

## Omaha Inland Port Authority (OIPA) Innovation District Plan

### Public Meeting & Stakeholder Focus Group Takeaways

On May 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup>, 2025, the Omaha Inland Port Authority (OIPA), with assistance from the HR&A Advisors, Lamp Rynearson and Vireo planning team, held initial **focus group discussions** for the OIPA Innovation District Plan with neighborhood representatives, city officials, neighborhood business leaders, housing providers, and institutions.

On May 21 at The Venue at Highlander Accelerator (2120 North 30th Street), the consultant team also kicked off the project with the first **community meeting** for the planning effort. During the meetings, they discussed innovation districts and their characteristics and shared existing conditions and data trends related to the planning area. In addition, they sought participants' perspectives on what an "innovation district" could mean for the community, important assets, market opportunities, the look and feel of inclusive development, and potential achievements for the district.

Key themes from these conversations are summarized below.



# Public Community Meeting

Over 100 residents gathered to share their hopes, ideas, and priorities for a future innovation district in North Omaha. In facilitated table discussions, participants responded to questions about what innovation should mean today and into the future, and what outcomes they want to see.

Representatives from each group shared reflections on what an innovation district should achieve. Several core themes emerged from the conversation, grounded in the values of equity, inclusion, cultural pride, and long-term prosperity for the local community.

## **Key Themes:**

- **Inclusive Economic Growth:** Residents emphasized the need to create good jobs, support local and Black-owned businesses, and increase access to capital, especially through business incubation, workforce training in trades and tech, and youth talent retention. The district should help reduce poverty and raise household incomes by keeping more dollars circulating locally.
- **Equitable and Affordable Housing:** Participants called for diverse, mixed-income housing options that include affordable, middle-income, and market-rate units. Priorities included preventing displacement, increasing housing stability, supporting rehabilitation, and addressing homelessness to ensure that longtime residents benefit from new investment.
- **Education and Innovation:** The community envisioned a hub for intergenerational learning—investing in technology, trades, and creative industries. They stressed the importance of preparing young people for careers, fostering tech startups, and building pathways for local talent to grow and stay in North Omaha.
- **Community and Culture:** Residents want the district to celebrate North Omaha's history, culture, and creativity through events, art, public space, and community-driven storytelling. There was a strong emphasis on pride, safety, and fostering a shared sense of belonging.
- **Sustainability and Quality of Life:** Environmental sustainability, access to green space, and long-term community well-being were central priorities. Residents also emphasized the importance of a transparent and inclusive planning process that reflects the voices of existing residents and businesses.



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## Stakeholder Focus Groups

The consultant team hosted a series of focus groups with stakeholders working directly in key topic areas including city and municipal officials, housing and advocacy groups, community organizations, local businesses, transportation, economic development, education and local institutions. These targeted conversations allowed for deeper discussion of specific challenges, opportunities, and priorities from those with individuals and groups who are working on key and efforts within the North Omaha neighborhood. The notes below reflect the issues and ideas raised by participants and will be used to inform ongoing analysis and the development of recommendations.

## City & Municipal Officials

### Key Themes:

- **Economic Development:** Strong focus on job creation, attracting employers, supporting small businesses, and equitable investment in North Omaha.
- **Infrastructure & Housing:** Urgent needs include modernized zoning, increased density, affordable housing (especially starter homes and duplexes), and investment in both physical and social infrastructure (parks, public amenities).
- **Comprehensive Plan & Zoning:** Multiple officials highlighted the importance of aligning the Innovation District with the ongoing comprehensive plan, including updates to the zoning code, parking requirements, and small lot development.
- **Community Engagement & Trust:** Broad consensus that engagement fatigue is real. Officials urged better communication, clear differentiation of projects, inclusive participation (not just the same voices), and visible follow-through to build trust.
- **Public Amenities & Services:** Lacking amenities like public pools, updated parks, free public WiFi, and youth recreation. Maintenance and equitable distribution are challenges, especially in North Omaha.
- **Innovation Opportunities:** Discussion of sector-specific focuses like fintech, medical, prefab housing, ag innovation, and clean energy. Emphasis on defining measurable outcomes and aligning projects with emerging economic sectors.
- **City Support:** Officials want clearer roles, access to resources (e.g., infrastructure funding, clean energy), and better coordination across city initiatives.

## Housing & Advocacy Groups

### Key Themes:

#### Challenges & Barriers

- **Policy & Governance:** Most housing policy is set at the state level. The city's rental registry faces challenges with enforcement and is complaint-driven. No inclusionary housing requirements are currently tied to TIF or other incentives.
- **Development & Infrastructure:** Infill development is complicated by aging infrastructure and fragmented parcels. Zoning and code issues (like sewer line requirements) create barriers to middle housing types (e.g., duplexes). Inaccurate property valuations create an appraisal gap and hinder financing and investment.
- **Housing Access & Quality:** High investor ownership and non-local landlords reduce housing quality and neighborhood stability. Habitability issues are a concern and speculative landholding by investors restricts opportunities for new housing.

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- **Capital & Developer Support:** Residents and small-scale developers struggle to access capital. There's a mismatch between housing affordability thresholds and actual North Omaha incomes, leading to underutilization of available units.

## Policy Priorities

- **Tenant Protections & Rental Reform:**
  - Enact source-of-income protections to expand voucher access across neighborhoods.
  - Strengthen the rental registry with real enforcement mechanisms, fines, and proactive inspections.
  - Improve code enforcement to address persistent issues with absentee landlords and substandard housing.
- **Equitable Development Tools**
  - Create or strengthen inclusionary zoning policies tied to TIF and other public incentives.
  - Reform zoning and building codes to enable missing middle housing (e.g., stacked duplexes, ADUs).
  - Prioritize disposition of city-owned land for homeownership and affordable housing development.
- **Homeownership & Wealth Building**
  - Expand programs that support homeownership readiness, repair assistance, and intergenerational property transfer (e.g., deed transfer at death).
  - Encourage policies that reduce speculation and increase opportunities for community ownership.

## Community Organizations and Local Businesses

### Key Themes:

#### Neighborhood Identity & Pride

- **Rich Black History:** Strong ties to North Omaha's cultural legacy, including historic figures, community leaders, and thriving past businesses.
- **Desire for Renaissance:** Calls to revive the 1960s–80s era of local vitality; new museum and tours celebrate local heritage.
- **Youth & Future Generations:** Participants emphasized the importance of including youth in the community's future story and opportunities.

#### Assets to Uplift Through the Innovation District

- **Small Businesses & Economic Growth:** Expand commercial activity; address gaps in infrastructure (e.g., commercial, retail, co-working).
- **Third Spaces & Placemaking:** Libraries, coffee shops, parks, and spaces for community gathering and youth engagement are seen as essential.
- **Walkability & Connectivity:** Desire for destinations and vibrant streetscapes like those in Benson or Blackstone.
- **Historic Preservation & Cultural Anchors:** Leverage local landmarks and identity (e.g., Saratoga trailways) in new development.

#### Barriers & Challenges

- **Access to Capital:** Many businesses self-fund; resources feel out of reach or inaccessible.
- **Infrastructure Inequity:** Perception that investments prioritize West Omaha over North Omaha.
- **Nonprofit Saturation vs. Business Support:** Concern that funding is directed toward nonprofits at the expense of for-profit local businesses.

#### Roles in the Innovation District

- **Business & Community Leadership:** Participants see themselves as future business owners, patrons, advocates, and collaborators.

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- **Program Participation:** Interest in supporting youth, workforce development, and grassroots organizing.

#### **Vision for the Innovation District**

- **Inclusive, Community-Rooted Development:** "Developed for us by us"—must reflect local culture, history, and needs.
- **Job Creation & Opportunity Pipelines:** Emphasis on skilled trades, entrepreneurship, research, and healthcare-related careers.
- **Long-Term Mentorship & Support Hubs:** Structures to help local talent develop and sustain opportunities.

#### **Neighborhood Feel**

- **Nostalgic & Familiar:** Family-centered, with parallels to areas like Dundee or Memorial Park.
- **Intentional Design:** Colors, references, and place-based design should affirm that this is a space for the community.
- **Presence of Institutions:** Integration of trusted institutions is key to authenticity.

## **Transportation**

#### **Key Themes:**

#### **Current Conditions**

- **Safety & Access Issues:** Wide streets (e.g., Florence Blvd) and high-speed corridors (e.g., Storz Highway, 30th St) make walking and biking unsafe. Recent upgrades (e.g., 16th St, Adams Park) haven't fully addressed safety or comfort.
- **Transit Access:** Frequent bus routes; 30th & Ames has the highest transit access. Still, limited evening service and gaps in access—especially for workers at places like Lozier and Airlite.
- **Microtransit:** Existing zones don't fully meet needs. Pilot programs underway with philanthropic support (e.g., airport, North Omaha).
- **Disconnected from Regional Assets:** Airport is nearby but lacks pedestrian access. Despite proximity, the neighborhood feels distant due to infrastructure gaps.

#### **Infrastructure & Investments**

- **Ongoing/Planned Projects:**
  - Streetcar study funded for north extension
  - Bus Rapid Transit 24th St route.
  - Corridor planning and "Forever North" alignment with Innovation District.
- **Utilities & Legacy Sites:** Substandard streets, aging water lines, broadband integration challenges, Superfund site, and freight infrastructure.

#### **Opportunities & Needs**

- **Bike Share Expansion:** New stations planned at parks, ORBT stops, and potentially within the district.
- **Infrastructure Gaps:** Narrow spaces limit shelters; need better sidewalks, lighting, and transit coverage.
- **Freight & Economic Tension:** Efforts to calm traffic for safety may conflict with freight efficiency goals.
- **Potential Trail & Transit Hubs:** Abandoned railways and existing corridors (e.g., Beltline Trail, 24th & Lake) offer opportunities for new connections.

## **Economic Development**

#### **Key Themes:**

#### **Business & Market Context**

- **Limited Investment & Historic Disinvestment:** North Omaha has long lacked capital and investment, especially in the BID area. A legacy of nonprofit-led development and manufacturing footprint exists.
- **Opportunity for Growth:** Sectors with potential include renewable energy, housing construction innovation (e.g., prefab), consumer goods, and emerging tech (AI, life sciences).

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- **Innovation District Role:** Could provide business support, workforce development, and space for small and scaling businesses. Must build on community history while enabling new economic growth.

#### **Barriers & Needs**

- **Access to Capital:** Many entrepreneurs lack access to patient, early-stage capital. There's a need for micro-scale investment (\$5K-\$100K), especially for businesses serving outside markets.
- **Business Infrastructure:** Small businesses need access to services (e.g., legal, accounting, mentorship). Existing support isn't always coordinated. Lack of low-cost entry points and commercial space. Need to support both consumer-focused and primary-job producing businesses.
- **Limited Retail Data:** Cash-based transactions often make North Omaha appear less viable to national retailers, but spending capacity exists in this neighborhood. There's a need to better demonstrate market opportunity using alternative metrics.

#### **Inclusive Development**

- **Leverage Existing Efforts:** Align with BID, Chamber, and iHub goals. Learn from successful models (e.g., Blackstone, prefab factories in LA).
- **Tailored Support:** Many efforts are piecemeal or too general. Focus is needed on specific sectors and on the unique needs of Black entrepreneurs and returning community investors.
- **Workforce Pipeline:** Employers are shifting tech-wise—there's a need for faster training programs to help locals access mid-level jobs. Institutions move slowly; the district could respond more nimbly.

## **Institutions & Higher Education**

#### **Key Themes:**

##### **Current Priorities & Initiatives**

- **University of Nebraska Medical Center:** Developing its own Innovation District west of campus, featuring coworking space, labs, and a research center. Focus on programming (e.g., business development, lunch & learns) and improved access via bikeways.
- **University of Nebraska Omaha:** Partnering with Urban League on 16th Street education center. Focused on local adult learners and skill-building. Interest in launching an architecture studio.
- **University of Nebraska Lincoln:** Exploring a satellite campus for urban design. Leads the state's only accredited architecture program. Innovation Campus hosts fabrication and maker space projects (e.g., prefab housing).
- **Metro Community College:** Offers construction tech, drafting, and urban agriculture training (e.g., container farms). Needs include 3D modeling capacity and continuing education options like micro-credentials.
- **Omaha Public Schools:** Career pathways programming in engineering, design, and renewable energy (e.g., solar panels, housing construction). Emphasis on literacy, transferable skills, and community-based projects. Collaboration with employers and post-secondary institutions.
- **Creighton:** Opening campus to the broader community. Investing in green infrastructure and exploring connections to North Omaha via property west of the interstate. Seeking more cross-institutional faculty collaborations.

##### **Opportunities for Collaboration**

- Strong alignment potential across institutions in architecture, planning, interior design, construction, biotech, and urban agriculture.
- Opportunities for co-location of labs, makerspaces, and workforce training facilities in the Innovation District.
- Institutions expressed interest in shared or “neutral” space to enable collaboration and reduce silos.
- Desire to connect adult learners, technical training, and workforce pipelines directly to district programming and industry needs.