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Workforce in Cedar Falls

Cedar Falls is home to a vibrant economy, anchored around manufacturing, technology, and small businesses.

The economic impact of the last year highlighted that the most important asset for our businesses is our workforce. **It's the people who keep our economy running.**

Cedar Falls is facing a critical workforce shortage, with our small businesses unable to fill shifts, and restaurants forced to cut their hours or remain closed for additional days during the week.

It's clear that we need both a plan for pandemic recovery, and a long term focus on attracting and retaining the workforce our local economy needs to thrive.

As your mayor, I will work every day to find innovative and creative solutions as we compete for workers on a national scale.

Our plan to build the future workforce Cedar Falls needs includes:

- Launching a new workforce center in partnership with local employers and UNI
- Expanding the CFSD's CAPS Initiative
- Developing a new internship program for all City departments
- Improving access to affordable housing and public transportation, and
- Attracting new employers to our community

Workforce center

Grow Cedar Valley (formerly the Cedar Valley Chamber and Alliance) conducted a survey of area businesses in 2020 in which 70% reported being unable to fill their open positions. A survey of local graduates revealed a consistent belief that there are insufficient job opportunities within this community, forcing them to relocate elsewhere in Iowa or leave the state entirely. This loss of our future workforce presents a critical threat to the long-term health of our local economy.

To address this disconnect between our employers and our students, I propose the creation of a dedicated workforce center in Cedar Falls. An ideal space for this facility already exists within Maucker Union on UNI's campus. Smaller satellite locations in other key areas of the community could also be considered. Designed to partner with UNI's Office of Career Services, the facility would be staffed by representatives from UNI, the City, and local employers who could engage directly with students and faculty to share job opportunities, internships, and demonstrate our commitment to keeping students in the Cedar Valley. The first step towards ensuring our future workforce is demonstrating that they are valued and actually ask them to stay.

CAPS program expansion

The Center for Advanced Professional Studies (CAPS) is the collaboration of education, business, and the community with the objective of providing students with a unique, immersive experience, resulting in highly skilled, adaptable leaders. Focused on the tenants of profession based learning, responsiveness, self-discovery, skills development, and entrepreneurship, CAPS helps build our future workforce. This program, designed by the Cedar Falls Schools System, is a perfect example of a public-private partnership that benefits all parties.

The City can work with the Cedar Falls Schools District to scale-up the number of students and employers enrolled in the program. The City can assist CAPS with program funding, facility space, and connection with private industry. The City should also work with the CAPS Director and the University of Northern Iowa to bring a similar program to UNI.

This will enable students from outside the Cedar Falls School District to benefit from a different type of experiential learning.

Investments in our students will pay dividends for years to come. By providing new learning opportunities and connecting students with local employers, we can decrease the number graduates who leave our community and increase our employee base.

City internships

The City of Cedar Falls includes four different departments, each containing several different divisions with jobs ranging from accounting to waste water management. We are fortunate to have a talented staff with decades of experience in a variety of fields. This expertise represents a phenomenal opportunity for students to learn applicable skills and make a connection with our community. The City currently hosts one or two interns per year, generally in the planning department. To increase participation and provide new learning opportunities, I propose the creation of a formal internship program with the area's education institutions. Each division of the City would have a goal of hosting at least one intern per year. This will provide students from Cedar Falls High School, UNI, and Hawkeye with real world experience in their field of study, and will increase the pool of potential future employees for the City. This program will help retain graduates in Cedar Falls, and will decrease the City's hiring costs by reducing the recruitment efforts needed to fill an open role.

Access to affordable housing and public transportation

Attracting and retaining the next generation of our workforce will require access to housing and transportation throughout our community. The median home price in Cedar Falls increased from \$203,000 in January 2020 to \$240,000 in May 2021. While this increase provides a long-term economic benefit to many families, it also prices many families out of the market. We've seen a similar increase in rent prices, impacting a large segment of our population. As graduates of Cedar Falls High School, UNI, and prospective residents decide where to live, we need to ensure access to an array of housing types and at varying price points.

To assist with diversifying our housing stock, the City needs to focus on preserving housing the core neighborhoods of the City, promote affordable rental options, and ensure equal accessing housing. During my time on Council, we developed a program that provides a forgivable loan to a resident to convert an existing rental property back into a single family home. The program currently only has funding for a few homes per year, but has already seen positive results. Increasing the program's funding to provide loans for thirty properties per year will help stabilize our core neighborhoods and increase the number of opportunities for young residents to stay in this community. The increased value of these restored properties will boost the tax base and reimburse the taxpayers for their investment in our neighborhoods.

The City maintains a waiting list for residents who are eligible to receive housing funding from the US Department of Housing and Urban Development. Residents on the list currently face a two-year waiting period for access to a rental unit. During this time, many leave the area or simply do not have access to safe housing. The City must work with property owners to expand the list of participating properties, incentivize inclusion of qualifying units in new developments through reduced permitting and inspection fees, and partner with agencies including Habitat for Humanity to increase our housing stock and help our residents access the financial benefit of home ownership.

Attracting new employers and reforming public incentives

Under the City's current public incentive plan, certain industries are eligible for a five-year abatement on property taxes owed on new or increased value for commercial buildings. This incentive structure helped develop the Southern and Northern Industrial Parks. The current structure focuses primarily on manufacturing, warehouses, and similar industries while excluding other industry types, including hospitality and service related industries.

National economic trends filter down and impact local economies. Reductions in new investments in manufacturing, and the ability to locate commercial facilities around the world place increasing pressure on local economies to compete not only with neighboring communities but also with cities across the country. To compete with Medford, OR, Noblesville, IN, or Marion, IA, Cedar Falls must build a new public incentive structure that meets the needs of our future economy.

This model may include extended abatement timetables, a focus on a diverse slate of industries, and new tax increment finance (TIF) districts.

To design the best possible model, Cedar Falls must establish a business roundtable. This group will consist of local and regional developers, business owners, economic development experts, and commercial lenders. The group will gather information from other communities, the Iowa Economic Development Authority, Chambers of Commerce, and other thriving communities to develop a set of recommendations. These recommendations will be presented to the Mayor and Council for action. Upon adoption of a reformed model, this group will be asked to periodically review progress and gather feedback from stakeholders to evaluate the new model's effectiveness.

Building a more effective and innovative public incentive model will enable Cedar Falls to attract a diverse array of employers, which will ensure lasting job opportunities for our students and help attract new residents to our community.

The future of our community depends on resolving our workforce shortage, and I look forward to working together to build a bright future for Cedar Falls!