



Vision for Growth—DRAFT

The importance of having a vision for the future

A properly grounded vision answers the all important “why?” question. It is the pillar of an implementable plan and reflects a balancing of the community’s aspirations and its recognition of political and fiscal realities. Without a vision that is both aspirational and realistic, a plan will never be more than a feckless collection of recommendations.

Implementation failures can often be tied to an absence of vision, or to a vision that does not speak to known constraints and the work of expanding a community’s capacity to realize its ambitions. While successful implementation requires much more than a properly grounded foundational vision, such a vision is indispensable.

Community values as the foundation for a good vision

For a plan to stand a chance of being implemented—especially a long-range plan that requires continual fidelity to a payoff that is years and often decades down the road—**the plan’s vision must relate directly to what the community most deeply cherishes**: the beliefs and attitudes that define how the community operates and why it makes the decisions it does. When a vision is rooted in this way, a plan will reflect what the community has already demonstrated a willingness to do.

A good vision, in short, is born out of recognizable community traits that can be translated into a decision-making framework that everyone in the community can readily recognize and embrace, with principles the community is likely to put into practice. Because all good plans eventually require sacrifice—in the form of a willingness to pay higher taxes, adopt new and different laws, to reprioritize long-held assumptions about what’s most important, or some combination of all of these—the vision at the heart of a plan has to speak to everyone in the community.

What would be at the core of an implementable long-range vision for Fargo?

An implementable vision for Fargo must be rooted to what the Fargo community values today and what the community has proven to value over time. Of the many cherished values central to Fargo’s community DNA—frugal, modest, respectful—one value consistently stands out for its influence on community and individual decision-making: **Fargo values what is practical.**

Practicality and its influence as Fargo's overarching value

Consistently choosing to be practical is straightforward. It's a commitment to delivering tangible, real-world benefits and, in doing so, embracing the wisdom that the best solution to a problem is often the simplest.

The practicality in Fargo's community DNA taps into this basic meaning of "practical," but it is also more complex—especially as it relates to how Fargo has grown. Fargo's practicality has driven decision-making around growth in subtle and specific ways that have served the community well:

- **Far-sightedness:** Practical is not synonymous with short-sighted. Fargo has many practical *AND* far-sighted achievements in its history and its present. The FM Diversion and its long-term flood protection impact is a far-sighted achievement with immense, long-term practical value to future generations. As a result of the project, Fargo will have flood-protected lands with potential to serve any number of practical future needs. It is a big, expensive project that the community was willing to undertake (with considerable local resources devoted to the project) primarily because of its practical value.
- **Fiscal responsibility:** Though it faces fiscal headwinds from time to time, Fargo has a history of fiscal conservatism and of preserving its capacity to invest in basic services and infrastructure. This is reflected in Fargo's practical, pay-as-you-go approach to growth in recent decades that has paid for infrastructure expansion through special assessments on the end users. Though not without shortcomings, this is a more practical and orderly way to grow than the heavily subsidized sprawl found in most places that have grown as quickly as Fargo has over the past 40 years, and one reflection of this is Fargo's lighter leapfrogging footprint compared to so many other places in America over the same period.
- **Stewardship of assets:** The careful tending of an impressive tree canopy is perhaps the best and most visible example of Fargo embracing an ethic of community stewardship that imparts very tangible benefits to the community—from cooler streets in the summer, to wind screening in the winter, to the market value added to properties on beautiful tree-lined streets. Importantly, nor is the management of the city's impressive tree canopy the only excellent example of the community stewarding something of civic importance. The city's recovery and subsequent expert nursing of downtown is another, revealing a willingness to do what is necessary to ensure Fargo's future is anchored by Fargo's past.

No community, of course, is always far-sighted, always fiscally responsible, or always a good steward of its assets, and Fargo is not special in this regard. When lapses occur, there may be any number of forces within or beyond a city's control that result in regrettable decision-making. Often in Fargo, lapses can be traced back to the community's practical nature.

- **The practicality of avoiding "no":** It may be cliché to say that Fargoans are polite and that the politeness owes to immigrants having to get along with each other to survive harsh winters, homesickness, and loneliness on the frontier. But there is no getting around the pronounced degree of politeness and reserve plainly visible to outsiders—a politeness that can make it difficult for the community to say "no" even when it should.

When it comes to how Fargo grows, difficulty with saying “no” has produced visibly uneven results. As practical as Fargo’s pay-as-you-go growth patterns appear to be, what has ultimately been built is often *impractical and unsightly*—thoughtlessly designed buildings in poorly proportioned subdivisions that will not add value to the community in the long-run.

- **Mistaking expedient for practical:** Saying “yes” to something that isn’t optimal but probably “good enough” can often be rationalized as practical. Why push the envelope and demand higher standards when a proposal clearly delivers basic utility (habitable housing, serviceable commercial space, etc.)? To demand better may sometimes feel insufferably fussy, or even greedy, to a practical people.

When such compromises are made, however, the community isn’t actually being practical—it’s not tapping into the practicality of being far-sighted, fiscally responsible, and practicing good community stewardship. Such compromises, rather, are a form of expediency—of taking the easier road because it’s more convenient and avoids social discomfort.

With “practicality” as a core value that also acts as a double-edged sword, Fargo’s vision for growth and a decision-making framework based on that vision must accomplish two things: (1) amplify Fargo’s historical tendency to view the more difficult path as eminently superior if it creates tangible, long-term value, and (2) help Fargo avoid situations where it’s prone to distort “practical” into harmful behaviors—the inability to say “no” and the acceptance of expedient solutions.

The following is an example of how Fargo’s intrinsic practicality—and the beneficial aspects of that core value—might be translated to a vision and decision-making framework for the growth plan:

Fargo’s Vision and Decision-Making Framework for Practical Growth

Through the adoption and implementation of the Fargo Growth Plan 2024, our community embraces a distinctively Fargo path called *Practical Growth*. Regardless of how much Fargo grows in the coming decades, we aim to grow in a manner that expresses our practical commitment to:

- **Being far-sighted:** We consider long-term implications of decisions big and small and ask “Is this something we’ll be proud of and that will add value to our community in 30 years?” It is more practical to get things right from the start and create something of lasting value than to be saddled with something either costly or regrettable in the not-so-distant future.
- **Being fiscally responsible:** If something is cheaper, it doesn’t necessarily mean it’s the fiscally responsible choice. Part of being far-sighted is making sure that we are being smart with our community’s resources and can pay our bills and be self-reliant in the long-run. It is more practical to guard our community’s resources and use them wisely than to put the next generation in the position of paying for our mistakes.

Valuing fiscal responsibility as a tenet of practical growth also creates an important test for our community: “If we say something is a priority, how willing are we to have skin in the game—to use our own resources to make sure something is done right?”

- **Being good stewards:** Fargo is filled with natural, historical, recreational, and other community assets that have served us well and will continue to serve us well if we invest in them and keep them strong. It is more practical to invest wisely in our most cherished assets than to see them diminished and devalued.

We will not approve projects that are not far-sighted, fiscally responsible, nor developed in such a way as to enable affordable stewardship because these are values closely tied to our community's practicality. To make decisions that are in line with these commitments and to avoid habits that can lead to comfortable but impractical choices, we embrace the following **principles for growth:**

- **Development or redevelopment, and the rules that govern it, must be predictable**
 - Our land development policies and processes should be as predictable and consistently applied as possible, avoiding case-by-case discretion. Transparent rules that are evenly and automatically applied reduce the number of situations where a Fargoan is forced to render "impolite" verdicts.
 - We must guard against a tendency to see convenience and expediency—which can lead to unpredictable decision-making—as equivalent to being practical.
 - The rules that govern the public realm and private development and redevelopment in Fargo should reflect practical standards of quality and durability—creating neighborhoods that have lasting value and are fiscally responsible.
- **Achieve an intentional balance between new development and redevelopment**
 - Go2030 and the downtown and core neighborhoods master plans all assert the importance of reinvestment. Not letting established parts of the city decline is practical as it avoids failing to maximize the value of the existing infrastructure previous generations worked so hard to put in place.
 - Fargo's growth rate in recent decades has required new development to accommodate thousands of new households, and Fargo's 2007 growth plan called for an orderly and balanced approach to accommodating growth on the city's edges.
 - Going forward, we will be intentional about achieving a balance between redevelopment of existing areas and development on the frontier. We recognize that diverse living options to suit different needs and lifestyles is an important part of keeping Fargo competitive. At a community-wide level, and within different areas, we should strive to achieve a mix of fiscally responsible development types to make Fargo as adaptable as possible to evolving market demands.
- **Outward expansion should occur within a framework of practical conditions**
 - Growth patterns that are balanced and predictable should be tied to well-understood conditions, much as the 2007 Growth Plan communicated a tiered system (Tier 1 and Tier 2) for shorter-term and longer-term areas of development.
 - Going forward, transparent and practical conditions for outward expansion of Fargo's footprint should reflect an intentional balance between development and redevelopment, with new development steered in certain directions when specific conditions are met in already established areas.