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COMMUNITY PRIDE KEY FROM SURVEY

Input from 2,500 residents shows need to boost pride

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Council Bluffs Nonpareil

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Staci Hupp Ballard with the Iowa Economic Development Authority speaks during the Iowa West Foundation and Cc Vision event at the Mid-America Center on Wednesday, Oct. 29, 2025.

JOE SHEARER, THE NONPAREIL

I OWA WEST FOUNDATION & COUNCIL BLUFFS CHAMBER

The solution to growth in Council Bluffs comes down to pride.

The Iowa West Foundation with the Council Bluffs Area Chamber of Commerce hosted a community event Wednesday to share results from its recent survey of the Council Bluffs area.

The survey launched in June to study what attracts people to live and work in Council Bluffs alongside long-term satisfaction. It drew 2,500 participants in what's known as a "convenience sample," that respondents were chosen based on easy accessibility — not to provide a statistically reliable representation.

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"It's not a perfect representation of our community, but it's 2,500 people, and it's a good start," said Brenda Mainwaring, president and CEO of the Iowa West Foundation.

Data shows that cities that experience declines in population and losses of young workers will experience business closures, labor force shortages and reduced city services, said Chris LaFerla, president and CEO of the Council Bluffs Area Chamber of Commerce.

Iowa West and Council Bluffs Chamber are work collaboratively with the City of Council Bluffs, businesses and others to help prevent a decline in population in Council Bluffs and avoid those negative outcomes.

Retention and recruitment

Josie Schafer, director of the University of Nebraska Omaha's Center for Public Affairs Research, provided takeaways from the survey data.

Schafer observed that Pottawattamie County has seen a 0.5% increase in population in the past decade. Meanwhile, Douglas and Sarpy counties in Nebraska have seen more than a 10% growth over the decade.

Pottawattamie County, as a whole, is not growing alongside neighboring areas.

Of the survey respondents, 83% live in Council Bluffs, 74% work in Council Bluffs but only 60% both live and work in the city.

Some reasons for that, Schafer said, are Council Bluffs has relatively low wages and has many older homes — both of which deter younger residents.

"You are net-negative for domestic migration. People do come into the community," Schafer said. "We just saw a lot of transplants coming into this area, but more leave every year than come in, and that's exactly where this recruitment and retention focus comes in."

Schafer said key things people search for when choosing a place to live are the opportunities for social connection, job security, advancements and wages. Council Bluffs has the qualities to succeed in most of those categories.

"We're really clear there's something good going on here, and we want to keep that momentum going," Schafer said. "Regarding social connections, you are doing it. You are bringing people into this community, and you are making them feel part of this community."

A step in the right direction would be an increase in housing — a priority for the city, chamber and foundation.

"We are really clear that housing is a big part of the future of making this community better," Schafer said. "We're really at an inflection point in the Council Bluffs area, and, I think, that's a very exciting place to be."

Moving forward

The keynote speakers at the event — Schafer, Staci Hupp Ballard and Kiley Miller — all said Council Bluffs has all of the ingredients to be a successful community. It just needs to be put into a recipe.

Hupp Ballard, chief strategic communications officer at the Iowa Economic Development Authority, went into detail about the state's campaign to attract people.

"It's about getting businesses in our targeted industries to think of Iowa when they're considering relocation and expansion decisions," Ballard said. "It is about helping businesses grow and communities thrive by recruiting talent that they need."

Ballard said they are also using the lower cost of living and natural beauty to help attract families to the state, which is something Council Bluffs could work in tandem with in its efforts.

Mainwaring said Council Bluffs residents need to take pride in their city to encourage people to join the community.

"We need to move past outdated perceptions and embrace our own narrative," Mainwaring said. "We're a small town. We have great recreation, great arts, terrific schools — those are the things that people want in a community."

Council Bluffs residents tend to portray a negative perception of their town to outsiders, said Miller, manager of economic development data center services for Alliant Energy.

"These are positive things we love — the people, the history, the small town feel, the big city amenities, we get involved," Mainwaring said. "Maybe some of these are the things we should start talking about more publicly."

Miller's speech was a call to action, arguing residents need to be proud of their city if they wanted to attract growth.

The survey results showed that, analytically speaking, Council Bluffs has all the tools. But, by not pitching the community, it is missing an opportunity.

"We want to tell our own story, not let other people tell us who we are next," Mainwaring said. "We want to promote our status in the metro area as a place that offers an independent, small town atmosphere alongside big city amenities, and we want to support local businesses so our local economy can grow and thrive."