

Northfield Township

2023 Strategic Plan

Process Facilitated by Northern Illinois University's Center for Governmental Studies
Mel Henriksen, MPP, Assistant Director, NIU-CGS
Alli Hoebing, MPA, Research Specialist, NIU-CGS



NORTHERN ILLINOIS UNIVERSITY

**Center for
Governmental Studies**

Outreach, Engagement and Regional Development

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The Township Supervisor and Board of Trustees would also like to thank its staff and community members who participated in the stakeholder feedback phase of the process. An effective strategic plan includes feedback from stakeholders to ensure that the community's needs and expectations are understood.

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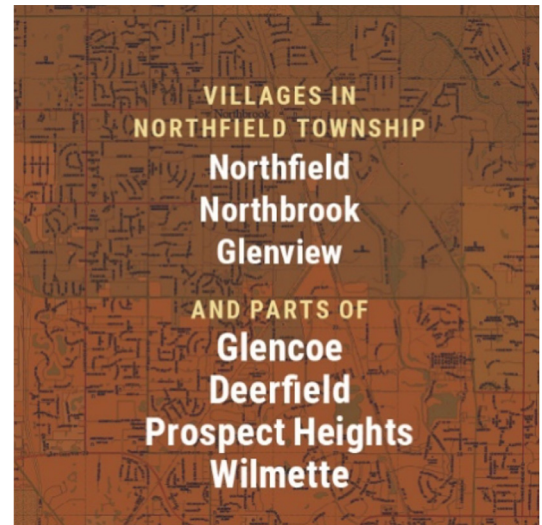
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Northfield Township Background

Township government is the oldest existing unit of government continuing to serve North America.¹ Today, 85 of Illinois' 102 counties operate under the township form of government, and the state's 1,428 townships serve more than 8 million citizens. By law, Illinois townships are charged with three basic functions: 1) assistance for the indigent; 2) the assessment of real property for the basis of local taxation (except in Cook County); and 3) maintenance of all roads and bridges outside federal, state, and other local jurisdiction.

Northfield Township is one of 29 townships in Cook County, Illinois. As of the 2020 census, its population was 91,565. Northfield Township serves as a liaison to Cook County to assist residents with property tax questions and appeals, offers assistance to residents through general and emergency assistance and a food pantry, registers voters and provides notary and passport services. Case managers assist residents with identifying other assistance programs for which they may be eligible. In addition, special programs are also developed for residents. An elected supervisor and board of trustees govern the township.²



Northfield Township's current mission is to ensure consistent, high quality, efficient township services, which include:

- Maintenance of roads and sanitary sewers
- Administration of emergency and general assistance and other human services
- Provision of tax assessment counsel and services

¹ <https://www.toi.org/about-us/history/#::-:text=By%20law%2C%20Illinois%20townships%20are,state%2C%20and%20other%20local%20jurisdiction.>

² <https://northfieldtownship.com/what-is-township-government/>

Executive Summary

Strategic planning is an effective way to identify and confirm an organization’s vision for the future and set organizational purpose and direction by incorporating clear priorities and measurable goals. In June 2022, Northfield Township engaged the Northern Illinois University Center for Governmental Studies (NIU-CGS) to facilitate its strategic planning process and help create its strategic plan. This process included broad stakeholder feedback ranging from community focus groups and interviews to a random-sample, community-wide survey, the results of which were shared at the township’s strategic planning leadership workshop and were designed to focus leadership and energize the organization.

From August through November 2022, the NIU-CGS team collected stakeholder input and captured relevant data to share with the board at a strategic planning workshop held in early December 2022. These findings were used during the workshop to assist Northfield Township leaders in making informed decisions related to the township’s future services, policies, and programs. Ultimately, workshop participants created strategic goals centered on where the township wants to go as an organization and as part of the community, in both the short and long term. Executive-level strategic planning sessions are a good staple for progressive organizations and are encouraged to be done regularly. This report provides documentation of the process as well as shares the strategic direction established by the community stakeholders, the township staff, and elected officials.

Strategic Goals and Priority Areas

At the workshop, thematic stakeholder input from the focus groups and survey was shared to help inform a series of discussions on leader’s visions for the future and the township’s current strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and challenges (S.W.O.C.). Participants were ultimately asked to use the workshop discussions to inform and identify short- and long-term goals. After a list of goals was developed, participants were then asked to classify each goal according to a matrix model of time and complexity. Agreed upon criteria were used to classify a goal as short- or long-term and as complex or routine (please see full report for defined criteria).

After the strategic planning workshop, the Northfield Township Board was asked to delineate, via an online ranking exercise, which goals should be given the highest priority. In total, the group developed seven short-term routine goals, 11 short-term complex goals, three long-term routine goals, and six long-term complex goals. The top three goals from each category are offered as a process “snapshot” representing the most important strategic goals or priority areas for the board and staff to address in the months and years ahead (see below). For a review of all the strategic goals developed, discussed, and ranked, please refer to the full report.

Top Three Short-Term Routine Goals

Develop multi-channel communication strategies to increase understanding of what the township does and does not do

- Work with community partners to foster more regular community outreach engagement, explore generational difference in information consumption
- Communicate the value of the township: Why is it so important to the service users, partners, community, and county?
- Investigate ways to communicate the township's boundary lines to combat confusion surrounding "Northfield" name

Evaluate programs/services offered to ensure long-term financial sustainability

- Including evaluating staffing needs/demands related to contraction/expansion/changes in services, programs, hours, etc. (ensure we are not a solution looking for a problem, we are spending money on programs/services that are needed)

Update all policy and procedure manuals at the township

- e.g., social media, outreach, communication, etc.
- Help with succession planning, onboarding, staff satisfaction and advancement

Top Three Short-Term Complex Goals

Expand the Township's physical space by either securing a new building or purchasing and redesigning the current space

Work with community partners/businesses to explore additional job training programs improving workforce development and opportunities for clients

Evaluate transportation options to improve client experience including improving the Dial a Ride program

Top Three Long-Term Routine Goals

Consistently maintain cash reserves in line with fiscal norms

Ensure the entire township office has a well-trained staff that can provide outstanding service to residents

- Assessor's office staff well-trained and able to focus on assessments and not just appeals

Consolidate all the PINs under township ownership (if buying current township building)

Top Three Long-Term Complex Goals

Through training programs and assistance provided by the township, help to reduce poverty in all areas of the township

Create/redesign a state-of-the-art community/township building

- e.g., rent the space out to agencies for things like community mental health, legal aid clinics, etc.

Work toward a more inclusive, welcoming environment within the township

- e.g., communication in multiple languages, meeting people at their need

After the leadership workshop, CGS staff reviewed all the goals created by the board and senior staff as well as discussions from the pre-workshop focus groups, survey, and leadership interviews. Four high-level strategic priorities surfaced and are shared below. These priority areas highlight the activities and initiatives that the township will focus on in both the short and long term. Full definitions, rationale, and goal alignment can be found in the full report.

Strategic Priority Areas



Connector and Convenor



Innovative Service Delivery



Sustainability and Organizational Advancement



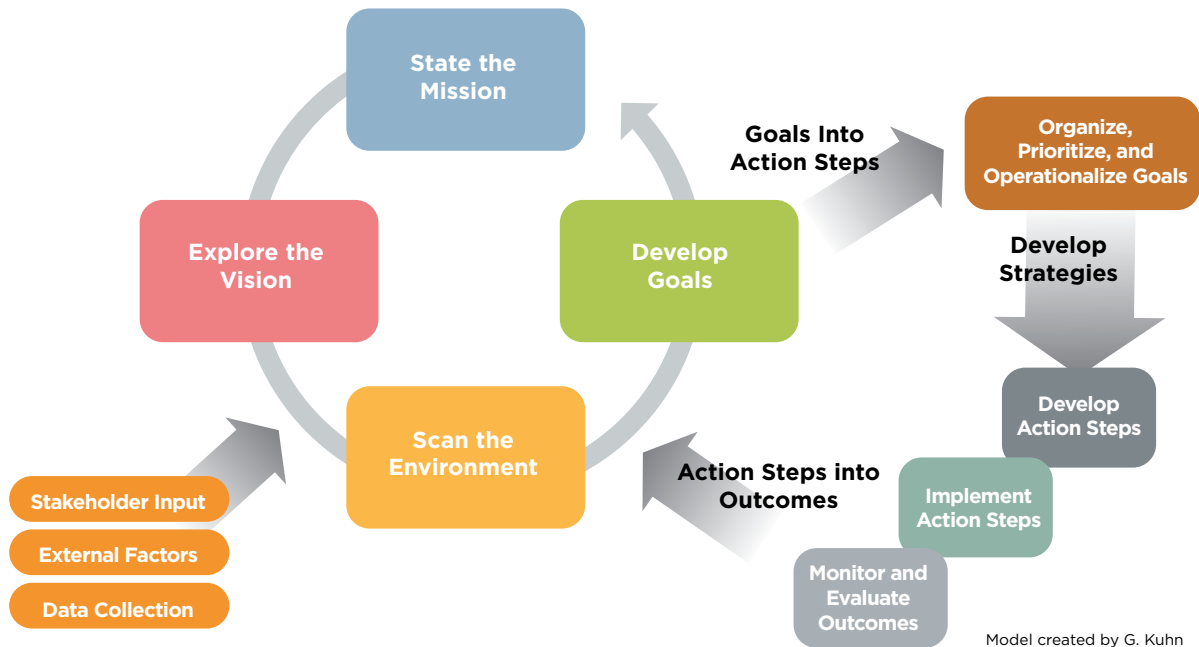
Communication and Outreach

Introduction

As an organization, Northfield Township has placed itself among governmental entities that have made a commitment to formalized strategic planning and goal setting exercises (Figure 1). The township board and administrative leadership team gathered in December 2022 to discuss a future vision for the township and review and establish short- and long-term goals. The workshop provided a positive atmosphere to methodically and *strategically* determine where the township wants to go as an organization to best serve the community well into the coming years.

It will be important to keep in mind that the judicious use of the township’s limited resources (including financial resources and professional staff time) will be key to achieving good results. Only a limited number of goals and objectives can be managed and implemented effectively at any given time. In a very realistic sense, clear and stable priorities must be maintained if the township desires to stretch its resources as far as they can go.

Figure 1. Strategic Planning Model



**Model generally represents the steps that are taken for this type of initiative.*

Pre-Workshop Stakeholder Input

Focus Groups

In October 2022, five in-person focus groups were held with a cross section of stakeholders (age, race, location, time in community, users and non-users of services, small and large business, etc.). Each focus group had approximately 10-15 participants. NIU-CGS staff conducted focus groups with the following groups:

- Business community
- Civic institutions (e.g., secular community, non-profits, service clubs, etc.)
- Intergovernmental organizations (e.g., city and village managers, police and fire chiefs, school and park districts)
- Township front- and mid-line/auxiliary staff
- Township service users

The focus group sessions were designed as a primer for the strategic planning process. The information presented was shared in summation at the leadership workshop and added *exploratory and thematic information* for the board and senior leadership team to consider. As a result of the focus group responses and feedback, the facilitators identified four overarching themes presented in Figure 2. The themes represent important topic areas that the township leaders and board were asked to think about as they went through the workshop exercises and developed short- and long-term goals. Therefore, it is not unusual to see alignment between the focus group themes and the priority areas identified as part of the entirety of the process. Please see [Appendix A](#) for a full summary of all focus group questions and aggregated responses for each theme.

Figure 2. Aggregated focus group identified themes



Pre-Workshop Stakeholder Input

Community Survey and User Focus Group

As a part of the strategic planning process, the Northfield Township staff commissioned the NIU-CGS survey research team to conduct two surveys and one user focus group between September and November 2022. The first study included a multi-mode survey (online, mail, and telephone reminder calls) of a random sample of residents. A total of 504 residents completed the survey (margin of error for the community survey is +/- 4.33 percentage points). The purpose of the survey was to determine residents' satisfaction with township services, suggestions for improving services, and suggestions for additional services the township could provide. The second study was focused on users of township services, and it included an online opinion survey sent to users with 116 responses and a supplemental service user focus group with six attendees.

The NIU-CGS survey research team, led by Dr. Mindy Schneiderman, worked directly with township leaders to create and analyze the community survey and to set up the service users focus group. Dr. Schneiderman also provided explanatory language and community outreach pertaining to the survey.

The questionnaire for both the focus group and the survey covered the following topics:

- Awareness and use of general/emergency assistance services provided by the township
- Current needs
- Communication about the township
- Perceptions of other township-provided services

This perspective helps to build a balanced, informed, and open view of the township's opportunities and challenges. Overall, most service users and residents are satisfied with the services provided by Northfield Township government and with the customer service they receive from township staff. However, some suggested improvements from the survey and service users focus group are listed below:

- Service users prefer Uber or Lyft be used rather than cabs for the Dial-A-Ride Transportation program.
- Service users want expanded hours for notary and passport services.
- Service users want more property tax assistance appointments.

Several major themes, ideas, and suggestions emerged from the survey and were shared at the workshop with board and senior staff. Please see [Appendix B](#) of the report for an executive summary of the community survey and service users focus group findings.

Outline of Leadership Workshop Exercises and Discussion Sessions

The format for all the discussion sessions used in the planning effort was highly participative and interactive. The workshop facilitators utilized a group discussion approach called ‘Nominal Group Technique’ where the facilitator assures participants have equal opportunities to speak and share opinions. During the workshop, individuals had the opportunity to generate and share their ideas, as well as participate in group activities in both small and large breakout sessions, allowing them to weigh alternatives and refine their thinking through dialogue. As ideas were shared and debated, township leaders worked steadily toward a consensus regarding organizational values, purpose, future directions, and priorities.

Introductions and Icebreaker Exercise

Describing Northfield Township

Participants were asked to introduce themselves and share how they became involved with the township, either as a board or staff member. Next, they engaged in an introductory icebreaker exercise designed to stimulate conversation by describing Northfield Township using the initials of their first and last name. Participants were asked to think about their ideas for describing the township ahead of time and then be ready to share them with the group during the first session of the workshop. This was a brainstorming exercise—all ideas about the township’s current and future state were encouraged and shared. No evaluative or judgmental debate was permitted during this session. Below is a summary of those answers.

Descriptions of the Township Using Your Initials—Word Cloud



Descriptions of the Township Using Your Initials—List

- Accepting organization
- Need-based, supports community’s needs
- Cliques—township communities operate in silos—could use more collaboration/connection
- Fair-minded—balance needs with resources—policies and practices are fair
- Kind and considerate
- Striving—future-focused, striving for excellence
- Service
- Moneyed—affluent
- Superb staff and elected officials
- Opportunity-focused—Board is excited about new opportunities
- Growing—services and expectations
- Customer-focused
- Thoughtful—outpouring of help
- Resilient—everybody works together
- Value—services are valuable
- Proactive
- Dedicated staff
- Stratified—wide variety of backgrounds within the Township

Visioning for the Future

The board and administrative leadership team also participated in a visioning exercise to describe the desired future direction and condition of the Township by answering the following visioning question:

“In 10-15 years when I return to the area, what do I hope to see or think I will see with regard to the township and its activities?”

Visions of the Future—Hope or think you will see in 10-15 years**Visions of the Future—Township Board and Staff**

- Township office/staff becomes more visible, becomes convener, engaged
- Populous is informed, more aware of services and how they work together
 - Engaged, understands how township works and interacts with other governments. Strengthened understanding of government processes.
- Township is recognized as a worthy use of taxpayer dollars—value is realized
- More integrated housing program/plan
 - More affordable, accessible, welcoming
- Township government will still exist
- Ensure all three legs of the “stool” remain strong (assessor service, human services, road services)
- Communities work together better (county, township, villages)
- The need for services declines, services reach those who need them
 - Connect to resources that already exist
- Township provides job training and education programs (proactive vs. reactive)
 - Help the community earn a living/make a life here since housing, food expenses, etc. are rising (youth and seniors)
 - Workforce development
- Northfield Township building/campus is a social service hub
- Intentional addition of staff, ensure the need is there, not just for busy work
- All local elected officials have a way to educate the public/market services (everybody is on the same page)
 - Every elected official recognizes the value of the township and its services: municipal taxing bodies become partners
- Clerk’s office absorbs some services typically done by other areas of the township (staffing increases)

Environmental Scanning Exercise Part I

Surrender or Lead

Participants were introduced to a leadership exercise entitled “Surrender or Lead.” The premise is that subgroups of participants work to develop responses to some simple but effective and thought-provoking questions. Participants were broken up into two working groups and asked to respond to a series of structured questions designed to initiate discussion and reveal perspectives, challenges, and frustrations of the participants as a whole. The participants’ responses were recorded on flipchart paper and discussed. The responses provided by each group are recorded below. **Bolded** and underlined sections are key phrases that groups provided in response to the open questions.

Group #1

1. We want to **improve services**, but **we need executable plans**.
2. The two most important things to focus on are infrastructure and services because **they underpin our mission**.
3. If it weren’t for **a lack of space**, we would be able to build infrastructure to execute on services.
4. We need to finally **commit**.
5. **Having a strategic plan** will have the biggest impact on the township in the coming 2-3 years.

Group #2

1. We want to **increase services**, but **resources are constrained**.
2. The two most important things to focus on are our community and their needs because **they deserve it**.
3. If it weren’t for **lack of mental professionals**, we would provide mental health services to all who need them.
4. We need to finally **increase our space**.
5. **Increase in mental health services** will have the biggest impact on the township in the coming 2-3 years.

Environmental Scanning Exercise Part II

Large Group S.W.O.C. Analysis

The next step of the strategic planning workshop involved reviewing and accounting for the internal and external factors present in the environment that can potentially influence the township, both positively and negatively. Given the exploratory statements and challenges raised in the Surrender or Lead exercise, participants were then asked to identify what constraints and practical difficulties are likely to be encountered that will make it challenging to achieve the desired future state. These elements included both internal and external factors, conditions, trends, regulations, agencies, resources, etc. Furthermore, participants were asked to identify the organization’s **strengths (S)** and **weaknesses (W)**. In what areas does the township regularly excel, and in what areas are there difficulties or shortcomings in terms of expertise, resources, or training? What **opportunities (O)** are on the horizon that can be used to the township’s advantage? Conversely, what trends or **challenges (C)** lie ahead that would be obstacles or hindrances? Those answers are captured below.

S.W.O.C. Exercise (Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, Challenges)

Numbers in parentheses noted next to responses represent a participant agreeing with/adding same idea

Internal

STRENGTHS	WEAKNESSES
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Board has a lot of ideas • Volunteers • Dedicated staff/invested • Have financial resources to utilize • Available space for expansion • Active Board—intelligent, passionate, unified • Township administration—in tune with staff • Cross-trained staff • Attorney—knowledgeable about township law 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Lack of focus with so many ideas/different opinions (1) • Sometimes not committed to execution • Staff can sometimes be resistant to change • Current space too small, not ADA compliant • Strong Board—different opinions—hard to make decisions • Roles/responsibilities not clearly defined for staff—need to work to strengths— “Everyone can’t do everything” • Need to always have a strong accounting firm • Continuity of board—turnover can be a challenge

External

OPPORTUNITIES	CHALLENGES
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Staff skill development/cross-training • New, bigger space for services • Options for meeting people at their need • Imposing a committee structure <ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Increase accountability – Could introduce more expertise on specific needs for residents – Work with staff to make sure everybody is on board • Re-evaluate/restructure the way staff works (remote work, flexible hours, etc.) • Create clearly defined roles and responsibilities • Build relationships and trust with staff 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Lots of ideas inhibit focus • Learning how to have more space effectively (new building) • Finding ways/opportunities to meet more often (OMA is a challenge) • Securing staff buy-in for new processes/change of structure • Addressing/combating staff burnout (mental health) • Board has difficulty committing • Everybody is a Jack of All Trades, Master of None <ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Spread too thin • Staff feels uncomfortable/unsure about coming to board members for problems <ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Power dynamics – Turnover could be a challenge

Nominal Group Goal Identification

With the preceding workshop sessions as a sound foundation for goal setting, the final workshop session provided a healthy group discussion of goals and objectives needed to achieve the future visions as expressed by the Township leadership. Agreed upon criteria were used to classify a goal or objective as short- or long-term.

The agreed upon criteria used for classifying goals/objectives as either short- or long-term and routine or complex involved the following: **Short-term** are those goals/objectives that could or should be completed or substantially underway in the next one to three years. **Long-term** are those goals/objectives that could or should be completed or substantially underway within a three-to-eight-year time frame. **Complex goals** are complicated, multi-layered goals that require extraordinary resources, such as technical specialists, funding, or the collaboration/agreement of another unit of government or an outside organization, business, or agency. **Routine goals** are not simple or easy but could largely be accomplished by the organization with required budget and staffing allocations, or with minor external assistance.

To begin the process, participants were asked to highlight the three or four most important policy and program goals/objectives they thought the township should accomplish in the next one to three years, as well as establish long-term goals and objectives focused on a three- to eight-year time frame. Each participant shared their short- and long-term goals/objectives with the group for feedback and discussion. After all the goals were shared, participants were asked if there were any others they wanted to include after hearing from their colleagues, and a final list was created.

Open Group Discussion and Consolidation of Goals/Objectives

This final phase of the discussion served as the forum for board and staff members to discuss, evaluate, and debate the ideas and goals offered by each participant in the previous sessions. Participants were asked to give their opinions, evaluations, and judgments of the worthiness and value of different policy objectives.

Board and senior staff members then worked together to confirm each goal as short- or long-term, especially where similar goals were developed, including the suggestion that more operational goals should be addressed at the staff level and incorporated into administrative plans. In total, the group developed seven short-term routine goals, 11 short-term complex goals, three long-term routine goals, and six long-term complex goals.

Post-Workshop

Goal Prioritization and Board Ranking Exercise

After the workshop, each board member was asked to delineate, via an online ranking exercise, which goals should be given the highest priority. The board was provided an online “forced ranking” tool where they were asked to rank all the goals within each quadrant of the time and complexity matrix. In other words, participants ranked each of the seven short-term routine goals from 1 to 7, with 1 being the most important. They similarly ranked each of the short-term complex, long-term routine, and long-term complex goals against others of the same category. Then a goal prioritization was calculated by averaging the rankings given by all participants. For example, if a goal were given the scores of 2, 6, 6, 6, 1, 2, and 3, the average total would be 3.57. **The lower the score, the higher the priority.**

The following figure presents a dashboard based on priority level (*High, Medium, Lower*) for the short-term and long-term strategic goals based on the consensus ranking exercise conducted by the board (Figure 3). The goal priority dashboard demonstrates the most important strategic goals, tasks, and objectives for the board and staff to address in the months and years ahead. Following the goal dashboard, the priority areas are shared along with how each goal aligned with the stakeholder feedback.

Figure 3. Strategic goals—priority dashboard

**(E) and (I) denote and Externally-focused (township residents and partners) or Internally-focused (organizational) goal*

Short-term Routine Goals <i>Short-term routine goals have a timeframe of 1-3 years. The term “routine” does not mean the following goals are simple or easy, but that they could largely be accomplished by the organization with required budget and staffing allocations, or with minor external assistance.</i>	Priority Level
Develop multi-channel communication strategies to increase understanding of what the township does and does not do (E) <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Work with community partners to foster more regular community outreach engagement, explore generational difference in information consumption • Communicate the value of the township • Determine why township services are so important to the service users, partners, community, and county • Investigate ways to communicate the township’s boundary lines to combat confusion surrounding “Northfield” name 	High
Evaluate programs/services offered to ensure long-term financial sustainability (I) <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Including evaluating staffing needs/demands related to contraction/expansion/changes in services, programs, hours, etc. (ensure we are not a solution looking for a problem, we are spending money on programs/services that are needed) 	High
Update all policy and procedure manuals at the township (I) <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • e.g., social media, outreach, communication, etc. • Help with succession planning, onboarding, staff satisfaction and advancement 	High
Maintain current tax levy (I)	Medium
Convene a Youth Advisory Board (E)	Medium
Develop a brochure for the Assessor’s Office to increase awareness and communications regarding services (I)	Lower
Develop new services for the Road District (I) <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • e.g., additional recycling options such as film • May need additional equipment such as a compactor • Use recyclables for green opportunities 	Lower

Short-term Complex Goals <i>Short-term complex goals have a timeframe of 1-3 years. The term “complex” means the following goals are complicated/multi-layered and they require extraordinary resources such as technical specialists, funding, or the collaboration/agreement of another unit of government, or an outside organization, business, or agency.</i>	Priority Level
Expand the township’s physical space by either securing a new building or purchasing and redesigning the current space (I and E)	High
Work with community partners/businesses to explore additional job training programs improving workforce development and opportunities for clients (E)	High
Evaluate transportation options to improve client experience including improving the Dial a Ride program (I and E)	High
Increase access to mental health and mental wellness services for clients, township residents, and township staff (I and E)	High
Develop a board committee structure utilizing the skill sets of board members to better implement key priorities and plans (I)	Medium
Expand services and funding for individuals with different abilities (E)	Medium
Investigate and implement a mental health board (I and E)	Medium
Work to ensure the township is viewed as a convener by other agencies, organizations, and municipalities (E)	Lower
Continue to develop the successful Oakton scholarship program by offering non-credit scholarships in addition to credit options (E)	Lower
Develop more coordination with villages/other intergovernmental organizations regarding streets and other programs/services offered by the Road Commission (E)	Lower

Long-term Routine Goals <i>Long-term routine goals have a timeframe of 3-8+ years. The following goals are “routine”, not simple or easy, but could largely be accomplished by the organization with required budget and staffing allocations, and/or with minor external assistance.</i>	Priority Level
Consistently maintain cash reserves in line with fiscal norms (I)	High
Ensure the entire township office has a well-trained staff that can provide outstanding service to residents (I) • Assessor’s office staff well-trained and able to focus on assessments and not just appeals	Medium
Consolidate all the PINs under township ownership (if buying current township building) (I)	Lower

Long-term Complex Goals <i>Long-term complex goals have a timeframe of 3-8+ years. The following goals are complicated/multi-layered goals that require extraordinary resources such as technical specialists, funding, or the collaboration/agreement of another unit of government, or an outside organization, business, or agency.</i>	Priority Level
Through training programs and assistance provided by the township, help to reduce poverty in all areas of the township (E)	High
Create/redesign a state-of-the-art community/township building (I and E) • Rent the space out to agencies for things like community mental health, legal aid clinics, etc.	High
Work toward a more inclusive, welcoming environment within the township (E) • e.g., communication in multiple languages, meeting people at their need	Medium
Investigate a township-owned transportation service to address identified transportation gaps (E)	Medium
Evaluate the township’s core operations from a sustainable, environmental perspective (I and E) • e.g., possibly becoming a solar community	Medium
Implement expansion of recycling program/services as new needs emerge (E) • e.g., prescription drug disposal	Lower

Strategic Priority Areas

Based on an evaluation of the entirety of the process, including interviews, focus groups, community survey, discussions at the workshop, and the goals developed, four high-level strategic priority areas were identified. These priority areas highlight the activities and initiatives that the organization will focus on in both the short and long term. The strategic priority areas identified as a result of the strategic planning process are illustrated and fully defined below along with goal alignment and focus groups data related to each area.

Strategic Priorities



Connector and Convenor

While the township does not have complete control over provision of assistance services within its boundary area, it can play the role of convenor and connector between partner organizations and current and potential clients. This important role of truly embodying collaboration will help close gaps in services, create efficiency, and grow the capacity to serve the township's mission.

“Connector and Convenor”-related goals from the workshop

1. Convene a Youth Advisory Board
2. Increase access to mental health and mental wellness services for clients, township residents, and township staff
3. Work to ensure the township is viewed as a convenor by other agencies, organizations, and municipalities
4. Develop more coordination with villages/other intergovernmental organizations regarding streets and other programs/services offered by the Road Commission
5. Work with community partners/businesses to explore additional job training programs improving workforce development and opportunities for clients

“Connector and Convenor”-related comments from the pre-workshop focus group sessions

- Township should consider creating a phone/online directory—be the convenor of groups; a one-stop resource
- Hope the township continues evaluating, reducing duplication of services, increasing efficiency
 - Collaboration continues
- Hope the township takes a more active role in mental and behavioral health resources
- One challenge is trying to be everything to everyone. Instead can the township focus on core services and work with partners to address impactful issues in the community?

Innovative Service Delivery

With the township’s limited resources and staff, it is important for the township to remain vigilant and innovative when considering the most efficient way to provide core services while keeping up with the demands of the community. Collaboration, efficiency, and consolidation are all words used when discussing government organizations that are funded via taxpayers. Finding innovative ways to deliver services long term while maintaining financial sustainability is a balance.

“Innovative Service Delivery”-related goals from the workshop

1. Develop a board committee structure utilizing the skill sets of board members to better implement key priorities and plans
2. Expand services and funding for individuals with different abilities
3. Continue to develop the successful Oakton scholarship program by offering non-credit scholarships in addition to credit options
4. Investigate and implement a mental health board
5. Evaluate transportation options to improve client experience including improving the Dial a Ride program
6. Evaluate the township’s core operations from a sustainable, environmental perspective
 - a. e.g., possibly becoming a solar community
7. Through training programs and assistance provided by the township, help to reduce poverty in unincorporated areas
8. Develop new services for the Road District
 - a. e.g., additional recycling options such as film
 - b. May need additional equipment such as a compactor
 - c. Use recyclables for green opportunities
9. Implement expansion of recycling program/services as new needs emerge
 - a. e.g., prescription drug disposal communication
10. Investigate a township-owned transportation service to address identified transportation gaps

“Innovative Service Delivery”-related comments from the pre-workshop focus group sessions

- Hope in the future there is no longer a duplication of services, efficiency is assessed continuously
 - Hope to see evaluation of road district duplications/need with village/county
- Hope the township can keep up with the needs/demands of the community—keeps a pulse on the needs and can pivot/change/partner to maintain or increase services/programs
- Hope to see a 708 Board established
- Township should consider additional services/extended service hours
 - Private partnerships (grocery stores) for some services (food pantry satellites)

Sustainability and Organizational Advancement

Sustaining the core services that the township provides is a critical piece of the township’s mission and legal framework. To sustain, or advance, the quality of services it is important to address both the physical/facility space and staffing and organizational needs. The growing demand for current township-provided services, as well as the general growing need in the township as a whole, was a priority for almost every focus group.

“Sustainability and Organizational Advancement”-related goals from workshop

1. Update all policy and procedure manuals at the township
 - e.g., social media, marketing, communication, etc.
 - Help with succession planning, onboarding, staff satisfaction and advancement
2. Evaluate programs/services offered to ensure long-term financial sustainability
 - Including evaluating staffing needs/demands related to contraction/expansion/changes in services, programs, hours, etc.
3. Maintain current tax levy
4. Expand the township’s physical space by either securing a new building or purchasing and redesigning the current space
5. Consolidate all the PINs under township owners (if buying current township building)
6. Ensure the Assessor’s Office has a well-trained staff that can focus on assessments and not just appeals
7. Consistently maintain cash reserves in line with fiscal norms
8. Create/redesign a state-of-the-art community/township building
 - Rent the space out to agencies for things like community mental health, legal aid clinics, etc.

“Sustainability and Organizational Advancement”-related comments from the pre-workshop focus group sessions

- Township should consider increased staffing to meet current demand and evaluate staffing before introducing more services/extended hours/more programs
- Hope the township addresses space issues/facilities and decides in the short term to buy current building or build new facility
 - Need a bigger building, ADA compliant, possibly different location for more visibility
- The township should ensure the food pantry is sufficiently staffed/supplied to provide adequate service
 - Extended hours or satellites pantries would be great, but more staff would be needed
- Hope the township keeps human services assistance as main focus
 - Food pantry
 - Redefine core functions, be innovative

Communication and Outreach

Many community members and partners are aware of the township’s food pantry and Assessor’s Office, but there are also many that are still unaware of the depth and breadth of township services. The challenge of any organization is to communicate, to many different stakeholders, cohesive and up-to-date information. In this instance, sharing the township’s core mission and multiple services/programs to both service users and non-service users is key.

“Communication and Outreach”-related goals from workshop

1. Develop multi-channel communication strategies to increase understanding of what the township does and does not do
 - Work with community partners to foster more regular community outreach engagement, explore generational differences in information consumption
 - Communicate the value of the township: Why is it so important to the service users, partners, community, and state?
 - Investigate ways to communicate the township’s boundary lines to combat confusion surrounding “Northfield” name
2. Develop a brochure for the Assessor’s Office to increase awareness and communications regarding services
3. Work toward a more inclusive, welcoming environment within the township
 - e.g., communication in multiple languages, meeting people at their need

“Communication and Outreach”-related comments from the pre-workshop focus group sessions

- Hope the township can continue to educate the community and partners on what the township does and does not do—multiple communication channels
- A challenge is that misconceptions exist due to the name “Northfield” —confusion with the village
- Hope to see improved marketing/education about township services/value via storytelling using video/all media.
 - Why are we doing what we’re doing? Need to communicate the story
- Hope to see an annual event/forum that brings different communities/ethnic groups together
- The township should utilize the elected officials for communication and marketing of services to residents as well
 - Consider including in a new resident welcome packet
- The township should apply an equity lens to all things/services/communication materials/website

Conclusion

The value of the strategic planning process will only be realized if this report is used as an active working guide for both the township board and staff. This document captures the content of the discussions and assists the township leaders in developing implementation plans for their high priority goals.

In Northfield Township's ever evolving operating environment, adapting to changes in demographics, community trends, technology advancements, and best practices, among others, will be key. The strategic plan is meant to be a road map for the township with the flexibility to adapt to those changes. Therefore, it is recommended that the township undertake a regular review (monthly, quarterly, or semi-annually) of the strategic plan, its goals, and implementation schedule to identify the need for updates or modifications to ensure the township consistently recognizes and meets changes in community needs and expectations. In addition, the township is encouraged to continue to engage in regular strategic planning process updates/renewals every three years.

What is apparent from the exchange of ideas and dialogue during the environmental scanning and strategic planning workshop is that the township is fortunate to have progressive leadership and a management team that is looking ahead and committed to strategic thinking and planning.

We wish you well with the ambitious years that lie ahead.

The image shows two handwritten signatures in black ink. The signature on the left is for Melissa, and the signature on the right is for A. Hoebing. Both signatures are fluid and cursive.

Mel Henriksen and Alli Hoebing, Project Coordinators and Session Facilitators

Appendix A

Focus Group Feedback Summary

One of the key analytical techniques used for focus group notes is an analyst's search for key phrases, words, or terms that emerged during the focus group sessions, a process known as coding. Coding is done by analysts' individual readings of the data, followed by key term searches with the aid of document software. The words and phrases listed below are the results of the study team's analysis of the collected focus group notes. At a glance, the reader can discover what terms were used or referred to most frequently in the feedback notes. Using individual analyst's coding, the researcher identifies terms that recur across groups and across questions. The results are revealing, in that they highlight key topics or issues that should be considered when proceeding with strategic planning discussions.

The information that follows is a summary of key themes and topics that emerged during the exploratory focus group/outreach sessions. The focus group sessions served as a primer for the strategic planning process. The information that is presented in this summation was designed to add exploratory and thematic information for the board and senior leadership team to consider during the strategic planning workshop.

The same exploratory focus group discussion questions were asked to each focus group and are listed below:

1. How would you describe Northfield Township to a stranger or someone who doesn't live or work here?
2. If you left and didn't return for 10-15 years, what programs or services do you think you would see the township offering, or what do you hope you would see when you return?
3. What do you like best about the township? Related to that, what are the strengths/greatest assets of the township? Opportunities?
4. Can you identify areas or topics in need of attention or improvement? Related to that, what are the weaknesses/greatest needs in the township?
5. What are/should be the top priorities for the township over the next 3-5 years?
6. If you could change or initiate one key item or thing about the township, what would it be?

Overall Themes Based on All Focus Group Feedback

(Numbers in parentheses noted next to responses represent a participant agreeing with/adding the same idea)



Mission-Focused

- Why are we doing what we're doing? What are we good at, and what do we do better than anyone else? Core service-driven
- Evaluate focus and mission and communicate Northfield Township's story to partners, taxpayers, and clients/potential clients
- Ensure human services assistance is the main focus (4)
 - Focus on being a social services safety net and funding (food pantry, food insecurity)
- Continuously evaluate services to learn what/where services are and are not being met. What organizations are working on the same community issues? Resource allocation needs?
- Redefine core functions and look at innovative ways to provide services (4)
 - Consider offering financial aid and scholarship programs
 - Focus on workforce development (2) with food pantry recipients
 - » Job fairs

Core Services Assessment/Evaluation

- Complete a Needs Assessment at the township level (4)
- Ensure efficiencies are adequately addressed and focus on core service delivery (eliminate duplication of services) (6)
- Ensure township is sufficiently staffed and supplied to provide adequate core services (4)
 - Consider private partnerships (grocery stores) for some services
 - Explore food pantry satellite locations (schools, senior centers, etc.) and meet people where the need is
- Additional services/extended service hours
 - Mental health services for all ages and backgrounds—this may be a partnership vs. core service area (7)
 - Evaluate the need for additional senior services regarding food insecurity, mental health, housing availability to age in place, and affordability (2)

Connection and Communication

- Connect with the community to promote the core services offered (residents, partners, businesses, etc.) (6)
- What does the township do? What does it not do? Create/improve easily digestible marketing/communication pieces
 - Share with partners, schools, etc.
 - If already doing this, there may be a disconnect or may need to consider additional outlets/communication tools
- Consider creating a phone/online directory—be the convenor of groups—one stop resource
- Evaluate whether all services/communication materials are inclusive of all groups in the community (2)
 - Explore communications/marketing in native languages in the community
 - Expand accessibility to technology and transportation (2)

Facilities and Organizational Management

- Perform a Facility Needs Assessment of the township’s building/space and make a decision about enhancements or a new building (5)
 - Make the building ADA compliant with either selection
 - Explore better security options, increase safety for employees and clients by installing a security system such as an alarm, cameras
 - Continue to collaborate with intergovernmental and civic partners for sharing spaces
- Regular compensation evaluations (yearly or every two years)
 - Consider cost of living, remain competitive, flex schedules or other incentives that are not necessarily “monetary”
- Investigate the creation of a “pandemic sick leave policy” for employees so they no longer have to use regular sick time for pandemic-related illness
- If additional services/extended service hours are needed, then staffing needs to be evaluated to avoid staff burnout
 - i.e., if weekend hours or satellite pantries are added staffing would need to be evaluated—not able to do with current staffing levels
- Introduce/evaluate adding mental health days to paid time off to reduce burnout and encourage self-care

Top Priorities

- Core service/mission driven—tell the story of the township
- Focus on mental health programs for all (age, race gender, employees/community)
- Complete a Facility Needs Assessment and make decision
- Evaluate current and future services, staffing, and resources
- Partnerships and collaboration to assess community need, duplication, and efficiencies

Appendix B

Community Survey Executive Summary

Northfield Township commissioned the Center for Governmental Studies (CGS) at Northern Illinois University to conduct a community needs assessment study. The study was conducted September-November 2022. It included a focus group and an online survey of township service users. A total of six service users attended the focus group and 116 service users completed the online survey. Additionally, the study included a separate multi-mode survey (online, mail, and telephone reminder calls) of a random sample of Northfield Township residents. A total of 504 residents completed the survey.

The purpose of the study was to gather resident opinions of Northfield Township government provided services and the areas the Township should focus their attention on in the future. Full survey results can be requested through the township.

Key Findings

Awareness/Opinion of General/Emergency Services Provided by Township

- The majority (55%) of residents would contact family or a friend first for general/emergency assistance. 12% of residents would contact Northfield Township first. The main reasons given for not contacting the township first are they are not aware that the township provides general/emergency assistance, and they are more comfortable contacting family or a friend.
- Most residents (70%) are aware that the township has a food pantry. One-fifth or less of residents are aware that the township provides referrals to health or social service agencies (20%), LIHEAP (19%), Dial-A-Ride transportation (19%), scholarships for Oakton Community College (16%), and emergency financial assistance (11%).
- Overall, users of the food pantry are satisfied. They comment they are satisfied with the:
 - quantity of food provided,
 - quality of food provided, and
 - customer service received from Township staff.
- Users of Low Income Home Energy Assistance Program (LIHEAP) are satisfied with the ease of filling out the application, that it covers costs, and the customer service received from township staff.
- Overall, users of Dial-A-Ride transportation are not satisfied. They mention the:
 - cabs are sometimes not available,
 - cabs are not always on time,
 - cabs do not show up occasionally, and
 - they do not like the coupons.
- Users prefer Uber or Lyft be used rather than cabs for the Dial-A-Ride transportation program.
- Overall, users of Emergency Financial Assistance are satisfied. They comment that they're satisfied with:
 - the ease of applying,
 - that it paid rent within one week,
 - that it provided additional money, and
 - the customer service received from township staff.

- Overall, those who received a referral to a health or social service agency are satisfied. They state:
 - the township staff provided good information,
 - they are satisfied with the customer service received from township staff, and
 - the referral was helpful.

Opinion of Non-General/Emergency Services Provided by Township

- Users of notary and passport services are satisfied; however, they would like the hours that the services are available to be expanded.
- Overall, users of Property Tax Assistance Service are satisfied. They comment that:
 - it is easy and efficient,
 - it is very easy to schedule an appointment, and
 - the staff are knowledgeable, responsive, and provide excellent follow-up.
 - The users would like for more appointments to be added during the appeal season.
- The majority of residents rate the quality of the services provided by the township excellent or good.
 - Sanitary sewer (83%)
 - Passport (80%)
 - Recycling center (79%)
 - Snow plowing of streets (71%)
 - Appearance of medians, parkways, and trees (67%)
 - Condition of road surface (63%)
 - Property Tax Assistance (59%)

Additional Services Residents Need

- 10% of residents are having trouble affording to stay in their home. Hardship is caused by high property taxes, rising rent, decreased income, unemployment, credit card debt, increased utility costs, and paying for college for children. Residents suggest the township should help with paying property tax, mortgage, rent, and utilities; finding a job; and paying off credit card debt.
- Residents indicate they have a need for the following services or information:
 - Assistance finding mental health treatment
 - Help finding affordable health insurance
 - List of assistance programs offered by government (federal, state, county, township) and other organizations, including eligibility requirements
 - Assistance finding childcare,
 - Help finding affordable dental care
 - Resources and supports for caregivers
 - Assistance with grocery shopping, housework, and yardwork for seniors and those with a disability

Communication about Northfield Township

- 36% of residents report they receive information about the township from the township newsletter.
- 26% receive information about the township from township emails.
- 23% receive information about the township from family, friends, and neighbors.
- 22% receive information about the township from the local newspaper.
- 35% of residents indicate they do not receive information about the township.

Almost one-half (48%) of residents would prefer to receive information about the Township from Township emails.