Jewell counties in an official or unofficial capacity. We would like to work with sites outside of those counties as well if it makes sense.

Of course, we can do very little without money. We feel like we've been successfully precisely because of our autonomy and will be looking for donors who share our vision for making Red Cloud into a hub for arts, culture, and creativity in the region. We aspire to become self-funded and self-sufficient and seek to grow the tourism budget so that we can finally hire additional staff. We also want small businesses to grow and thrive around our tourism ecosystem. To that end, we will propose later this year that the City of Red Cloud stop funding Heritage Tourism

and instead utilize the \$15,000 that they have been giving to this office to establish a revolving loan fund for small businesses. There's a lack of incentives in the community and we feel that that stymies growth and makes businesses less likely to take a risk on improving storefronts, making building repairs, improving their marketing efforts, or taking on additional employees. This modest investment of \$15,000 paired with state programs like LB840 (the [Local Option Municipal Economic Development Act](#)), and the Downtown Revitalization Community Development Block Grant (with potential grants or low/no interest loans up to \$50,000) could help dramatically improve the look and feel of our downtown and adjacent areas and provide a real boon to struggling local businesses.

And that leads me to our final objective: community aesthetic improvement. A beautiful place that you can be proud of is something that generates community pride. While I applaud the efforts at nuisance abatement, what I am talking about here is all of us doing small and big things to improve the look and feel of the community. I could start by finally painting my house and fixing my porch! But I also mean simple things like collaborating with the Chamber or any other organization on doing more to decorate for the holidays, providing businesses with incentives to decorate their spaces or do things like place planters or vegetation near their storefronts. We are very interested in utilizing our Creative District designation to place more public art throughout the community. And we want to make Hardwick Park a beautiful place that honors veterans and makes visitors feel welcome and like it's a retreat from the pressures of modern living. We want to establish more community cleanup days and maybe even bring back challenges like yard of the month. We want to do what we can to make our entries in to town more attractive.

We steadfastly believe that if you create a place that someone wants to visit, you will build a place that someone wants to live. If you build a place people want to live, you'll build a place where people want to work. If you build a place people want to work, you'll build a place where businesses want to be. That's an almost cliché saying now in tourism and community development circles, but it rings true for a reason—people want to visit, live, and work in fun places that have plenty of things to do and places to work. I feel like we've made a lot of progress over the last 9 years, but we still have a lot of work to do. I'm eager to get started.