

SWWRPC STRATEGIC PLAN

2022-2025



SOUTHWESTERN WISCONSIN
REGIONAL PLANNING
COMMISSION

Background

Purpose

This strategy was developed to provide guidance to the staff and Commissioners of the Southwestern Wisconsin Regional Planning Commission (SWWRPC). The primary goal of this plan is to identify the strategies SWWRPC will use to meet the region's challenges and leverage opportunities to create thriving communities.

We recognize that in order to deliver value, we must have ***focus and direction*** to know where we can most effectively apply our strengths, as well as areas or projects we should refrain from undertaking. We must seek opportunities for increased partnerships which lead to efficient use of resources, and identify parameters around the work we pursue in order to maintain focus and deliver high-quality services.

Planning Principles

The framework for this plan, and for embedding focus and direction in our mission, is founded on the following principles:

- **Collaboration:** SWWRPC will continue to increase collaboration with local governments and non-profits through coordinated service delivery, shared staffing, and other means that demonstrate a savings in time or money. This is in intentional response to the increasing challenges facing these entities as they seek to achieve their missions, such as declining population and budget constraints. These issues are simply too big for one agency to solve alone.
- **Agility:** We believe that the future will reflect, but not resemble, the past. Growing technological advancements, population and demographic shifts, and climate change require operational agility to meet an uncertain and complex future.
- **Alignment:** Aspirations are potentially unlimited and unbounded, but our capacity is limited. This strategy ensures aspirations are aligned with capacity, and enables the building of new capacity when necessary.
- **Continual improvement:** Continual improvement ensures we evaluate our success or failure so we can improve during the planning process, build on and expand our work, and avoid restarting at the end of each planning cycle.
- **Competition:** We will compete with other service providers when we have a clear competitive advantage that offers something unique and distinct from other providers, or a when we can offer a similar product or service in a more affordable and sustainable way. If we cannot identify a competitive advantage, we should avoid competition and focus our resources elsewhere.

Process

This process is an update to the 2018-2022 Strategic Plan, which included broad stakeholder and partner input and followed turnover in the Executive Director position. The 2018-2022 plan focused largely on internal issues, particularly staff retention and operational improvements.

Development of the 2022-2025 plan focused on identifying the unique offerings and competitive advantage of SWWRPC in relation to other private and non-profit community and economic development organizations. To develop this plan, SWWRPC staff and Commissioners engaged across a several year period and focused on the issues below.

- **2019:** Staff met at Bethel Horizons to discuss our values, the purpose of our work, SWWRPC history, statutory mandate, and a preliminary analysis of the unique nature of RPCs.
- **2021:** Staff analyzed customers, non-customers, and complements or substitutes for our work. We conducted an industry analysis to identify competitors, and evaluate our online presence and messaging. Finally, staff and Commissioners met at a regular SWWRPC Commission meeting to brainstorm key issues facing the region, the benefit SWWRPC brings to communities and organizations, and determine necessary improvements to SWWRPC operations.
- **2022:** Data review and discussion held during a SWWRPC Commission meeting, and consensus formed regarding preliminary challenges and opportunities. The Commission met in June to adopt the Strategic Plan.

SWWRPC in Context

SWWRPC Organizational Assessment

Strengths

- **Lean, interdisciplinary, with front line decision-makers:** Our small, interdisciplinary staff are hired for their ability to be leaders on any project. Agility is critical to our success and our staff are capable of making project-level decisions with minimal oversight.
- **Stable and supportive leadership:** Our Commission reflects the region's leaders, and they bring experience to the organization. They and the Executive Director have been working together for seven years to build an organization that delivers value to the region, and supports staff to achieve their mission.
- **Informed insiders, with an outsider's view:** SWWRPC staff are a blend of life-long southwestern Wisconsin residents, long-term transplants who chose to relocate here, and new arrivals looking for work or life opportunities. This blended background lets us balance the role of being informed resident consultants who bring a broader view of the region.
- **A broad mandate, relative financial independence, and a long-term vision:** The breadth of our statutory mandate gives us the freedom to evolve, which when combined with significant non-county funding and our future-focused role, enables us to use our voice to challenge and support in ways others can't, and offer a neutral and objective perspective.
- **A positive workplace with service-driven employees:** Our work environment is positive, and staff enjoy and respect one another. This mutual respect makes the office a place where employees like to work, and which enables collaboration, divergent points of view, and respectful debate on projects, ideas, and solutions.
- **Continually improving:** Our internal processes are structured to ensure staff continually grow and learn from one another, and independently. We have a variety of means of ensuring this, including an internal peer-review process for plans, after-action reports for learning from success and mistakes, and structured conference and training regimens designed to permit both the organization and the employee to grow in new areas. Through our collaborative projects, we also draw knowledge and skills from our partners that we can apply elsewhere in our work.

Weaknesses

- **Capacity:** When serving 5 counties, 51 cities and villages, hundreds of townships, and multiple organizations, there's always more work to do. We'd like to help everyone, however we're constrained by limited funding and staffing that requires us to choose and leave some communities underserved.
- **Need to focus:** We have a consistent back log of work and are continually launching new projects. We also have projects that come to us unexpectedly, and so we must focus our efforts where we can be most effective, and understand when it's important to say "no" to avoid mission creep or burnout.
- **Desirable employees in a competitive market:** Our strength lies with our staff, whose ability and expertise makes each desirable in a competitive workforce market. It must be the first priority of the Director and Commission to retain staff who prove themselves capable of leading the organization's projects and delivering value to our communities.
- **Diversity:** The staff and Commission had made intentional strides to increase the diversity of the its members, and continually seeks for insight and leadership that will provide new and divergent perspectives. However, we recognize that "we don't know what we don't know," and seek to continually grow our understanding of how we can serve all of the region's populations, including those who are traditionally overlooked in our work.

Southwestern Wisconsin Regional Assessment

Opportunities

- **Natural beauty and sense of place:** The Driftless Region is unique, and the sense of place and natural beauty associated with it may be our greatest asset, and help attract outdoor enthusiasts and others.
- **Quality of life:** While largely subjective, community members often mention the region's low-stress life for young professionals and families. Remote work opportunities are growing and the cost of living can be relatively lower than many urban areas. Opportunities for healthy living abound due to relatively clean air and water, and the prevalence of parks and open spaces around the region.
- **Economic opportunity:** The region's residents appreciate and support local businesses, which fill our main streets. We also have growing tourism opportunities tied to unique food venues, historic locations, and natural beauty.
- **A relative climate haven:** Relative to much of the country, the region is relatively insulated from the most harmful climate hazards such as sea-level rise, drought, ground water depletion, extreme heat, and forest fires.
- **Relational work and sense of community:** New residents of southwestern Wisconsin are often impressed with the ability to become involved in their community and make an impact, particularly in our larger communities. This ability to get involved is largely due to our small rural nature and the value of relationships in civic life. The complementary challenge to this is finding residents with time to attend meetings and become involved.

Challenges

- **Declining or stagnant population:** According to the 2020 Census, the region's population change from 2010-2020 was a stagnant 0.04%, a growth of 61 people. This stagnation is tied to historic outmigration of the region's youth and a nation-wide trend in declining birth rates, and will impact the region in a variety of ways ranging from community wealth, tax base, workforce, and volunteerism.
- **Aging population:** As youth leave the region and birth rates decline, a greater percentage of our population become empty-nesters and (eventually) retirees. This results in fixed incomes, constrained tax base, an increase in cost of social services, and a continuation of the existing workforce shortage currently hemming business growth.
- **Declining school enrollment and labor force:** Regional school enrollment is down by over 18% from 20 years ago. This will become an increasing challenge for schools due to a state funding formula tying revenue to enrollment. While enrollment declines or stagnates, the cost of education continues to grow due to the need to improve or replace buildings and compete for quality teachers, and obtain up-to-date educational resources.
- **Barriers to labor force attraction:** The region has a significant decline of labor force, creating difficulties for businesses seeking to grow. The shortage of available, affordable, or move-in ready housing and buildable lots contribute to the challenge of workforce attraction. Other barriers include areas of poor broadband internet and the lack of sufficient affordable quality childcare.
- **Cultural barriers to inclusion:** New comers often find native southwestern Wisconsin residents to be nice, but not always welcoming. It can be hard to find community in many of our smaller communities, and this can be a deterrent for new residents seeking to settle here.
- **Unprepared for a changing future:** A growing number of signals indicate that demographic shifts, changing technology, and climate change will result in a future that is markedly different than the past. Many of our community leaders remain anchored to past practices and bound to local control, reducing their communities' resilience, agility, and innovation and leaving them unprepared to meet future challenges.

SWWRPC Strategy

Mission

SWWRPC Mission: *“The Southwestern Wisconsin Regional Planning Commission works to build a resilient southwestern Wisconsin through the creation of economic diversity, support for innovation, and development of locally-led strategic initiatives implemented by collaborative partnerships grounded in common purpose.”*

The SWWRPC Mission draws on the organization’s original purpose identified in Chapter 66.0309 of the Wisconsin Statutes, which permits the creation of RPCs and grants them the authority to provide any of the following actions:

- Conduct all types of research studies, collect and analyze data, prepare maps, charts and tables, and conduct all necessary studies for the accomplishment of its other duties.
- Consistent with the elements specified in s. [66.1001](#), make plans for the physical, social and economic development of the region, and, consistent with the elements specified in s. [66.1001](#), adopt by resolution any plan or the portion of any plan so prepared as its official recommendation for the development of the region.
- Publicize and advertise its purposes, objectives and findings, and distribute reports concerning these items.
- Provide advisory services on regional planning problems to the local government units within the region and to other public and private agencies in matters relative to its functions and objectives, and may act as a coordinating agency for programs and activities of local units and agencies as they relate to its objectives.

Vision

“The Southwestern Wisconsin Regional Planning Commission is recognized for delivering innovative long-range planning services that promote resiliency through collaborative partnerships and competitive strategic positioning of our communities and organizations. We are led by an inter-disciplinary team of knowledgeable professionals dedicated to building the capacity required for our communities to thrive.”

Core Values

We will implement our strategy only if our practices are tethered to our principles, ensuring integrity and accountability in our work. The values below reflect the values of today’s SWWRPC staff. Their drive, focus, and values enable us to meet the region’s greatest challenges. To ensure fit and alignment of staff with mission, and to accommodate and include future staff, we will evaluate these values during each strategic planning cycle to ensure our practices remain tied to our principles.

- We are service-driven
- We seek to be effective
- We embrace challenges
- We work with integrity, and provide unbiased views
- We are future-focused and take the long-view
- We are life-long learners
- We aspire to deliver the high quality service

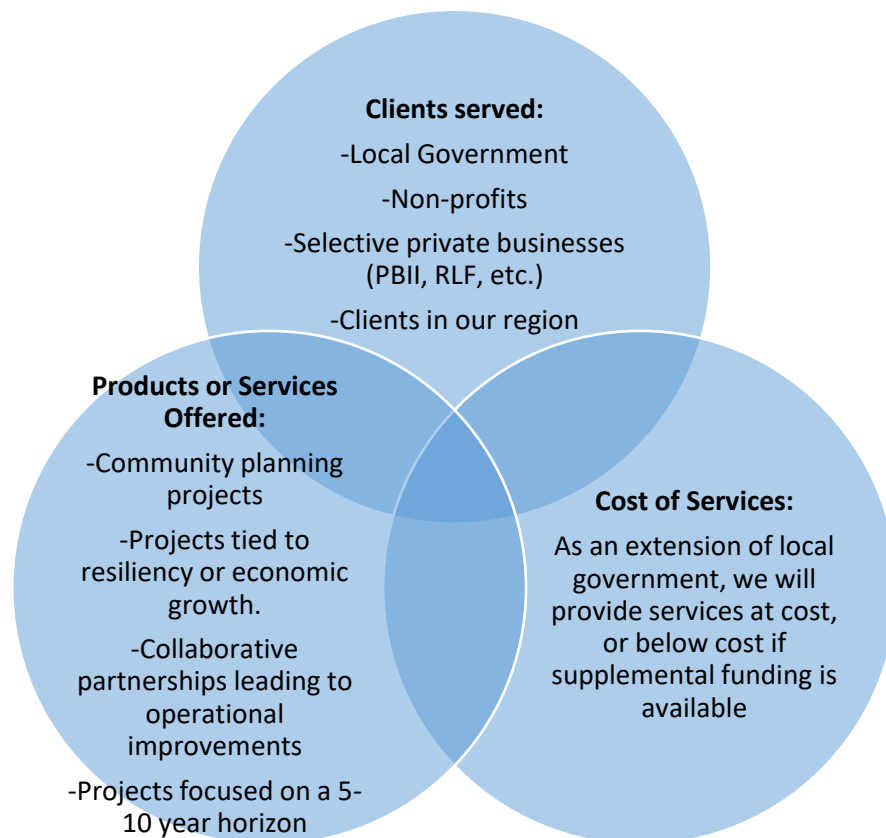
Strategic Priorities: 2023-2033

The following priorities will guide our operations for the next 10 years, and reflect SWWRPC's unique role in the region. Work plans will be developed at 3-year intervals to refine the means of implementing these strategies, and to ensure alignment of SWWRPC operations with the region's evolving needs.

- **Strategy 1:** Build resilient communities and organizations through activities that position the region to attract new populations, enhance economic diversity, adapt to the local and national impacts of climate change, and empower them to thrive in a complex and uncertain future.
- **Strategy 2:** Grow the economy through our unique role in the region, such as our partnership with the US Economic Development Administration (EDA), and by adding value to our partners' work by advising on project enhancements that lead to increased sustainability and greater return on community investments.
- **Strategy 3:** Create, and facilitate the creation of, new collaborative partnerships that build resiliency through reduced expenses and improved efficiencies among local government and non-profit partners.
- **Strategy 4:** Maintain capability and capacity to execute on this strategy.
- **Strategy 5:** Enhance the decision-making ability of local organizations through the provision of quality data, maps, scenario planning, and strategic thinking.

Value Proposition

A value proposition identifies the customers or clients served, the unique product or services provided, and the relative cost of the goods or services offered. To be effective in our mission, future projects will align with at least two of these three elements, varying minimally in response to the demands of our clients. We will accommodate evolution of this value proposition to permit agility while holding true to our Mission.



Work Plan: 2022-2025

The following work plan outlines measurable actions that will enable us to implement the strategies identified above. This work plan is set to a 3-year timeline, and will be evaluated semi-annually and updated in 2025. Performance metrics for the work plan are identified in the Plan Implementation section as well as in the accompanying Implementation Matrix.

Strategy 1: Build resilient communities

Actions

- Work directly with communities to educate on the nature of resiliency, and how communities are at risk and can increase resiliency in their operations.
- Help develop local housing working groups. Include best practices used throughout the region and return on investment analyses to generate local support for community investment in housing.
- Continue to engage in long-range planning, including comprehensive and strategic planning tied to community climate resiliency and economic diversification.
- Work with school districts to develop opportunities for increased collaboration and shared services, and to help them grow enrollment.
- Grow our conservation and ecological planning work to include watershed plans and GIS modeling.
- Work on community marketing and branding projects to support local placemaking and workforce attraction efforts.
- Engage communities to modernize their ordinances to ensure flexibility and enable unique community amenities and development models.
- Develop renewable energy plans to grow the amount of renewable energy generated on municipal and publicly-owned buildings.
- Develop county and local climate change adaptation strategies that identify at-risk assets, opportunities for economic growth through workforce and business attraction.

Strategy 2: Grow and diversify the economy

Actions

- Continue to aggressively pursue EDA and other economic development capacity building grants to develop land and financing for economic growth.
- Update the regional Comprehensive Economic Development Strategy to align the work of partners such as Prosperity Southwest Wisconsin, EDA, Wisconsin Economic Development Corporation, and local economic development efforts to maximize the use of our minimal resources. Include strategies and tactics to increase climate and economic resiliency for the region.
- Support projects that attract childcare facilities, new housing development, and other necessary community amenities required to attract workforce.
- Help our communities become welcoming to new and diverse populations that are required to maintain community events, tax base, workforce, and school enrollment.

Strategy 3: Form collaborative partnerships

Actions

- Serve as project managers and implementation monitors for SWWRPC-led plans.

- Continue to develop tools such as the Asset Map and Constructability Map to assist in on-boarding new partners, rapidly respond to development opportunities, reduce time required to prepare grants, and maintain regional institutional knowledge.
- Facilitate the development of shared service agreements between organizations which result in reduction of administration and overhead costs while maintaining high-quality service-delivery.
- Serve as the regional administrative agent for projects that span counties or cities in order to reduce overhead and administrative burdens at the local level.
- Increase relationships and collaborative projects with networks outside of the region, including statewide agencies or private sector firms, in order to increase statewide awareness and funding to the region.

Strategy 4: Maintain the capacity and capability of staff

Actions

- Maintain competitive market-rate compensation and benefits packages, and evaluate compensation packages every two years at a minimum.
- Continue to conduct annual staff evaluations, semi-annual retention meetings, and exit interviews to maintain a positive organizational culture and ensure alignment of staff with our mission.
- Continue to diversify operational revenue to enhance the investment of our partner counties, while also providing financial independence and operational resiliency.
- Continue to improve upon existing strong SWWRPC marketing efforts through direct marketing to municipalities and the growth of our newsletters and annual report distribution through our partners.
- Increase new funding streams from state and federal agencies such as WEDC, USDA, and EPA.
- Continue to invest in staff professional development, including project management and leadership training, in order to ensure all staff are able to lead and manage team projects.

Strategy 5: Enhance local decision-making

Actions

- Remain the region's premier data and GIS provider through continued analysis of new data trends and synthesis of relevant data sources.
- Continue to provide local public engagement, board facilitation, and community surveys to help communities identify core issues and opportunities, and create informed, publicly-supported policies and projects.
- Continue to provide data analyses to local communities and organizations to assist with strategy development and decision-making.
- Maintain current databases from sources such as the US Census and the Wisconsin Departments of Revenue and Public Instruction, and maintain active use of EMSI's modeling tool.
- Continue to engage GIS as a decision-making and asset management tool, growing the number of public web maps for use by partners and the public.

Plan Implementation

Plan Implementation and Performance Assessment

Financial performance will be based on a rolling 3-year return on investment and profit/loss analysis, since annual financial performance is not an effective timeline due to the fluctuating nature of revenue expenses, particularly staffing levels and healthcare premiums. All non-financial metrics will be evaluated annually and reported to the Commission. Performance will be based on the following metrics, which are included with targets on the accompanying Implementation Matrix.

- Annual turnover rate and reason for turnover
- Annual investment in professional development and training
- Grant revenue as a percentage of overall revenue to measure revenue diversification
- The number of annual contracts awarded by value and overall count
- The number of projects funded in support of new services, such as climate change adaptation work
- The number of comprehensive, strategic, and outdoor recreation plans completed
- The number of projects in SWWRPC-conducted plans that are implemented by local communities
- Annual growth of on-going, sustainable revenue
- Client feedback surveys
- Referrals and return clients

Continual Improvement

SWWRPC leadership will use this plan as a “living document” to guide decision-making and measure progress through the Plan-Do-Study-Act (PDSA) cycle (Figure 1). The plan will be evaluated annually and used to evaluate performance of the staff, and on-board new staff and Commissioners. Progress will be reported to the Commission on an annual basis.

Figure 1 – The PDSA Cycle

