



**William H. Lyon Fairgrounds Task Force**  
**Minnehaha County, South Dakota**  
May 16, 2023

Between 1938 and 1942, Minnehaha County, South Dakota received numerous gifts of real estate from Winona Axtell in commemoration of her deceased husband William H. Lyon. This property became known as the W.H. Lyon Fair Grounds, the site of the Sioux Empire Fair, 4-H Achievement Days, Sioux Empire Livestock Show, and multiple sporting and community events, horse shows and rodeos throughout the year. On January 18, 2022, the Minnehaha County Board of Commissioners passed resolution Minnehaha County 22-11, “A Resolution to Authorize a Task Force for the Purpose of Reviewing and Establishing a Vision for the William H. Lyon Fair Grounds” (Attachment A).

## VISION STATEMENT

The Task Force envisions a financially sustainable W.H. Lyon Campus that will be seen as a regional attraction for entertainment, hospitality, commercial, retail, and research development by leveraging private/public partnerships to fully support, foster, and host agriculture events and a large-scale agricultural exposition.

## ASPIRATIONS

- The Task Force strived to look beyond the present use and condition of the W.H. Lyon Fairgrounds to envision what it could be.
- As we look for local inspiration, we look to planning and partnerships that went into the creation of Phillips to the Falls, The Sanford Sports Complex, Sioux River Greenway, Lake Lorraine Development and the initial visioning and community engagement process for the potential redevelopment of the Downtown Riverline District.

*“Everything we do in our community is generally ‘Best in Class.’ Examples include the Sanford Sports Complex, our outstanding giving for United Way, how vibrant our Chamber is, the Denny... on & on. We need to implement the same standards of excellence to this campus as we do elsewhere throughout our community.” - Member of the Task Force.*

## RECOMMENDATIONS

### **Recommendation One:**

Conduct the necessary due diligence to determine the existing property value and the cost of either improving the existing property to meet the standards of the vision statement, or entertaining other potential sites for the relocation of the Campus. While due diligence should not be done in haste, now is the time to provide clarification regarding the long-term property status and value. The final resolution of this item will allow for more in-depth conversations with public/private partners in bringing our shared Vision for the W.H. Lyon Campus to life.

### **Recommendation Two:**

Further clarify the existing deed restrictions so that the County can better understand what options it has at the W.H. Lyon Fair Grounds while still meeting the intent of the deeds.

### **Recommendation Three:**

Establish a joint Minnehaha County/City of Sioux Falls working group to brainstorm potential organizational models, funding avenues and public/private partnerships so that the W.H. Lyon Fair Grounds can transform into a regional agriculture campus that provides a greater cultural and economic impact to our community.

## TASK FORCE MEMBERS AND MEETINGS

The Commissioners selected the following Task Force members: Adam Kniffen, Amy Pokela, Bryce Jones, Cathy Harr, Chad Biegler, Erik Nyberg, Heidi Zwinger, Holly Rader, Jeff Eckhoff, Jon Carroll, Michael Jamison, Regina Beers, Robert Thimjon, Ron Nelson, and Sylvia Wolters. Commissioners Gerald Beninga served as liaison to the Task Force. The Task Force met as follows:

- Charles D. Smith Architect took the task force through a high-level review of the existing fairgrounds. The workshop report is Attachment B.
- The Commission authorized a Market & Economic Analysis of the W.H. Lyon Fairgrounds by CSL, Attachment C.
- Between February and April, 2023, the Task Force met to review financials, utilities, events, and meet with other fair directors in South Dakota and Nebraska. The summary of those meetings is in Attachment D.

The Task Force selected the following highlights from the attachments/findings:

- There must be closure brought to the uncertainty surrounding the property status. The Task Force members stated that the most frequent comments they hear from the public are in regards to the status of land. Is it for sale? What is the value of the land? Can it be sold?
- The present deed restrictions are a major hindrance to the operation and development of the campus. By way of example, the deed restriction requiring contracts be limited to five years in length or less severely limits the potential to secure larger donations, funding opportunities and development.
- The current funding is not sufficient to remodel, repair, replace, or enhance the campus.
- The W.H. Lyon Fair Grounds is utilized over 330 days a year with over 500,000 attendees.
- Most of the facilities on the W.H. Lyon Fair Grounds are showing widespread wear and tear. As a result, the facilities and grounds do not meet the standards of excellence our community and region have come to expect from our State's largest population center.
- Regional livestock shows have shown a strong desire to host their shows at the W.H. Lyon Fair Grounds due to the amenities provided in the community and ease of access to Interstate 29 and 90. However, the inadequate facilities at the Fair Grounds are a major deterrent to securing such shows.

- Our community has a wide range of facilities for different types of events; however, the Expo Center at the W.H. Lyon Fair Grounds is the only facility of substantial size designed for livestock events.
- The W.H. Lyon Fair Grounds has an annual estimated economic impact of \$35 million dollars for our community. The resulting tax revenue is not returned or invested in the Fair Grounds.
- City sales tax is not collected on the Fair Grounds but should be considered as a “new” revenue source.
- A business model that depends heavily on funds derived from a seven to ten-day outdoor annual event has inherent financial risk.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

- The commitment of the Task Force members is appreciated as they gave significant time to this project. Each of the members was dedicated to the process and the future of the W.H. Lyon Fair Grounds.
- The Task Force would like to thank the Sioux Empire Fair Association and their President Scott Wick, staff and Board of Directors for both their assistance during our fact-finding exercise, and also the creativity and tenacity that they exhibit in managing the existing facilities and bringing events to the W.H. Lyon Fair Grounds.
- The Task Force would also like to thank Carol Muller, Commission Administrative Officer and Tyler Klatt, Assistant Commission Administrative Officer for all their efforts in creating an environment that was conducive to covering the wide array of topics that needed to be reviewed and studied by the Task Force.