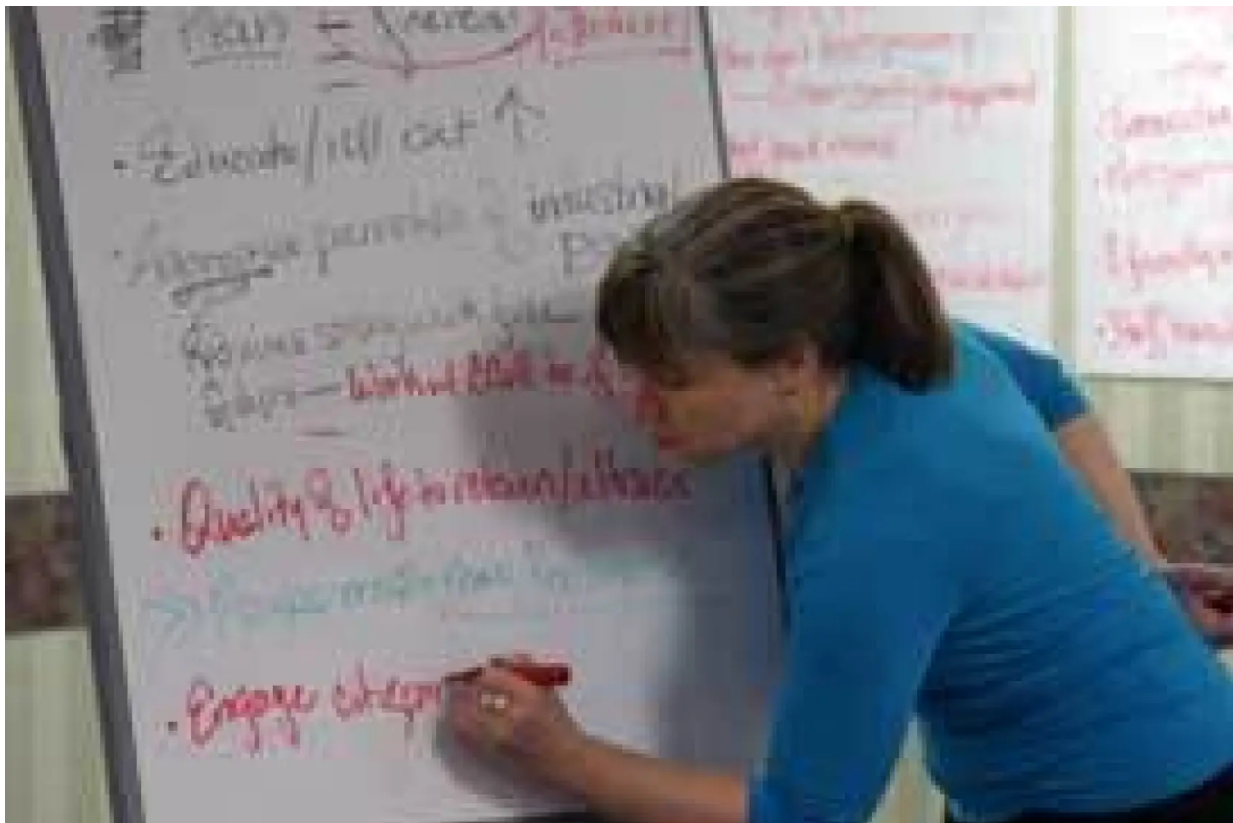


NEWS

Willmar City Council works on goals during planning retreat

WILLMAR -- Willmar City Council members met in a planning retreat all day Friday and Saturday morning and agreed on top goals that they and city staff should work toward during 2009 and 2010.



Sara Peterson, managing consultant with Larson Allen, facilitates a group of Willmar City Council members Friday during a planning retreat. The group discussed the goals that the city should work toward in the next couple of years. The work session continued Saturday. Tribune photo by Ron Adams

By WCT Newsroom

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WILLMAR -- Willmar City Council members met in a planning retreat

all day Friday and Saturday morning and agreed on top goals that they and city staff should work toward during 2009 and 2010.

The meeting was informal and no official votes were taken, but members agreed their top goal for the next two years is to continue to aggressively market and develop the industrial park at the old airport.

Also, council members agreed to ensure the city has a plan to weather state aid cuts; upgrade, maintain and protect core neighborhoods; and be flexible and adaptable to emerging opportunities.

The goals will be distilled into a report to the council by facilitator Sara Peterson, managing consultant with Larson Allen, an accounting and consulting firm in Minneapolis. Peterson said her role at the retreat was to find out what council members expected to cover and focus the agenda in the right direction.

In an interview, Peterson said strategic planning is important. The Willmar City Council holds a strategic planning retreat early in the year following the biennial council election.

"By being in a retreat mode, it changes the dynamic among individuals and you can have a different kind of conversation and a different kind of interaction that allows you to go deeper and allows you to deal with the communication itself and be a little more personal on those kinds of things," said Peterson.

"By leaving the council chambers and by leaving the city council building, you can also get a little more perspective on the bigger vision and the bigger issues and get a couple steps away from the individual decisions that have to go into that," she said. "It's an important exercise."

The effect of the loss of Local Government Aid due to the downturn in the state and national economy was a major discussion topic. Council

members said they want a plan going forward that would help the city weather the loss and be less dependent on LGA.

State aid accounts for 22.1 percent, or about \$4.6 million, of Willmar's 2009 budget revenue of \$20,842,162. LGA was cut late last year when Gov. Tim Pawlenty used his "unallotment" authority to cut Willmar's aid by \$316,000. The loss was covered by 2008 revenues and reserves, however.

For 2009, due to the state's projected \$4.6 billion revenue shortfall in 2010 and 2011, the governor's proposed budget could cut Willmar's aid more than \$400,000. The cut could increase proportionately if the state's deficit continues to grow.

As a result, City Administrator Michael Schmit proposed a three-phased approach to reducing the city's budget in the amounts of \$500,000, \$750,000 and \$1 million, depending on final budget action by the Legislature.

The approach had been presented to the council by Schmit at a work session in February, and council members informally endorsed the approach during their retreat.

Adaptability was seen as an important goal.

"We have to be adaptable both to the opportunities that present themselves for the city, be they economic development or otherwise," said Peterson.

Among other topics, council members discussed a request from citizens to endorse the nine principles of the Speak Your Peace Civility Project. The council had withheld a decision pending discussion of the project at the retreat.

Peterson said there was a community expectation that the council

would take some direction on what it would do with the project. During the retreat, council members had a lengthy discussion about how they want to interact with each other but were reluctant to formally adopt the principles.

In the end, council members agreed that the expectations they already have of each other align directly with the nine Speak Your Peace principles, such as paying attention, listening, showing respect, being agreeable and giving constructive criticism.

"Once we were clear on that, then it was easy for the council to say these principles are consistent with what we expect of each other, so we've acknowledged that as a group, and it will be part of my report to the council," she said.

Peterson thought the council had a "wonderfully open" conversation. Peterson said she talked to a couple of people who she said questioned whether the council would get anywhere. Afterward, she said, they expressed their pleasure with the outcome.

"We got agreement on the priorities and the goals and we moved forward in talking about the budget and moving forward on how the council works together," she said.