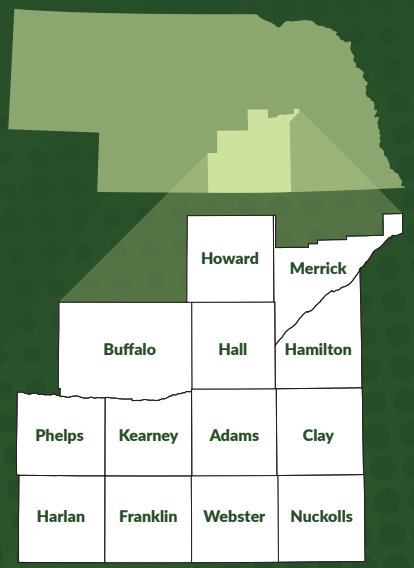
South Central Economic Development District

COMPREHENSIVE ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT STRATEGY

2026-2031





SCEDD
South Central Economic Development District

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Executive Summary 1
Summary Background 2
- Geography
- Human Capital/Labor Force
- Industries/Economies
- Natural Resources
  - Soil
  - Water
- Infrastructure
  - Transportation
  - Energy
  - Higher Education
  - Broadband
  - Healthcare

SWOT Survey 16
- Strengths
- Weaknesses
- Opportunities
- Threats

Economic Resilience 18
Strategic Direction | Action Plan 20
- Priority #1: Community Development/Quality of Life
- Priority #2: Housing
- Priority #3: Childcare
- Priority #4: Industry/Workforce Development

County Data Profiles 31

Adams	Hamilton	Nuckolls
Buffalo	Harlan	Phelps
Clay	Howard	Webster
Franklin	Kearney	
Hall	Merrick	

Acknowledgments 44
SCEDD Board & Staff
- Sub-Committee Members
- Special Thanks

SCEDD
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Cover Photo: Aerial View of Grand Island, Nebraska (2026). Wikimedia Commons. https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Grand_Island,_Nebraska_aerial_2026.jpg.
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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The South Central Economic Development District, Inc. (SCEDD) region is comprised of 13 primarily rural counties in south central Nebraska.

This Comprehensive Economic Development Strategy (CEDS) is intended to be both a blueprint and a reference document outlining how the greater SCEDD community can address priority economic development-related areas as identified by key stakeholders at in-person events, in online Teams meetings, and via surveys.

As mandated by the Economic Development Agency (EDA) regulations governing CEDS, each of the following components must be included:

1. **SUMMARY BACKGROUND:** a summary background of the economic conditions of the region
2. **SWOT ANALYSIS:** an in-depth analysis of regional strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats
3. **ECONOMIC RESILIENCE:** an explanation of how the region anticipates, withstands, and bounces back from any type of shock, disruption, or stress it may experience
4. **STRATEGIC DIRECTION/ACTION PLAN:** identification of priority areas with strategic objectives, action items, and collaborating partners for each area
5. **EVALUATION FRAMEWORK:** performance measures used to evaluate impact

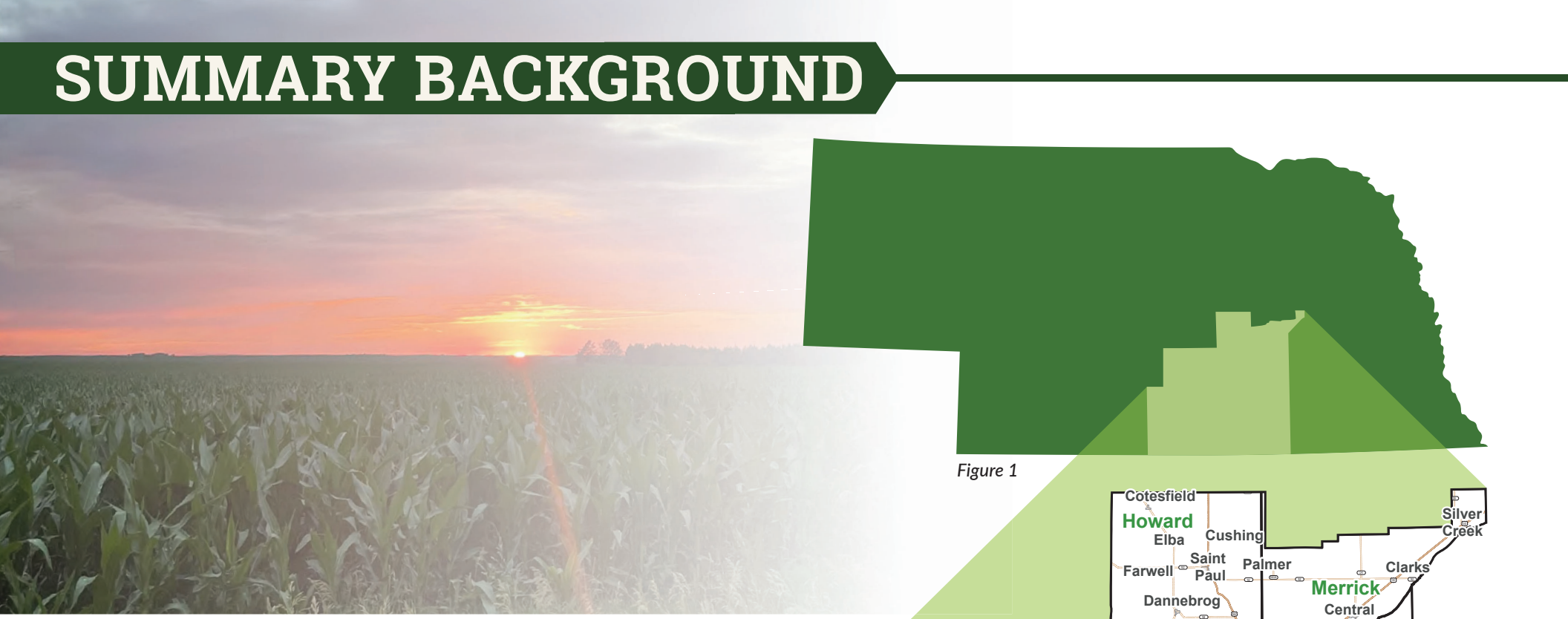
EDA

Utilizing regular feedback from internal and external stakeholders and responses to a SWOT survey circulated to a wider group, the following priority areas have been identified:

1. **COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT AND QUALITY OF LIFE:** The two biggest threats to the region are an aging population and the loss of young adults to metro areas. Much of the SCEDD region is characterized by aging and depopulation; 11 of the 13 counties have higher median ages than Nebraska as a whole, while 8 of the 13 counties lost population from 2020 to 2025. Despite this, “Quality of life” was one of the top identified opportunities in the SWOT survey. Community development and improving quality of life will help communities help themselves in their efforts to revitalize and retain younger adults.
2. **HOUSING:** The lack of affordable, entry-level housing was the top identified weakness among SWOT survey participants. This negatively impacts workforce development, which in turn affects industry growth. This also has an adverse effect on economic development as it makes it more difficult to retain and attract younger workers and families. Communities and organizations must be empowered to explore ways to increase the quality and quantity of entry-level housing.
3. **CHILDCARE:** The lack of childcare services, one of the top identified weaknesses in the SWOT survey, is a large barrier to labor participation for parents of young children. And like the lack of housing, the lack of childcare also has an adverse effect on economic development as it has a detrimental effect on the retention and attraction of younger workers and families. Stakeholders must collaborate with childcare advocates, resource providers, and possibly other communities to find solutions that address the need for childcare services.
4. **INDUSTRY AND WORKFORCE DEVELOPMENT:** The SCEDD region’s economic health has long been reliant on its agricultural sector combined with development of other sectors such as manufacturing that often provide higher-paying jobs. This regional economy requires continued workforce development and maintenance of infrastructure, including transportation. Communities and businesses need to grow and diversify their often agriculture-dominant economies to become more economically resilient.

S W O T SURVEY RESULTS
CEDS 5-Year Plan

SUMMARY BACKGROUND



Geography

The South Central Economic Development District, Inc. (SCEDD) region is comprised of these 13 counties in south central Nebraska: Adams, Buffalo, Clay, Franklin, Hall, Hamilton, Harlan, Howard, Kearney, Merrick, Nuckolls, Phelps, and Webster.

According to the U.S. Census Bureau's 2024 American Community Survey 5-year estimates, there are 85 incorporated cities and villages within the 13 counties. The three largest cities – collectively known as the Tri-Cities – are Grand Island (51,250) in Hall County, Kearney (33,783) in Buffalo County, and Hastings (24,878) in Adams County. The ten counties (excluding any of the Tri-Cities counties) each have populations below 10,000.

Figure 1

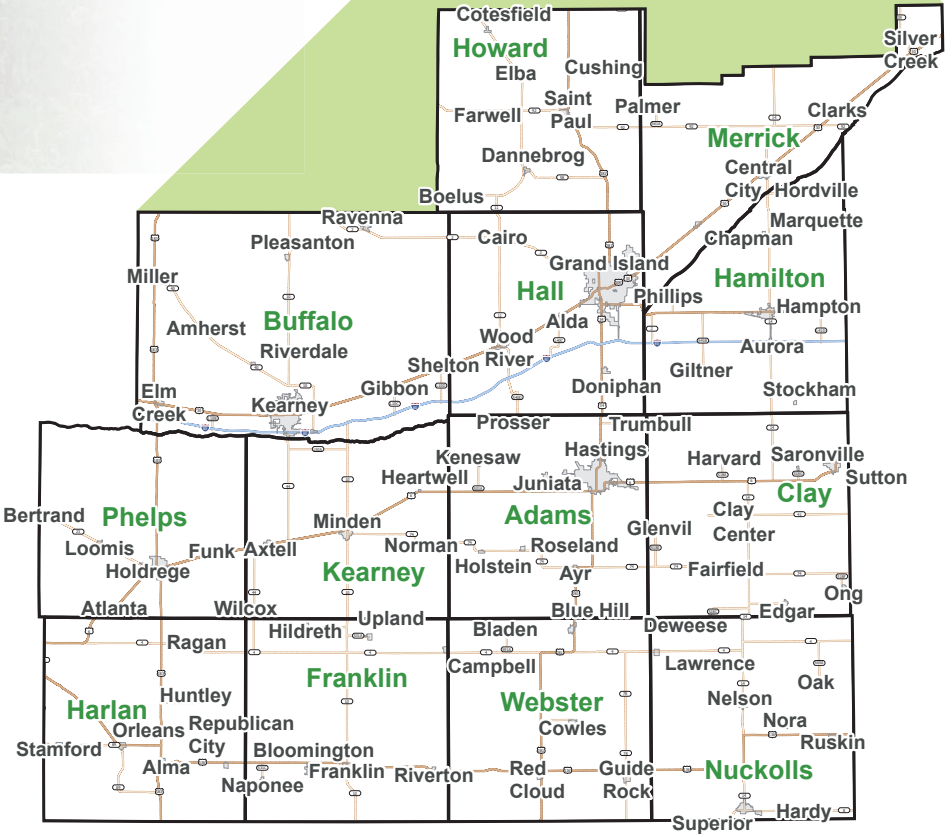


Photo: Sunset over cornfield, Kearney County, Source – LeAnn Jochum

SCEDD's municipalities are characterized by both their small size and ruralness. Almost one-half of SCEDD municipalities have a population below 300 (Chart 1). More than one-half of SCEDD counties have at least thirty (30) percent of the population residing outside of incorporated areas (Chart 2). Nine of SCEDD's thirteen counties are classified as 100% rural.[1]

The cities and counties that experienced greater growth in the SCEDD region are along the I-80 corridor. In the Nebraska development community, this is known as "The Fishhook," where the counties that experienced the greatest growth formed a pattern like a fishhook.[2] This variance in development has had lasting implications. Areas of the counties along the I-80 corridor, with more vibrant economies, are younger with higher household incomes, while areas of the counties further away are older and with lower household incomes.



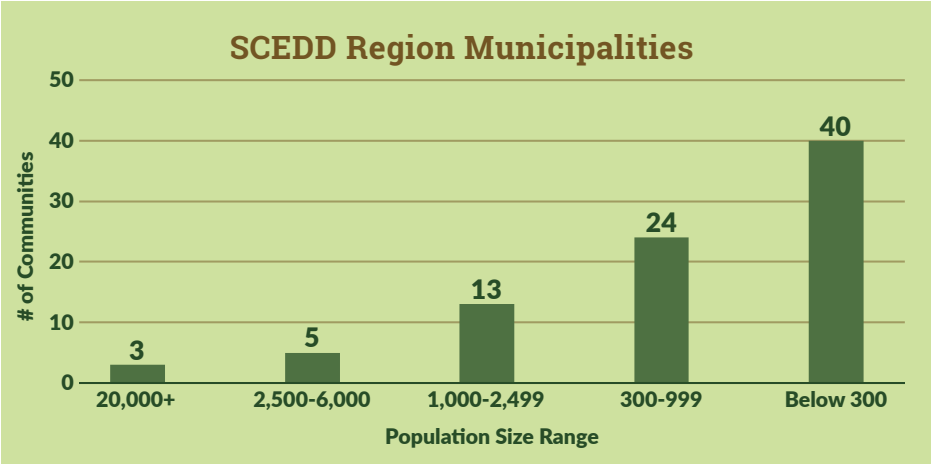


Chart 1

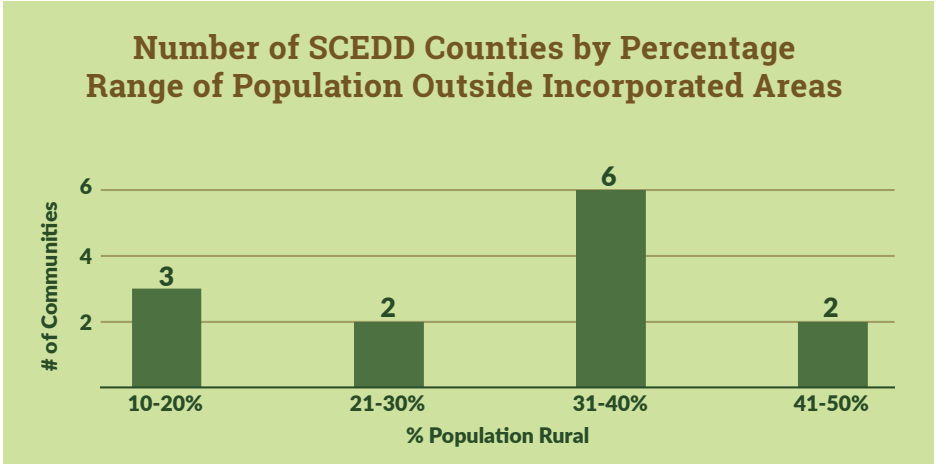


Chart 2

Sources: All Things Nebraska: Nebraska County Report Cards (from US Census Bureau's 2020 Decennial Census), [1]National Economic Resilience Data Explorer (NERDE) (from US Census Bureau's 2020 Decennial Census and ACS 2020-2024 5-Year Estimates)
[2]Cantrell, Randolph L., "Rural Depopulation: A Closer Look at Nebraska's Counties and Communities," Nebraska Rural Initiative, University of Nebraska-Lincoln (September 2005). Photo: Village of Bertrand, Source – Village

Human Capital/Labor Force

There are slightly more than 200,000 people who live in the 13 SCEDD counties. The SCEDD region is defined both by aging and depopulation. Its median age is 42.3, while the national median age is 38.9 (Chart 3). Furthermore, eight of its 13 counties lost population from 2020 to 2025.

The SCEDD region's workforce operates in a low unemployment, low pay environment. The unemployment rate in the 13 counties is typically 1-2 percentage points lower than the national unemployment rate (Chart 4).

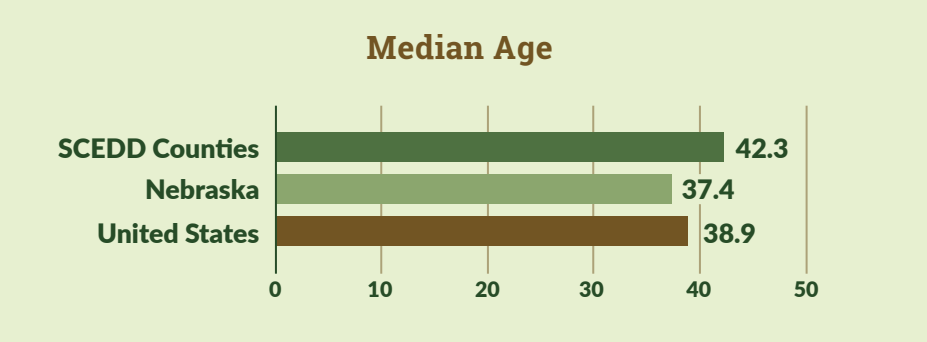


Chart 3

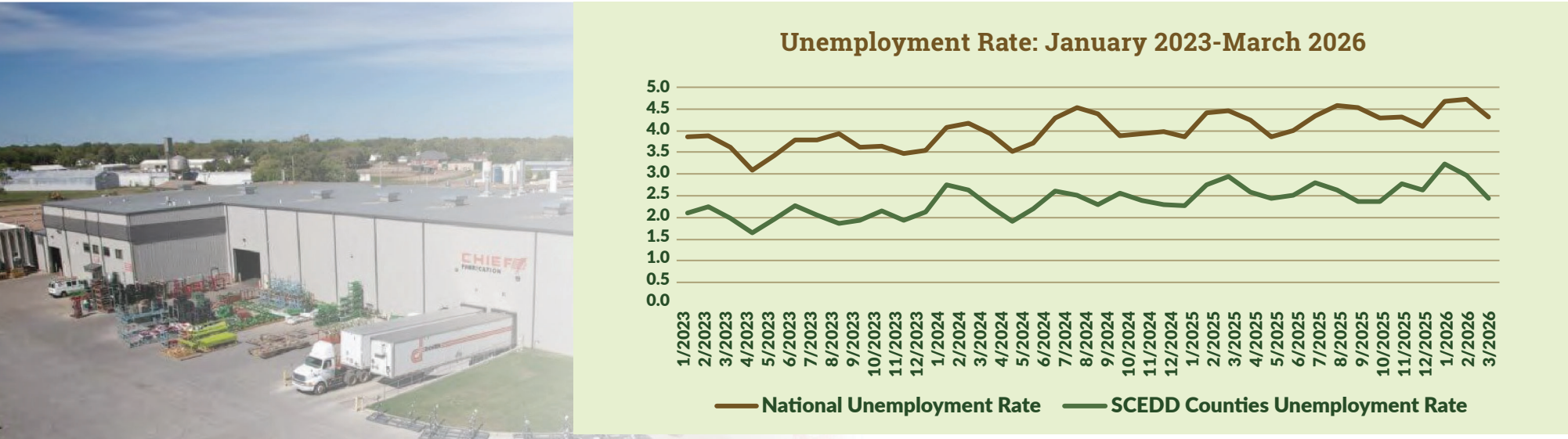


Chart 4

Source: Center on Rural Innovation (CORI) Economic Development Tool; "Primary counties" = 13 SCEDD counties (using 2019 and 2024 American Community Survey 5-year estimates), National Economic Resilience Data Explorer (NERDE) (from US Census Bureau's 2020 Decennial Census and ACS 2020-2024 5-Year Estimates): "Selected Area" = 13 SCEDD counties. Photo: Chief Industries manufacturing, Grand Island, Source – Grand Island Area Economic Development

Despite having lower unemployment rates and higher labor force participation (Chart 5), the average annual pay is about $20,000-$25,000 less than the national average (Chart 6). One possible reason is an educational/skills deficit. While educational attainment in the SCEDD region increased from 2019 to 2024, it continues to lag behind educational attainment in the United States as a whole (Chart 7).

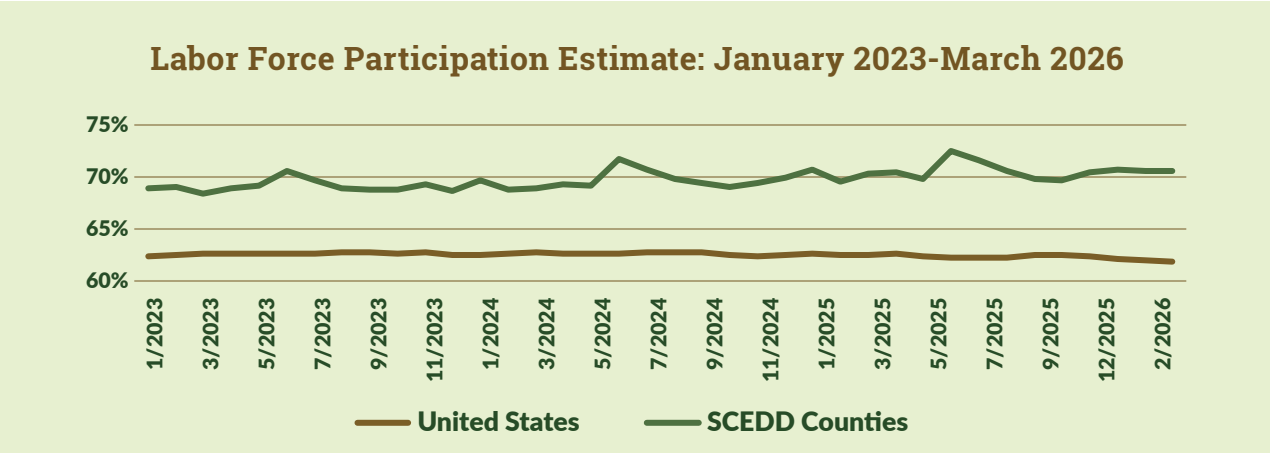


Chart 5

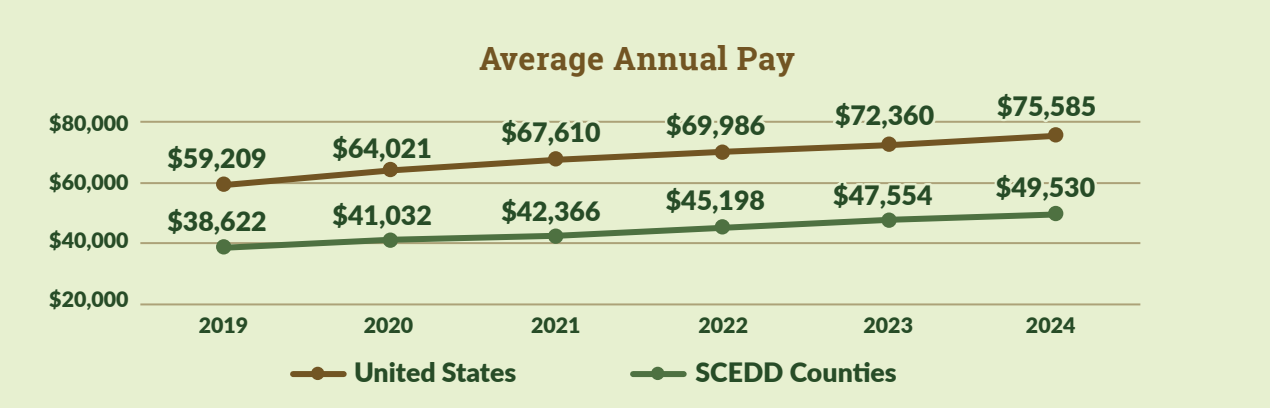


Chart 6

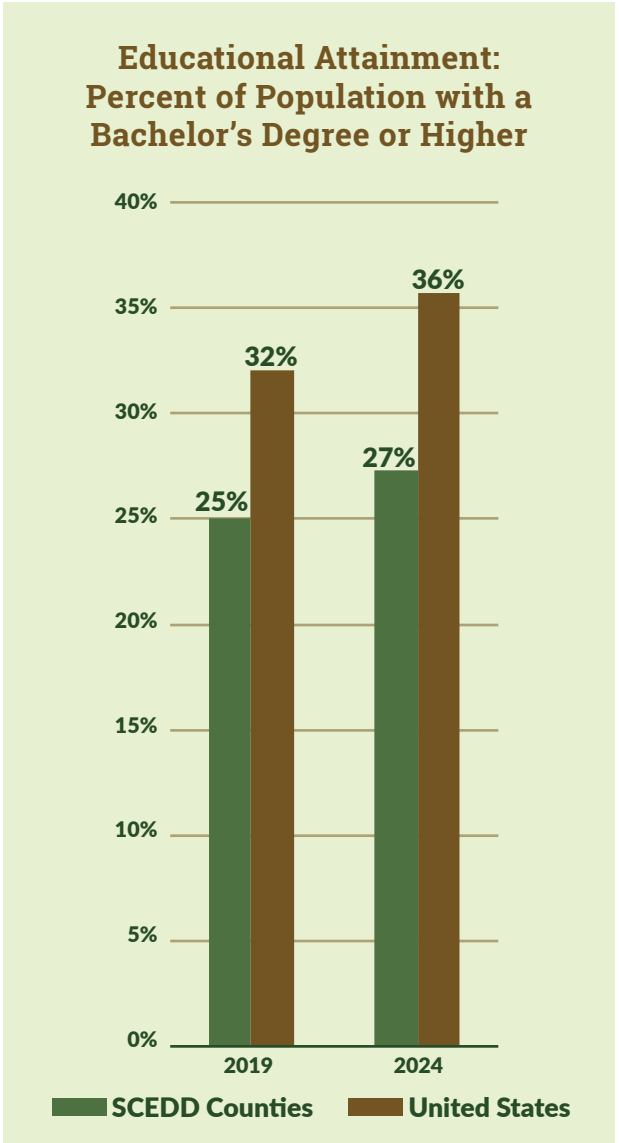


Chart 7

Sources: National Economic Resilience Data Explorer (NERDE) (from US Census Bureau's 2020 Decennial Census and ACS 2020-2024 5-Year Estimates): "Selected Area" = 13 SCEDD counties, Center on Rural Innovation (CORI) Economic Development Tool; "Primary counties" = 13 SCEDD counties; using data from 2019-2024 Quarterly Census of Employment and Wages, Center on Rural Innovation (CORI) Economic Development Tool; "Primary counties" = 13 SCEDD counties (using 2019 and 2024 American Community Survey 5-year estimates

Industries/Economies

The SCEDD region's top industry is agriculture. Nondurable goods manufacturing and durable goods manufacturing are second and third, respectively (Chart 8).

The top three industries by number of employees are (1) government and government enterprises, (2) manufacturing, and (3) retail trade (Chart 9).

Something other than government is the top sector in the three largest SCEDD counties: Adams, Buffalo, and Hall (Chart 10). In these counties, the economy is more diversified with a non-governmental sector – manufacturing or health – as the sector that provides the most jobs. Manufacturing is the top sector in three counties: Adams, Hall, and Phelps (Charts 10 and 11). Manufacturing jobs tend to be higher paying, while retail jobs tend to be lower paying.

Government is the top sector in eight of the ten smaller SCEDD counties (Chart 11). Government employment tends to pay better than employment in non-governmental sectors. However, as the number of government jobs is finite, an economy that has an over-reliance on government positions will be less economically resilient. Local economies would benefit from greater diversification.

Sources: National Economic Resilience Data Explorer (NERDE) (from US Census Bureau's 2020 Decennial Census and ACS 2020-2024 5-Year Estimates): Area analyzed = 13 SCEDD counties, University of Nebraska-Lincoln County Report Cards (from US Census Bureau's 2020 Decennial Census and ACS 2020-2024 5-Year Estimates): Areas analyzed = 13 SCEDD counties

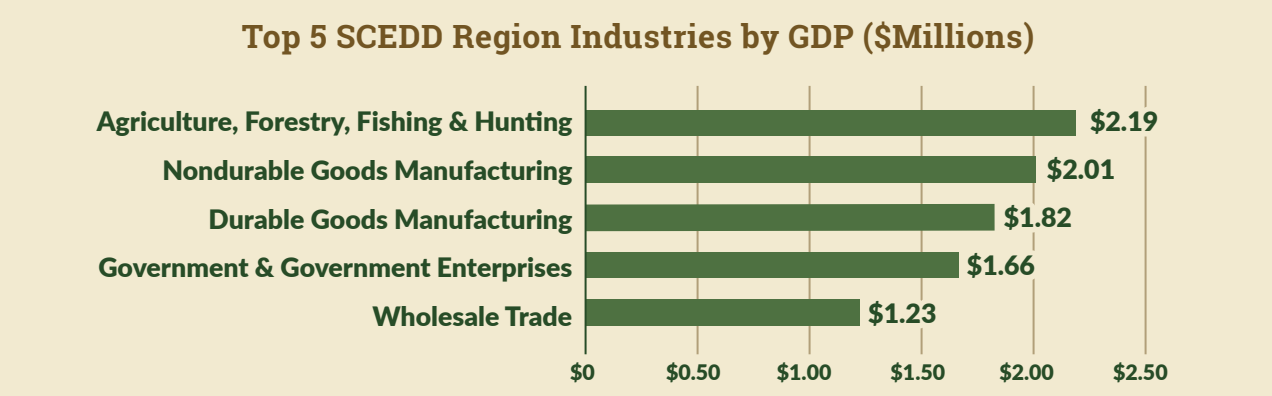


Chart 8

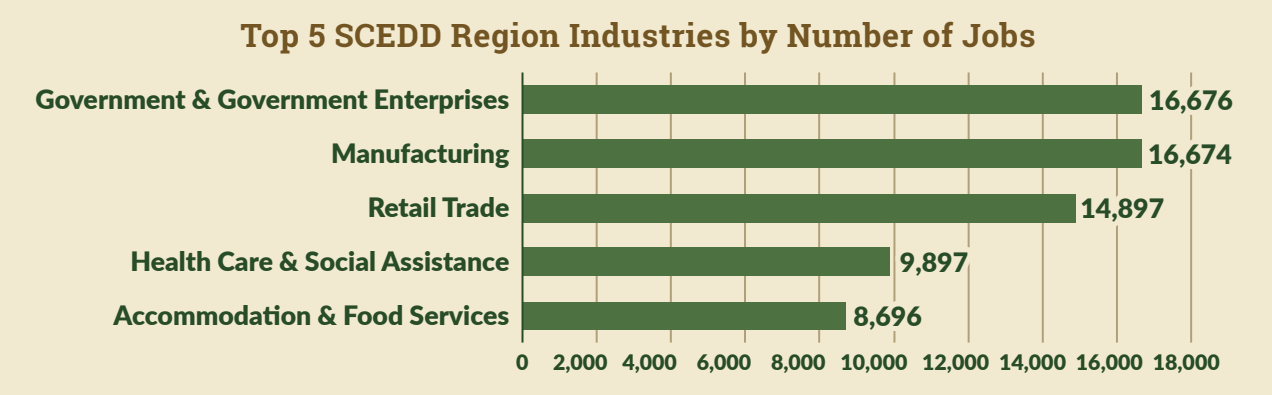


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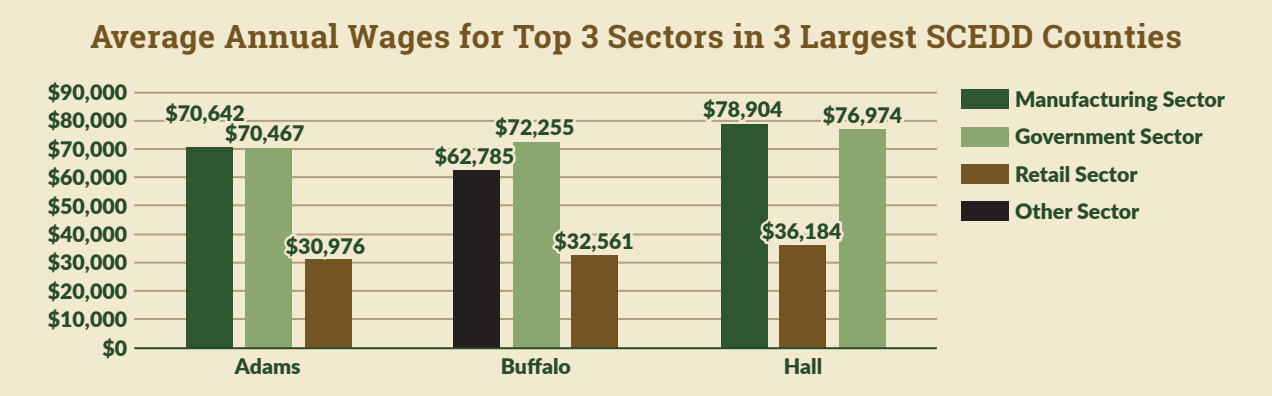


Chart 10

Average Annual Wages for Top 3 Sectors in 10 Smallest SCEDD Counties

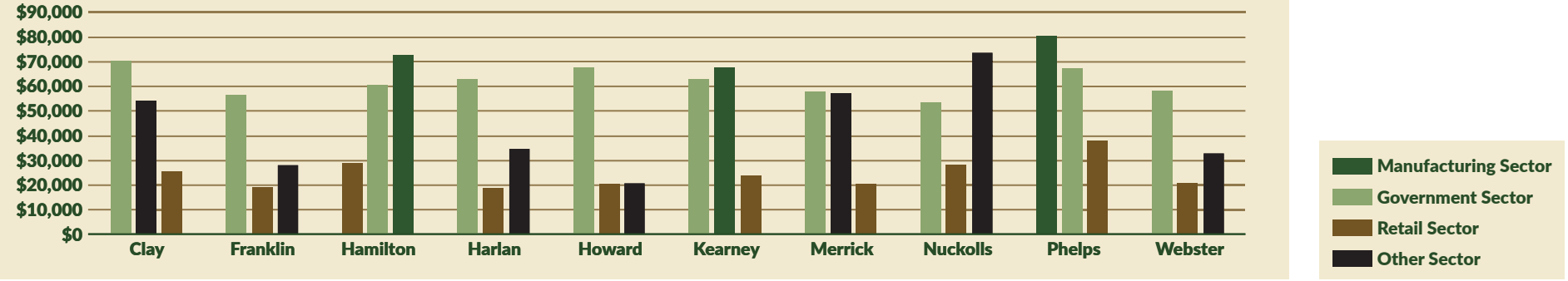


Chart 11

Number of Jobs for Top 3 Sectors in Three Largest SCEDD Counties

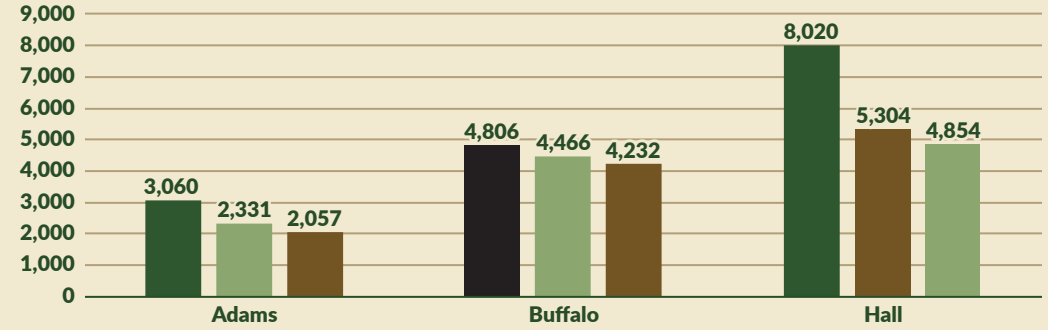


Chart 12

Government and retail trade are among the top three industry sectors by employment in each of the thirteen counties. Charts 12 and 13 show the number of jobs in each county's top three sectors. In Clay and Franklin counties, the number of government jobs is more than double the number of jobs in the second sector (Chart 13).



Number of Jobs for Top 3 Sectors in 10 Smallest SCEDD Counties

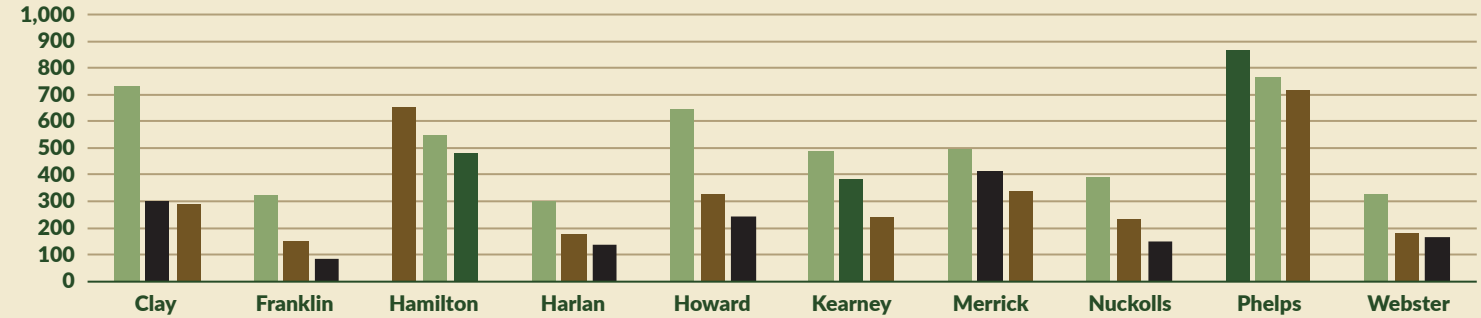


Chart 13

Source: University of Nebraska-Lincoln County Report Cards (from US Census Bureau's 2020 Decennial Census and ACS 2020-2024 5-Year Estimates): Areas analyzed = 13 SCEDD counties. Photo: Beck Corn Production Ribbon Cutting, Hamilton County, Source – Aurora Development Corporation

Natural Resources

The farmland soil in the 13 SCEDD counties is quite conducive to agriculture. The average pH for each county's soil ranges from 6.0 to 7.0 (Table 1); this is the ideal chemical foundation for plants.[3] Soil scores for SCEDD counties also quite good; scores above 75-80 are generally considered high while scores below 40 indicate severe agricutural limitations. The soil composition ranges from at least one-third silt to more than one-half. The high silt content plus sufficient clay makes the soil easier to work with and drain while maintaining structural integrity.

The SCEDD region's water quality ranges from excellent to good. Tap Water Data provides water quality scores for ten of the 13 SCEDD counties; the median quality score is between excellent and good (Chart 14). Of the ten scores, only one–for Buffalo County–is below excellent/good.

Soil Grade by County

County	Dominant Texture	Avg pH	Soil Score	Soil Composition Sand/Silt/Clay
Adams	Loamy Fine Sand	6.6	75.5	32.1% / 47.4% / 19.3%
Buffalo	Loam	6.9	n/a	41.5% / 41.7% / 16.8%
Clay	Silt Loam	6.0	76.9	18.6% / 56.1% / 22.4%
Franklin	Loam	6.7	n/a	32.6% / 46.8% / 17.5%
Hall	Loam	6.7	n/a	44.5% / 38.9% / 16.6%
Hamilton	Loam	6.6	73.3	31.5% / 49.1% / 19.4%
Harlan	Silt Loam	6.9	73.2	24.0% / 56.2% / 19.8%
Howard	Loam	6.8	54.7	46.6% / 36.8% / 15.7%
Kearney	Loam	7.0	66.7	39.3% / 43.3% / 17.4%
Merrick	Fine Sandy Loam	6.9	n/a	51.0% / 34.3% / 14.8%
Nuckolls	Silt Loam	6.6	80.0	23.8% / 54.9% / 21.5%
Phelps	Loam	6.9	68.2	32.8% / 48.7% / 18.5%
Webster	Silt Loam	6.8	71.7	24.7% / 53.3% / 20.7%

Table 1



Sources: [3]Soil by County: Nebraska Soil Data (from USDA Web Soil Survey (SSURGO) data) – Areas analyzed = 13 SCEDD counties, TapWaterData: Nebraska Water Quality Reports – Areas analyzed = 13 SCEDD counties. Photo: Platte River, Buffalo County, Source – Derek Luke

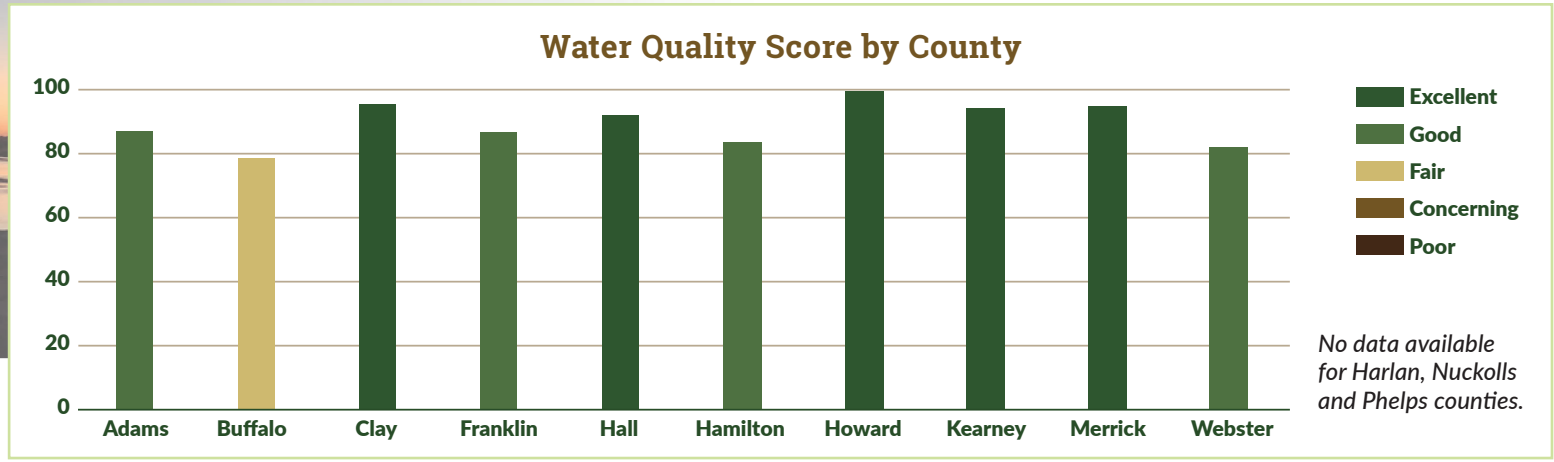


Chart 14

Infrastructure - Transportation

About five in six employees drive to work alone (Chart 15). Another one in ten carpools to work. With a lack of available public transportation options, SCEDD region employees are much more dependent on not only driving but driving longer distances to/from work. Because of this reliance on travel by automobile, gas prices have a disproportionate impact on household expenses.

Eleven of SCEDD's 13 counties have an airport (Table 2). Two of them, Buffalo and Hall, have airports with more than 10,000 deplanements per year.

There are more than 2,000 bridges/culverts in the region. In each of the 13 counties, at least one-third of them are rated to be in just fair or poor condition. In three counties–Hamilton, Howard, and Nuckolls–two-thirds or more are categorized to be in fair or poor condition.



Source: U.S. Department of Transportation: County Profiles – Areas analyzed = 13 SCEDD counties. Photo: MelissaMN. Adobe Stock. https://stock.adobe.com/images/hazy-summer-sunset-across-the-train-railroad-tracks-in-kearney-nebraska/1564058419

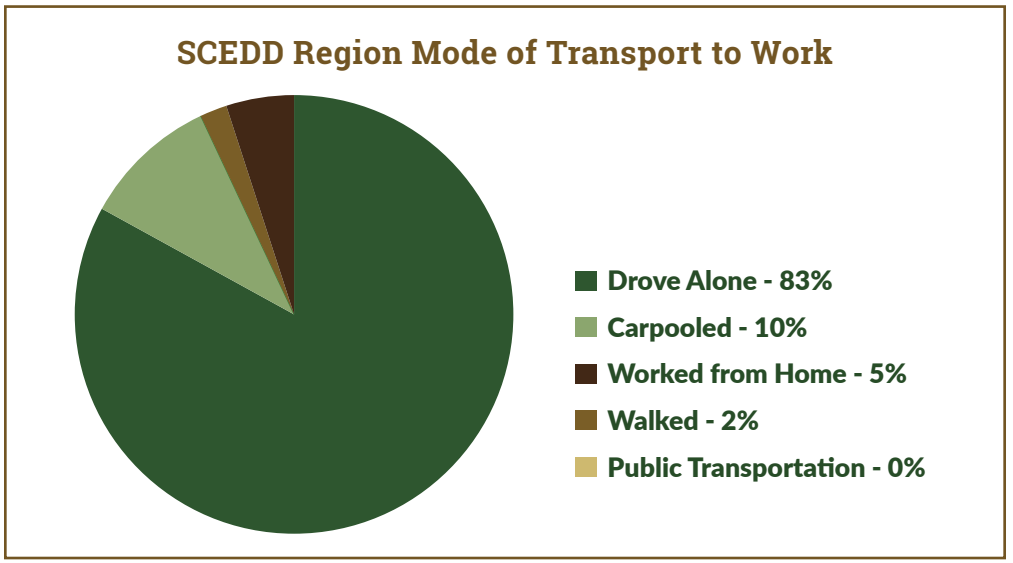


Chart 15

Transportation Profile by County

County	# of Airports*	# of Track Miles/Passenger Track Miles	# of Bridges/ Culverts	% of Bridges/Culverts in Fair/Poor Condition
Adams	1	92/24	211	39.8%
Buffalo	**1**	61/0	459	42.4%
Clay	1	50/25	134	37.6%
Franklin	0	12/0	104	41.4%
Hall	**1**	63/0	271	38.8%
Hamilton	1	51/0	175	68.0%
Harlan	1	40/14	92	37.0%
Howard	0	31/0	161	70.8%
Kearney	1	26/26	71	36.6%
Merrick	1	66/0	173	34.7%
Nuckolls	1	19/0	255	66.6%
Phelps	1	35/19	80	47.5%
Webster	1	33/0	191	36.1%

*Table 2 *Note: "# of airports" in bold are airports that have 10,000+ deplanements annually. The region's other airports have between 2,500 and 10,000 deplanements annually.*

Infrastructure - Energy

Nebraska is the only state where all residents and businesses receive electricity from non-profit institutions instead of for-profit corporations.[4] The non-profit institutions that serve as owners of electricity include municipal utilities, electric cooperatives, and public power districts. There are 109 power plants in the state that combine for an installed capacity of 9,145 megawatts (MW).[5] About one-third of these plants are natural gas and another one-third are wind.

There are 16 power plants in the SCEDD region. These power plants are distributed across seven counties: Adams, Buffalo, Franklin, Hall, Howard, Merrick, and Webster (Figure 2). The aggregate installed capacity of these power plants is 932 MW. Five of these plants are solar, four are natural gas, four are wind, and two are coal. One is listed as "other." None of them are nuclear.

Solar energy in both Nebraska generally and the SCEDD region in particular has been a growing part of the energy sector. There are nine active solar projects in the 13 counties, but only one that has been developed since 2021: a 1,000kW project in St. Paul (Howard County) in 2023.[6]

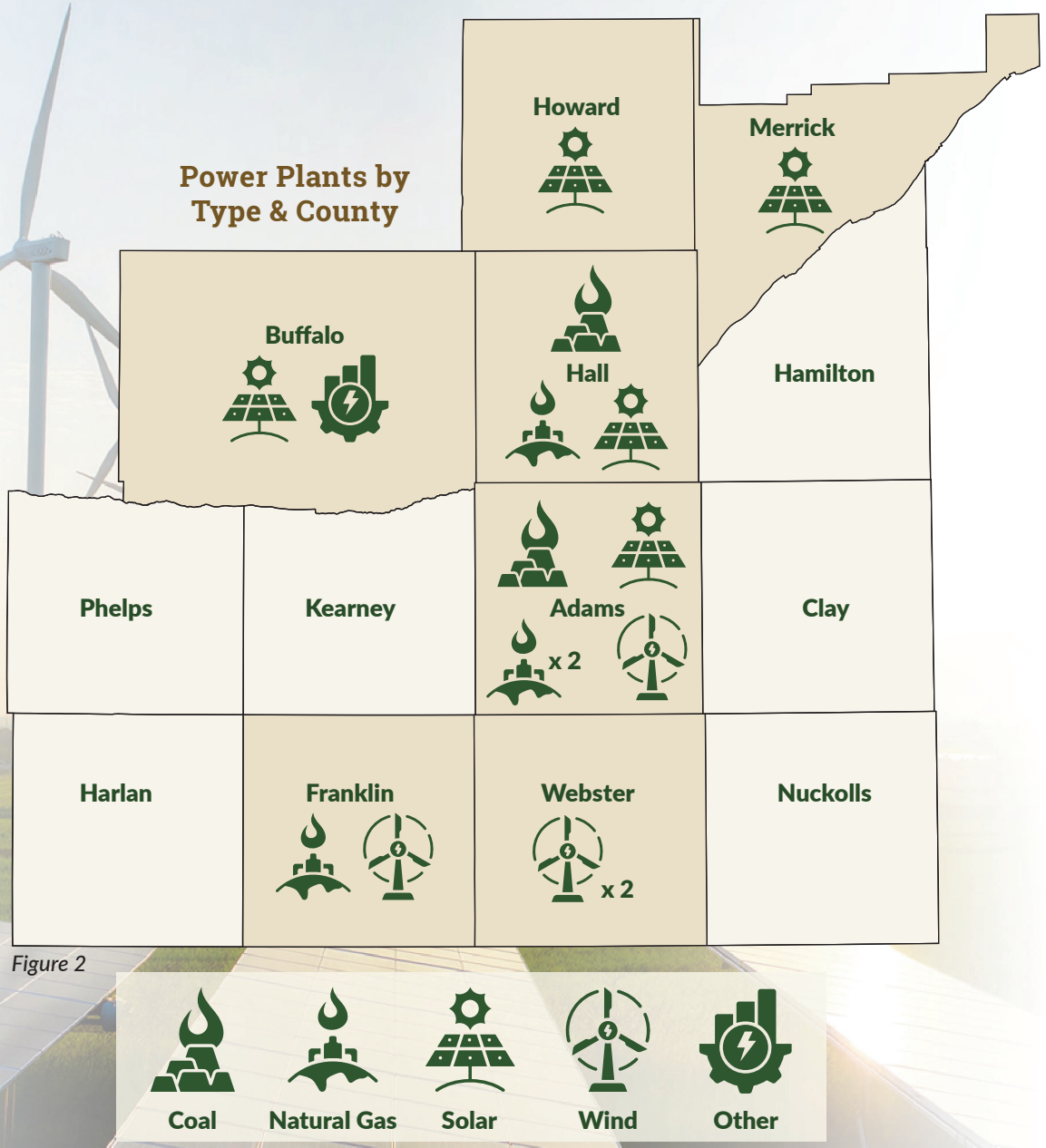


Figure 2

Sources: [4]Hanna, Thomas M., "Community-Owned Energy: How Nebraska Became the Only State to Bring Everyone Power From a Public Grid," Yes! Solutions Journalism (January 30, 2015): https://www.yesmagazine.org/economy/2015/01/30/nebraskas-community-owned-energy, [5]National Association of Counties (NACo): County Energy Explorer Energy Profiles – Areas analyzed = 13 SCEDD counties, [6]Nebraska Department of Water, Energy, and Environment (DWEE): Nebraska Community Solar Power Generation (updated May 6, 2026). Photo: PG Studio. Adobe Stock. https://stock.adobe.com/images/2026764094

Infrastructure - Higher Education

Within the SCEDD region are three institutions of higher learning: the University of Nebraska at Kearney (UNK), Central Community College (CCC), and Hastings College. In Fall 2024, the combined enrollment of these three institutions was 13,764; about one-half of these were enrolled at CCC.[7] This makes up almost 10% of statewide undergraduate enrollment.

While CCC enrollment increased by 9% from 2014 to 2024, enrollment decreased for both UNK (-15%) and Hastings College (-21%) over the same time frame. This increase in CCC enrollment and decreases in UNK and Hastings College enrollment mirror nationwide trends: increased enrollments at community colleges and decreased or stagnant enrollments at 4-year undergraduate institutions.[8]



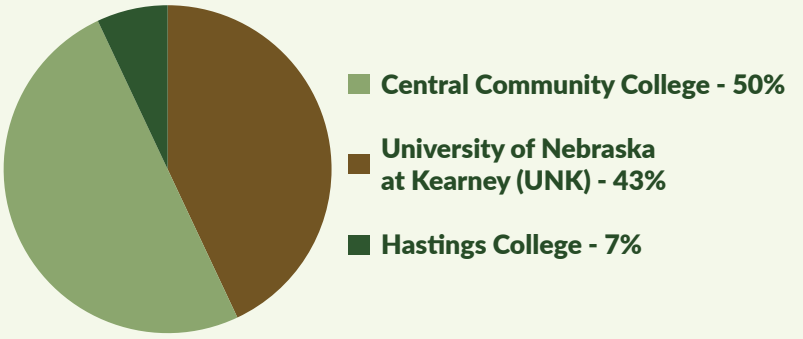


Chart 16



[8]Note: A majority of CCC locations are within the SCEDD region including Grand Island and Hastings Campus, Holdrege and Kearney Center's, additional locations are Columbus, Lexington, and Ord.

Sources: Nebraska Coordinating Commission for Postsecondary Education; "2025 Factual Look at Higher Education in Nebraska: Enrollment Fall 2014 through Fall 2024" Enrollment Dashboard (updated 9/17/25), [7]National Student Clearinghouse Research Center (NSC): Final Fall Enrollment Trends (January 15, 2026). Photos: May 2026 Graduation Court, UNMC at UNK, Source – UNMC. Students on Grand Island CCC campus, Source – CCC

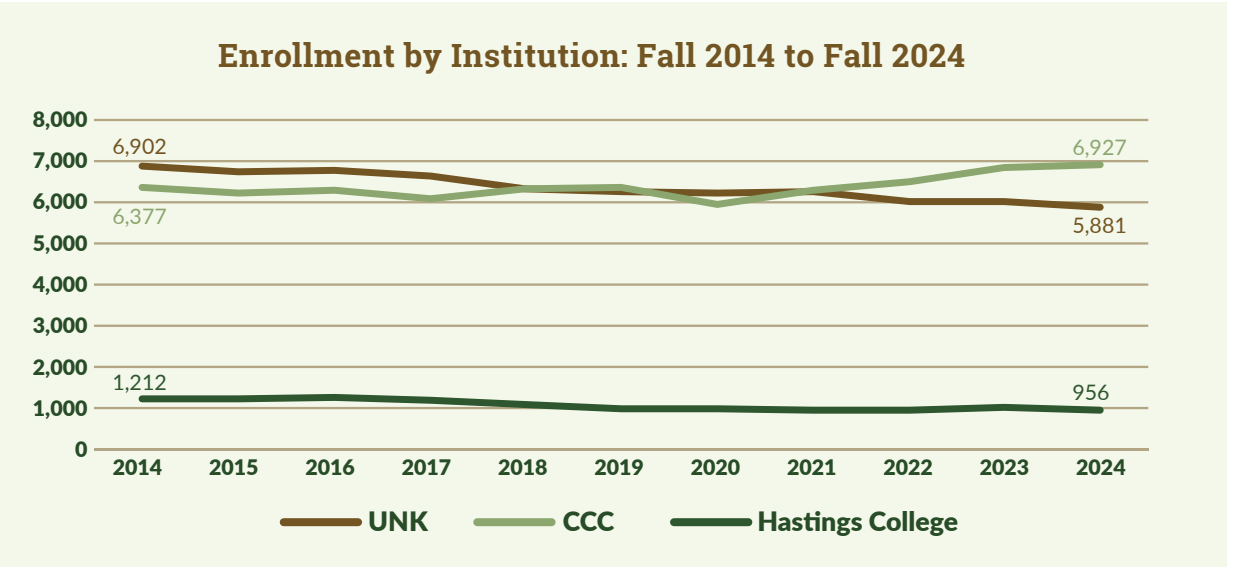


Chart 17

Infrastructure - Broadband

Broadband connectivity has become essential infrastructure for economic growth, workforce participation, education, health care access, and quality of life. The Federal Communications Commission (FCC) identifies broadband service with download speeds of at least 100 Mbps and upload speeds of at least 20 Mbps as the minimum standard needed to support remote work, entrepreneurship, innovation, online learning, access to digital health care services, and modern quality-of-life expectations.

Fiber is widely considered to be the fastest and most reliable technology commonly available as it can reach speeds up to 10 Gbps and is resilient to severe weather conditions when compared to other types of technology. Fixed wireless standard service varies in common range of 100 to 200 Mbps download speeds, notably less than fiber but more affordable deployment costs.

Overall, the SCEDD region performs well relative to national benchmarks. Access to broadband service meeting FCC standards is generally comparable to the United States as a whole, while the region significantly outperforms national averages in fiber broadband availability. This strong digital infrastructure positions the region to compete for residents, remote workers, entrepreneurs, and businesses that require reliable high-speed internet connectivity.

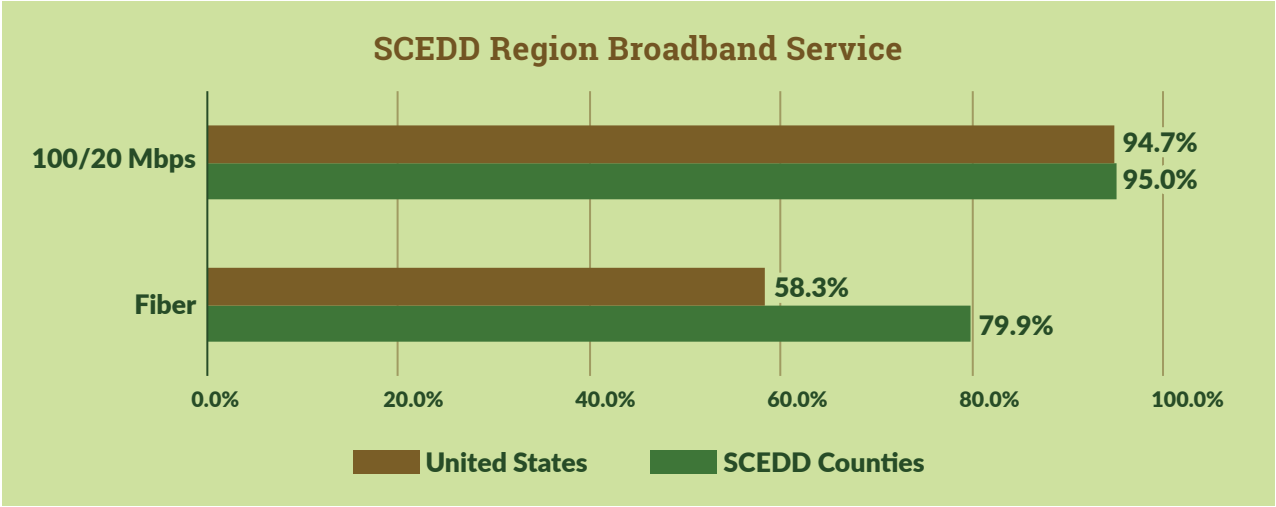


Chart 18

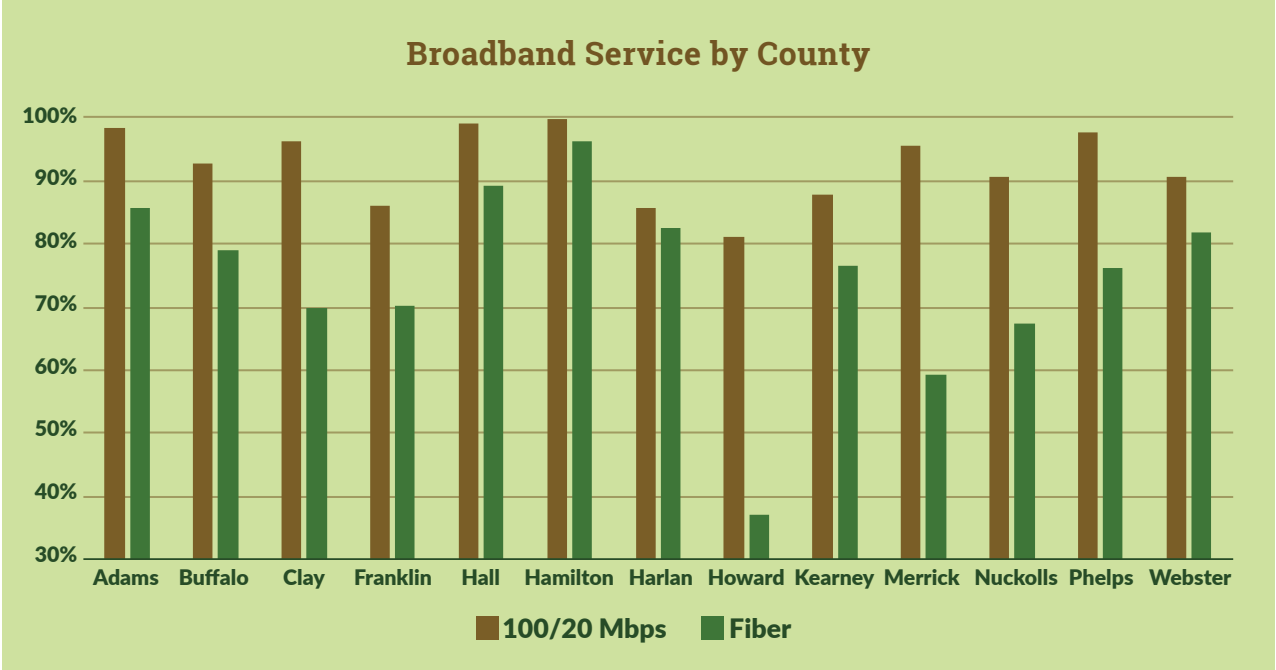


Chart 19

Despite these strengths, broadband access varies considerably across the region. Fiber broadband availability ranges from approximately 96 percent of locations in Hamilton County to 37 percent in Howard County. Counties located along or near Interstate 80 generally exhibit higher levels of fiber service, while more rural and geographically isolated areas have lower availability. These disparities highlight the importance of continued investment in broadband infrastructure to ensure that all communities can participate fully in the digital economy.

In some rural areas, the terrain and distance from existing service locations are obstacles to the adoption of fiber optic broadband. Local fixed wireless (LFW) or satellite are cost-effective alternatives, but might not provide speeds and capacity that are provided by fiber optic broadband.[9] Figure 3 (from the Nebraska Broadband Office: NBO) shows areas that, as of 2026, are Defined Project Areas (DPAs) currently being bid on by various service providers. Following completion of service to these DPAs, all areas within the SCEDD region should meet the FCC's minimum standard of 100/20 Mbps. Chart 20 shows the number of locations where, according to the NBO, broadband service implementation is in progress. Completing broadband implementation in the remaining service areas will help meet the current minimum standard in the short term, but long-term competitiveness will require continued investment in future-proof technologies that can meet growing capacity, reliability, and speed demands.

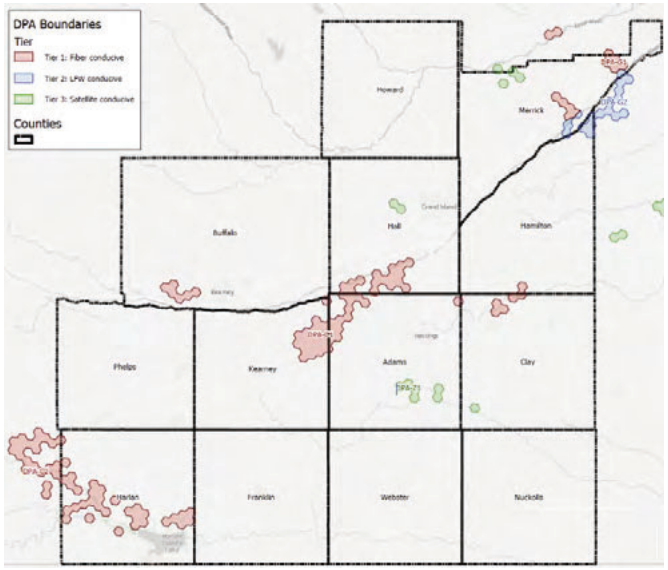


Figure 3

"While significant progress has been made in improving average broadband service in Nebraska, it is evident that further progress remains to be made in connecting outstanding underserved and unserved locations."

Nebraska Broadband Office

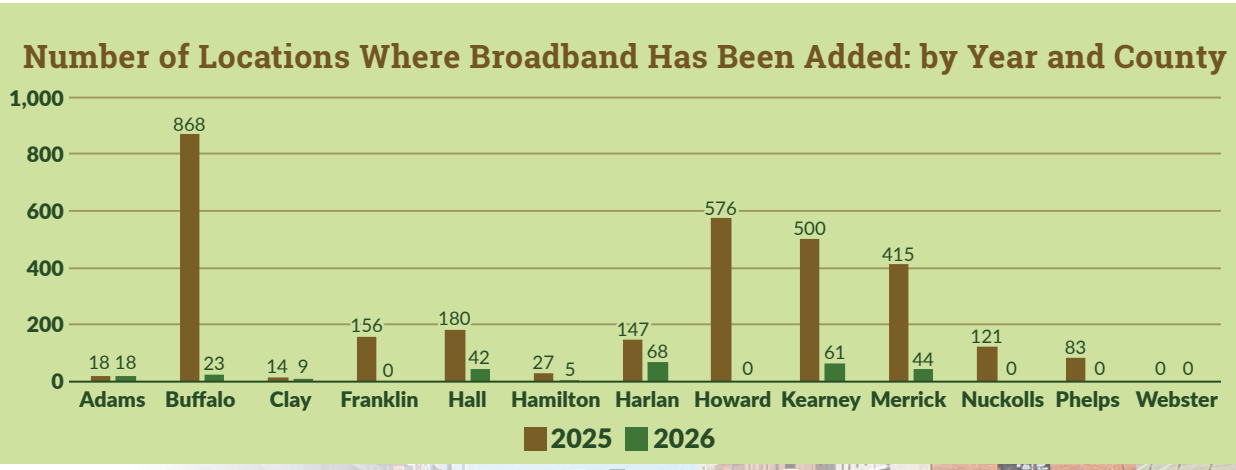
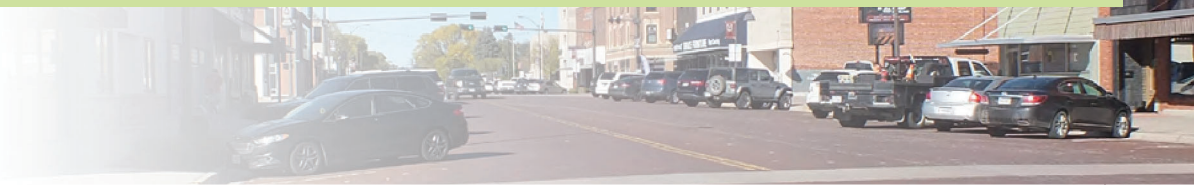


Chart 20



Sources: Center on Rural Innovation (CORI) Economic Development Tool; "Primary counties" = 13 SCEDD counties (from December 2025 release of FCC National Broadband Map), [9]BroadbandNow: Types of Internet Connections Explained: Fiber, Cable, DSL and More (updated Septembe 15, 2025), Figure 3: Nebraska Broadband Office graphic (provided 7/27/26), Nebraska Broadband Office data (data provided 7/27/26), 2025-nbo-annual-report-on-the-status-of-broadband-development.pdf. Photo: Downtown Holdrege, Source – LeAnn Jochum

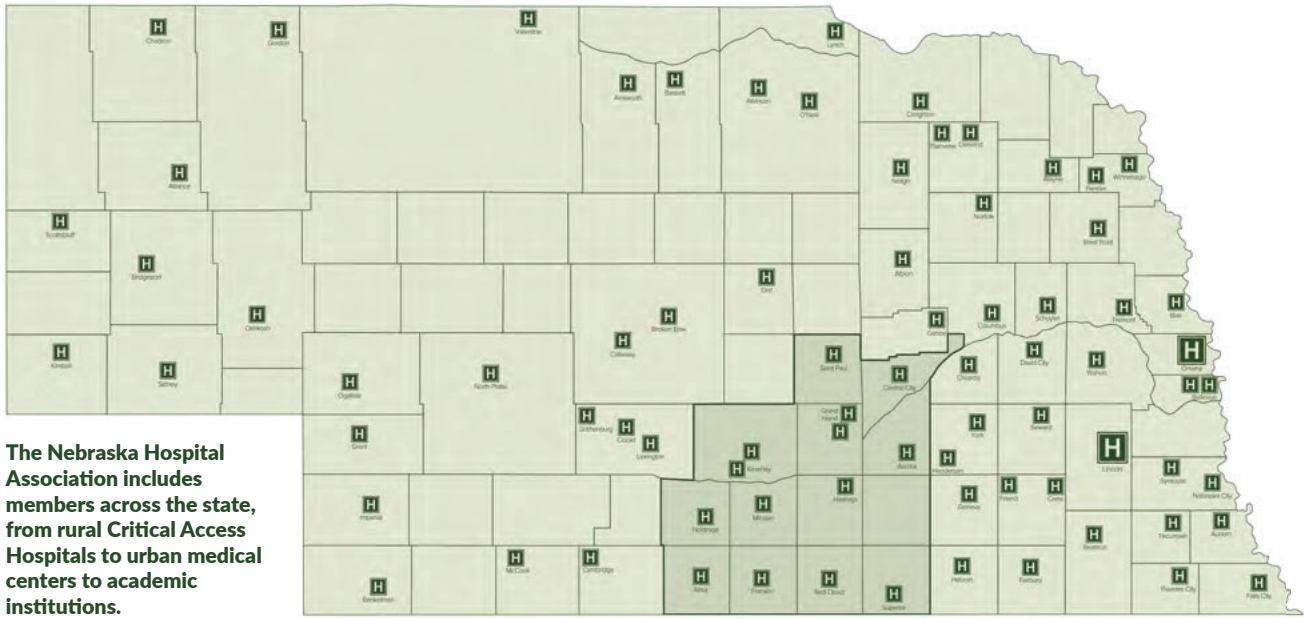
Infrastructure - Healthcare

There are 14 SCEDD-area regional hospitals that are members of the Nebraska Hospital Association (Figure 4). These hospitals are distributed across 12 counties. Each county has exactly one hospital except for Buffalo (2), Hall (2), and Clay (0).

The 14 hospitals include five acute care unit (ACU) hospitals and nine critical access hospitals (CAHs) (Table 3). ACU hospitals can provide short-term medical treatment for patients with severe or urgent health issues.[10] CAH hospitals are federally designated rural facilities that are typically smaller and provide basic and emergency services.[11]

The region also has 26 long term care facilities (mostly dual certified skilled nursing facility/ nursing facility institutions). There is at least one long-term care facility in each county (Chart 21).

The Nebraska Hospital Association Member Hospitals



The Nebraska Hospital Association includes members across the state, from rural Critical Access Hospitals to urban medical centers to academic institutions.

Figure 4





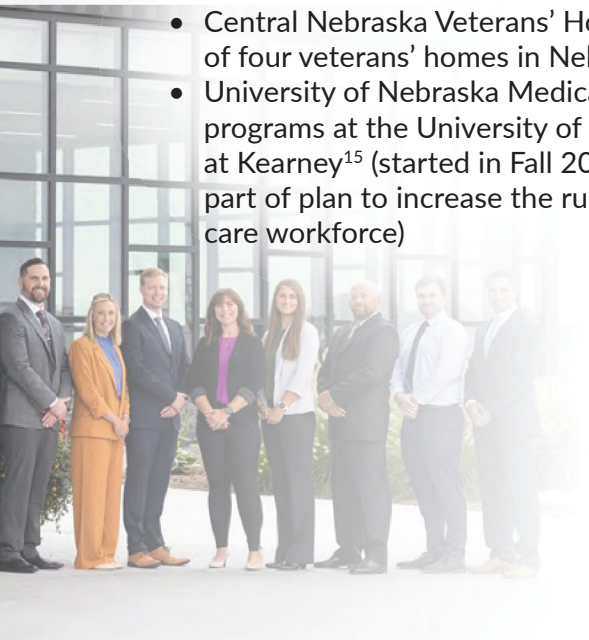
Sources: Nebraska Hospital Association; Member Hospitals (as viewed on 6/25/26), Nebraska Department of Health and Human Services; State of Nebraska Hospitals Roster (updated 6/15/26), [10]East Adams Rural Healthcare: "What Is an Acute Care Hospital?" (February 15, 2024), [11]Rural Health Information hub (RHIHub): Critical Access Hospitals (CAHs) (last updated 5/11/26)26). State of Nebraska Long Term Care Facilities Roster (updated 6/15/26), [12]Nebraska Department of Health and Human Services; Nebraska Local Health Departments (updated September 2024), [13]Nebraska Department of Health and Human Services; State of Nebraska Hospitals Roster (updated 6/15/26), [14]Nebraska Department of Veterans' Affairs; Central Nebraska Veterans' Home, [15]University of Nebraska Medical Center; UNMC Kearney, Photos: New Rural Health Education Complex on UNMC at UNK Campus, Spring 2026, Source – UNMC. Merrick Medical Center Physician Team, Source – Facebook

The State of Nebraska provides funding for 18 regional public health departments to oversee preventive and community health programs and services. This includes the coordination of the response to public health emergencies such as COVID and the aftermath of natural disasters such as floods and fires. Four of the public health departments have jurisdiction over SCEDD counties.[12]

- Two Rivers: Buffalo, Franklin, Harlan, Kearney, Phelps
- South Heartland: Adams, Clay, Nuckolls, Webster
- Central: Hall, Hamilton, Merrick
- Loup Basin: Howard

Other notable SCEDD region health care/ health-related institutions include:

- CHI Richard Young Behavioral Health: one of three psychiatric hospitals in Nebraska[13]
- Central Nebraska Veterans' Home: one of four veterans' homes in Nebraska[14]
- University of Nebraska Medical Center programs at the University of Nebraska at Kearney[15] (started in Fall 2025 as part of plan to increase the rural health care workforce)



NHA Member Hospitals in SCEDD Region

County	Hospital	City	Type
Adams	Mary Lanning Healthcare	Hastings	ACU
Buffalo	CHI Health Good Samaritan	Kearney	ACU
Buffalo	Kearney Regional Medical Center	Kearney	ACU
Clay	None		
Franklin	Franklin County Memorial	Franklin	CAH
Hall	CHI Health St. Francis	Grand Island	ACU
Hall	Grand Island Regional Medical Center	Grand Island	ACU
Hamilton	Memorial Community Health	Aurora	CAH
Harlan	Harlan County Health System	Alma	CAH
Howard	Howard County Medical Center	St. Paul	CAH
Kearney	Kearney County Health Services	Minden	CAH
Merrick	Merrick Medical Center	Central City	CAH
Nuckolls	Brodstone Healthcare	Superior	CAH
Phelps	Phelps Memorial Health Center	Holdrege	CAH
Webster	Webster County Community Hospital	Red Cloud	CAH

Table 3

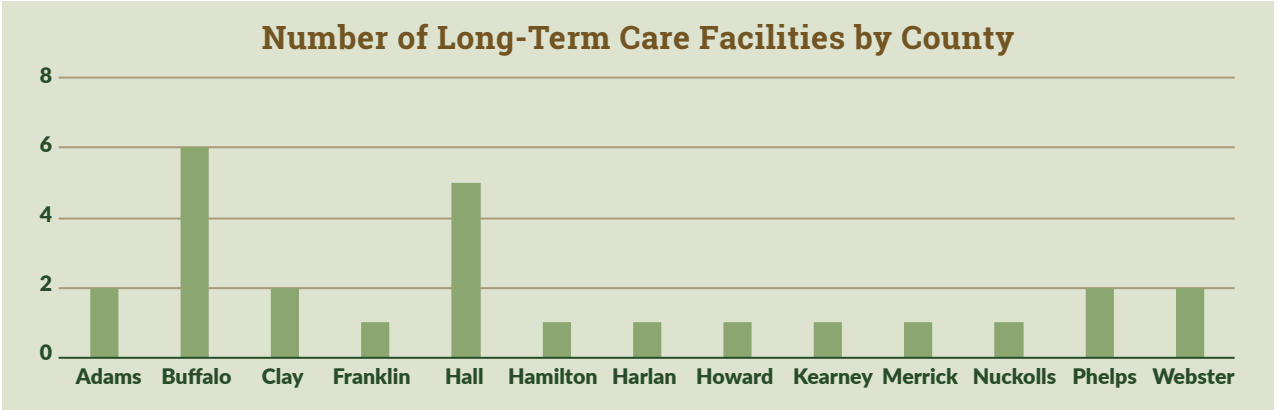


Chart 21

SWOT SURVEY

Overview

In November 2025, SCEDD surveyed the following stakeholders from the 13 SCEDD counties:

- Municipal clerks, mayors/chairs, and administrators
- County supervisors/commissioners
- Economic developers from the municipal or county levels

Seventy-one (71) people responded, with representation from each county.

Survey respondents were asked to rate the impact of each possible strength, weakness, opportunity, and threat on a 1-5 scale, with 5 being the most impactful. The aggregate scores for each evaluated strength, weakness, opportunity, and threat were summed and then divided by the number of responses to determine an average rating. The strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats are presented in the following sections in descending order of average rating to show the categories most impactful.



STRENGTHS

Rank		Rating
1	Agricultural Sector	4.64
2	Natural Resources: Groundwater, Surface Water, Soil, and Farmland	4.49
3	Quality of Life	4.31
4T	Cost of Living	4.13
4T	Housing Access and Affordability	4.13
6	Skilled Workforce	4.00
7	Outdoor Recreation/Tourism	3.49
8	Transportation Infrastructure	3.48
9	Post High-School Education: College, Trade, etc.	3.37
10	Manufacturing/ Food Processing Sector	3.28

The top three strengths identified by survey participants were the SCEDD region's agricultural sector, its natural resources, and its quality of life. This is understandable as SCEDD is composed primarily of rural counties. Respondents were less inclined to consider workforce education or the manufacturing sector as strengths.

WEAKNESSES

Rank		Rating
1	Lack of Affordable, Entry-Level Housing	4.24
2	Lack of Childcare Services	4.06
3	Aging/Dilapidated Housing Inventory	4.04
4	Aging Infrastructure	4.01
5	Aging/Shrinking Population	3.96
6	Difficulty Accessing Capital for Startups/Entrepreneurs	3.63
7	Low Wages	3.50
8	Outmigration (i.e., Brain Drain)	3.37
9	Over-Reliance on Agriculture/Manufacturing	3.30
10	Limited High Speed Broadband Fiber	3.18
11	Long Distance from Specialized Healthcare Facilities	2.96

The SCEDD region's three top weaknesses involve housing or childcare. These weaknesses are connected to longstanding depopulation concerns in that the lack of affordable, entry-level housing and childcare services make it more difficult to attract or retain younger people starting their careers. This negatively impacts community and workforce development.

OPPORTUNITIES

Rank		Rating
1	Creation of New Housing Units	4.36
2	Attraction/Retention of Young Families/Workers	4.33
3	Housing Rehabilitation	4.15
4	Expansion of Childcare Availability	4.05
5	High Pay, High Demand Workforce Development	3.95
6	Increased Community Collaboration	3.92
7	Marketing/Promotion of Region's Assets	3.89
8T	Expansion of High-Speed Broadband Fiber	3.35
8T	Improved Healthcare Accessibility	3.35
8T	Improved/Upgraded Outdoor Recreation/Tourism	3.35

The top opportunities address the top weaknesses. While survey participants see weaknesses in depopulation and the lack of affordable entry-level housing and childcare services, they also see opportunities to attract or retain young families/workers by creating new or rehabbed existing housing and by expanding childcare availability. Satisfactorily addressing these opportunities will, in the long run, positively impact community and workforce development.

THREATS

Rank		Rating
1	Aging Population	4.18
2	Loss of Young Adults to Metro Areas	4.01
3	Rising Healthcare Costs	3.91
4	Workforce Shortages	3.86
5	Global Economic Forces (e.g., Inflation, Supply Chain Distribution, Tariffs)	3.78
6	Federal/State Policy Changes/Shifts	3.60
7	Inadequate Infrastructure (e.g., Electricity, Transportation, Water)	3.59
8	Water Scarcity/Groundwater Depletion	3.12
9	Natural Disasters	2.94
10	Weather Threats	2.86

The two top threats involve depopulation. Reflecting themes from the results of weaknesses and opportunities sections, survey respondents are especially concerned over the aging population and the loss of young adults to metro areas. They are much less concerned with low probability/high impact events such as weather threats or natural disasters.



Photos: SCEDD Economic Development Forum, Stakeholders addressing SWOT Analysis, Source – SCEDD. Aerial View of Gibbon, Nebraska (2026). Wikimedia Commons. https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Gibbon,_Nebraska_aerial_2026.jpg.

ECONOMIC RESILIENCE

Three distinct but overlapping aspects of economic resilience are national risk, community resilience, and industry diversity. This CEDS addresses each.

National Risk Index

- FEMA developed the National Risk Index (NRI)–a metric comprised of 18 indicators–to identify communities at risk for natural hazards.
- Each of the 13 SCEDD counties' NRI is low: six of them are categorized as "relatively low" while seven of them are "very low." While major disaster declarations are periodically made in the SCEDD region (e.g., winter storm in May 2025, severe storms/wind/tornadoes/flooding in September 2024), the NRIs indicate the chances of a natural disaster occurring in the SCEDD region are much lower than for the rest of the United States.
- When natural disasters inevitably occur, the greater SCEDD community will function as it always has during and after previous disaster events: as a collective resource and information clearinghouse to provide affected communities awareness of available resources (including grants) to get through the immediate aftermath of the disaster event and then to help rebuild.



Sources: [16]National Economic Resilience Data Explorer (NERDE) (from US Census Bureau's 2020 Decennial Census and ACS 2020-2024 5-Year Estimates): Area analyzed = 13 SCEDD counties. Photo: Downtown demolition in Orleans, Source – Rena Conner

Community Resilience Challenges Index

- FEMA also developed the Community Resilience Challenges Index (CRCI)–a metric comprised of 22 indicators–to evaluate resilience by percentile across the country. The metric ranges from 1-100, where 1 is least resilient and 100 is most resilient.
- The 22 indicators are grouped into six categories: population, household, housing, healthcare, economic, and community.[16] Housing is one of the priority areas in this CEDS. Two indicators–population 65 and older and median household income–are persistent issues facing the SCEDD counties that indirectly affect housing and two other priority areas: childcare and industry/workforce development.
- Chart 22 shows how the SCEDD region faces significant community resilience challenges. A CRCI of 50 is average. All 13 counties have a CRCI of below 40; five of them have a CRCI of below 10. As the CRCI functions as a percentile ranking (e.g., where a percentile of 90 means being worse than 10 percent and better than 90 percent of the group), communities with a CRCI of below 10 have more dire community resilience challenges than at least 90 percent of all counties.
- Community development is another one of the priority areas in this CEDS. One of the goals of community development is to help communities better access resources that help them build and maintain community wealth. This will help them become more resilient to community challenges.

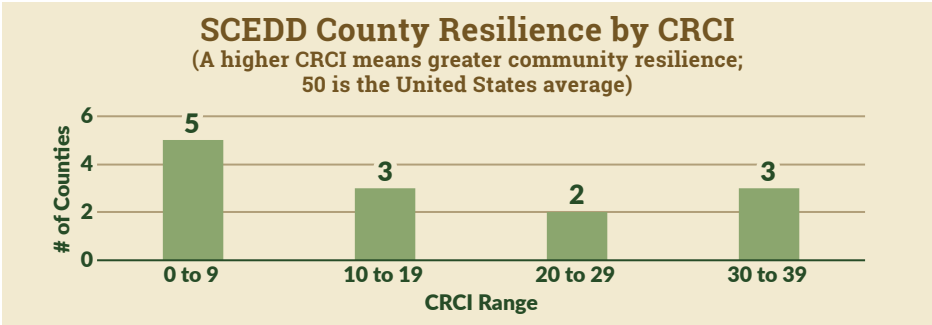


Chart 22

Herfindahl-Hirschman Index (HHI)

The Herfindahl-Hirschman Index (HHI) is a metric measuring industry diversity where a higher HHI means less industry diversity.

- Industry diversity reduces dependence on any single sector. Conversely, lack of industry diversity increases the dependence on a single dominant sector and decreases resilience to employment shocks and economic fluctuations.
- The SCEDD region's aggregate HHI of 1,830 is much higher than the United States' HHI of 1,290. Each of SCEDD's thirteen counties has an HHI of above 1,290 (Chart 23). However, the lack of industry diversity isn't uniform across all 13 counties; counties with larger cities close to the I-80 corridor have lower HHIs (and higher industry diversity) than counties further away.
- Economic development in sectors aside from agriculture will make the SCEDD region more economically diverse and resilient.
- One way to improve economic resilience is to help small businesses access loans and other resources. This will aid in both their growth and the diversification of the region's non-agricultural sectors.



Source: Center on Rural Innovation (CORI) Economic Development Tool; "Primary counties" = 13 SCEDD counties (using 2019 and 2024 American Community Survey 5-year estimates. Photo: Kenesaw Public Schools Ag Class, Source – Village of Kenesaw

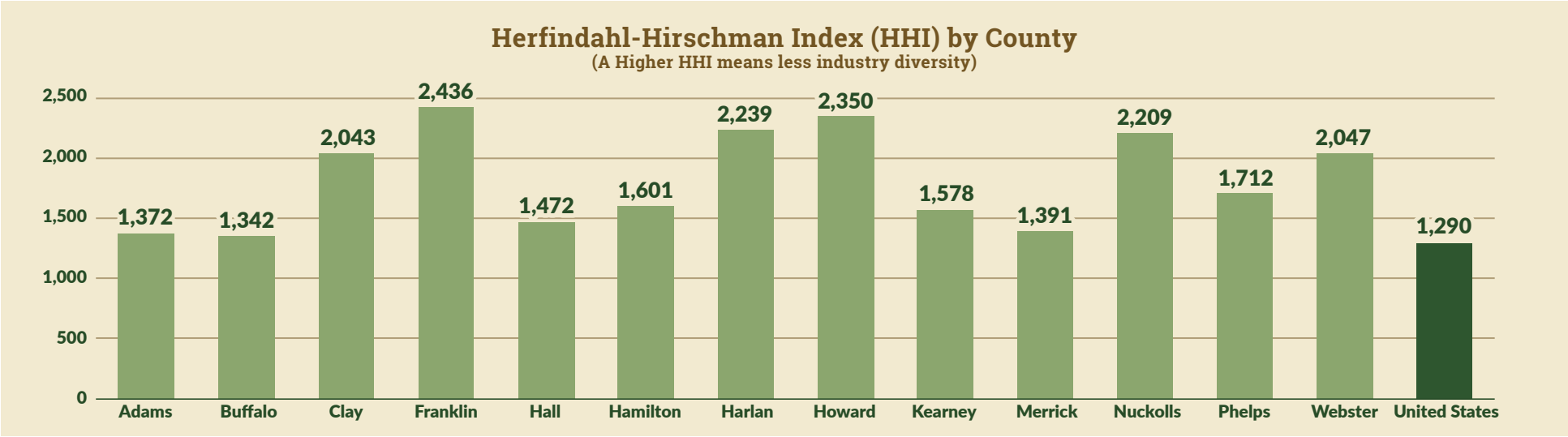


Chart 23

STRATEGIC DIRECTION/ACTION PLAN

Priority #1: Community Development/Quality of Life

Summary: SCEDD counties have a higher than average quality of life. One way SCEDD counties maintain a higher quality of life is by utilizing grants (e.g., CDBG, NET, Brownfields) for community redevelopment efforts.

The County Health Rankings & Roadmaps website defines well-being to include quality of life. To gauge quality of life, it combines four metrics: life span, physical health, mental health, and life satisfaction.[17] With few exceptions, Nebraska counties rate better in quality of life than the average United States county.

SCEDD counties also have slightly better population health and well-being ratings than the average Nebraska county (Chart 24).

- Seven SCEDD counties score about the same as the average Nebraska county.
- Four of them rate slightly better: Clay, Hamilton, Howard, and Phelps (in dark green)
- Two of them rate slightly worse: Harlan and Webster (in lighter green)

2025 Nebraska Population Health & Well-Being

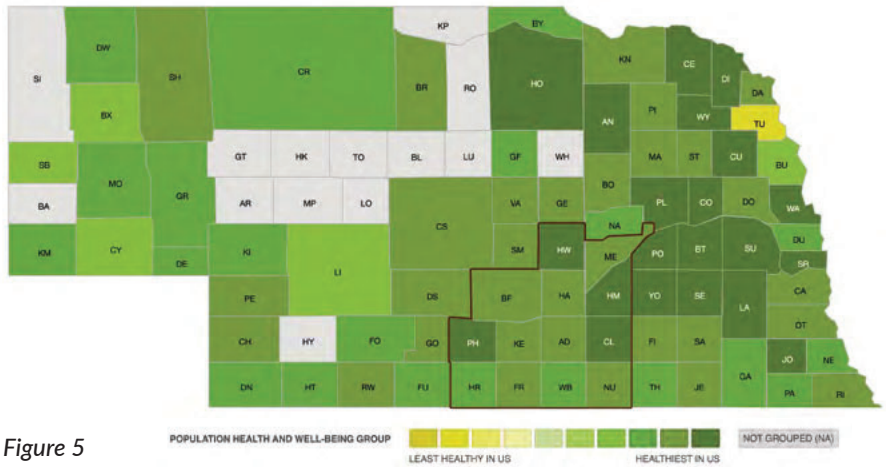


Figure 5

SCEDD County's Population Health and Well-Being Rating Relative to Average Nebraska County

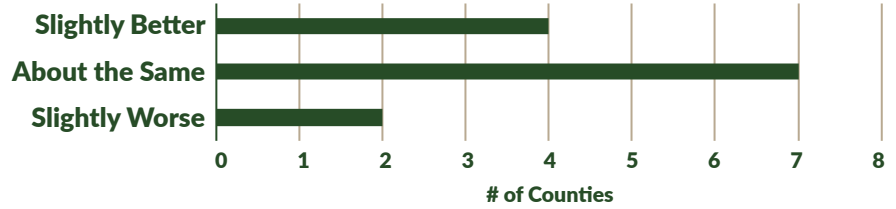


Chart 24

In the University of Nebraska-Lincoln's most recent poll of rural residents, strong majorities of respondents rate their communities as friendly (78%), supportive (67%), and trusting (62%).[18] Rural residents also have an increased sense of connectedness to their communities. According to the poll, respondents living in smaller communities are more likely than those living in larger communities to agree that the community fulfills their needs and that they feel like a member of the community.

According to a 2023 survey of greater Nebraska youth, the three most important community traits of their ideal community are (1) safety from violence and theft, (2) good schools; and (3) proximity to family.[19]

> **"Having an outside voice to come in and have those conversations adds value. The community feels like they're being listened to."**
>
> ***Michael Krings, City Administrator***
> ***City of Minden***

Sources: [17]County Health Rankings & Roadmaps; Nebraska Data by County (2025) – Areas analyzed = 13 SCEDD counties, County Health Rankings & Roadmaps; Nebraska Data by County (2025) – Areas analyzed = 13 SCEDD counties, [18]University of Nebraska at Lincoln: "2025 Nebraska Rural Poll: Community", [19]University of Nebraska at Omaha: "2023 Greater Nebraska Youth Survey" (August 2023)

SCEDD, along with Nebraska's seven other economic development districts (EDDs), contributes strategic direction and advocacy through the Nebraska Regional Officials Council (NROC). NROC's Impact Map demonstrates programs and projects where EDDs have collaborated with communities.[20] To view the NROC Impact Map, scan the QR code. SCEDD encourages community leaders to visit the map to discover successful project opportunities and new possibilities.

NROC Nebraska Regional Officials Council

Scan the QR Code to view the NROC Impact Map

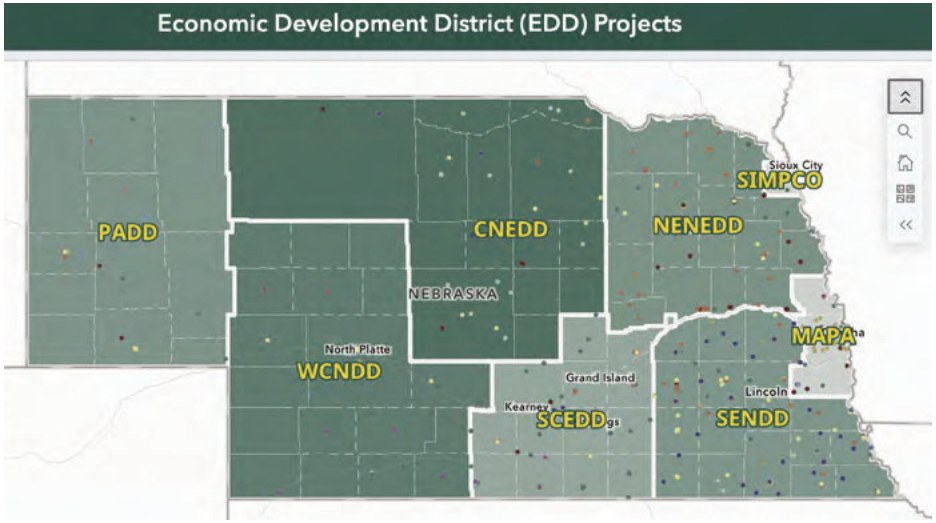


Figure 6 Visit nrocne.com

"You need that communication. You need that involvement amongst leaders of your community to actually help with vision. Community engagement is very important."

Jeff Hofaker, Executive Director
Phelps County Development Corporation

"Having that fresh and outside perspective is always helpful when you're working on community revitalization and particularly with underutilized assets."

Cassie Paben, Economic Development Director
City of Superior



[20]Nebraska Regional Officials Council (NROC): "Impact Map" (viewed 7/29/26). Photo: City of Kearney hike and bike trail, Source – Buffalo County Development Council

Priority #1: Community Development/Quality of Life

Evaluation Framework:

The objectives and action items presented below are listed from higher to lower rank order based on feedback received from stakeholders. For example: Objective #1 is a higher priority than Objective #2; the first action item under any objective is a higher priority than any other action item under that objective.

Objective #1: Community Engagement

- Assist communities with grant applications.
- Educate local leaders on potential funding resources to address community needs.
- Work with local leaders to identify the next right steps.
- Conduct needs assessments and visioning meetings to determine community priorities.

Objective #2: Community Revitalization

- Support local leaders with administration and project management of awarded grants.
- Help communities implement project ideas.
- Identify, assess, and redevelop Brownfields properties and other underutilized sites for an accurate inventory.
- Remove vacant properties to productive use by reducing barriers to investment and supporting housing and business development.
- Convene meetings with key stakeholders to engage in economic resiliency and contingency planning.

Objective #3: Improve/Promote Quality of Life

- Educate communities on resources that enhance livability (e.g., Nebraska.findhelp.com, USDA Rural Development programs, etc.).
- Promote the utilization of existing state resources (e.g., Nebraska Passport-Stop, Heritage Tourism initiatives, etc.).
- Track quality of life improvements (e.g., reduced number of vacant homes, increased number of children 18 and under, etc.).
- Assist communities in providing amenities that improve quality of life.
- Convene meetings with key stakeholders (including youth) to identify ways to promote quality of life both to residents and outsiders.

Potential Partners

- Nebraska Department of Economic Development
- League of Nebraska Municipalities
- Nebraska Regional Officials Council
- Nebraska Department of Water Environment & Energy
- Nebraska Emergency Management Agency
- USDA Rural Development
- Economic Development Administration
- Engineering & Planning Firms
- Chambers of Commerce
- Local Economic Developers
- Education Institutions: College/Universities/High School Clubs & Organizations
- Creative Arts Districts
- Charitable Organizations/Foundations
- County-Elected Officials
- Local Natural Resource Districts
- US Environmental Protection Agency (EPA)
- Kansas State University's Technical Assistance to Brownfields (KSU-TAB)
- Community action networks and partnerships

Metrics

- Number of meetings convened
- Number of community needs assessments
- Number of town visioning meetings
- Number of grant applications
- Number of grants approved
- Number and types of grants received without SCEDD support
- Number of communities served
- Number of quality of life improvements
- Number of volunteers/volunteer hours
- Amount of donated/matching funds to awarded grants
- Wellness statistics (tracking change over time)
- Number of Brownfields sites identified

Methodology:

To develop the evaluation framework of the community development/quality of life area, SCEDD conducted an online survey of interested stakeholders to rank each objective and action. The 13 people who participated in the survey were acting as elected or appointed community leaders. SCEDD then hosted two separate online meetings that included ten subcommittee members to discuss the survey results, potential partners, and useful metrics as well as to provide qualitative feedback.

Priority #2: Housing

Summary: In the 13-county SCEDD region, housing is viewed as both a strength and a weakness. From the SWOT survey, "housing access and affordability" was the 5th-highest-ranked strength. Yet "lack of affordable, entry-level housing" and "aging/dilapidated housing inventory" were the 1st and 3rd-ranked weaknesses.

Housing access and affordability was considered a strength. This is especially true for households that are older, have a higher income, and/or are already in a right-sized house. SCEDD county home ownership rates are higher than in Nebraska overall (Chart 25). The home ownership rates in seven counties exceed 78%; home ownership rates between 63% and 69% are considered healthy, striking a balance between a market for homeowners and rental units for residential mobility.[21] Rent is also lower in the SCEDD counties than in Nebraska generally (Chart 26).

"We need workforce housing the average person can afford. It is a challenge for blue collar and entry-level workers."

Alyssa Heagy, Former Executive Director, Next Point Home Development, Central Nebraska Nonprofit Developer



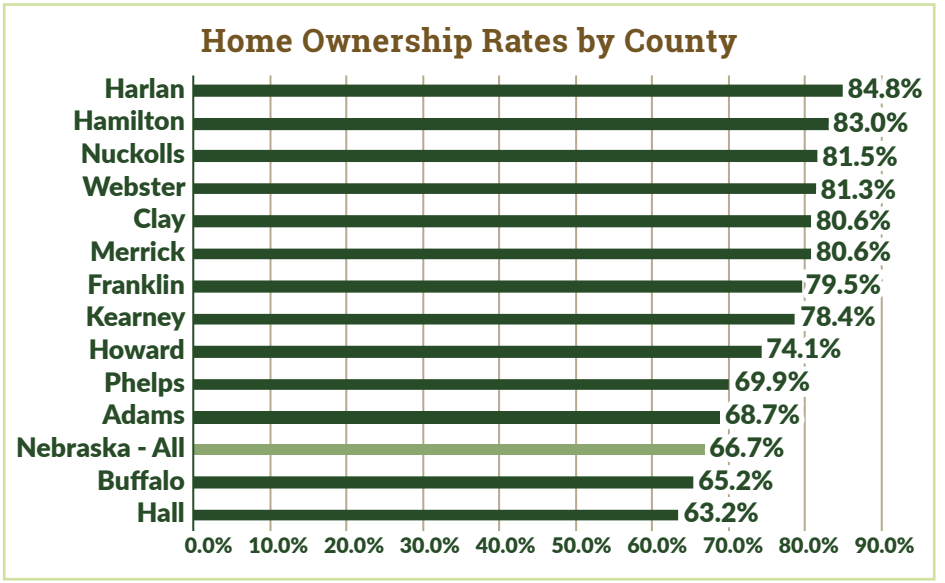


Chart 25

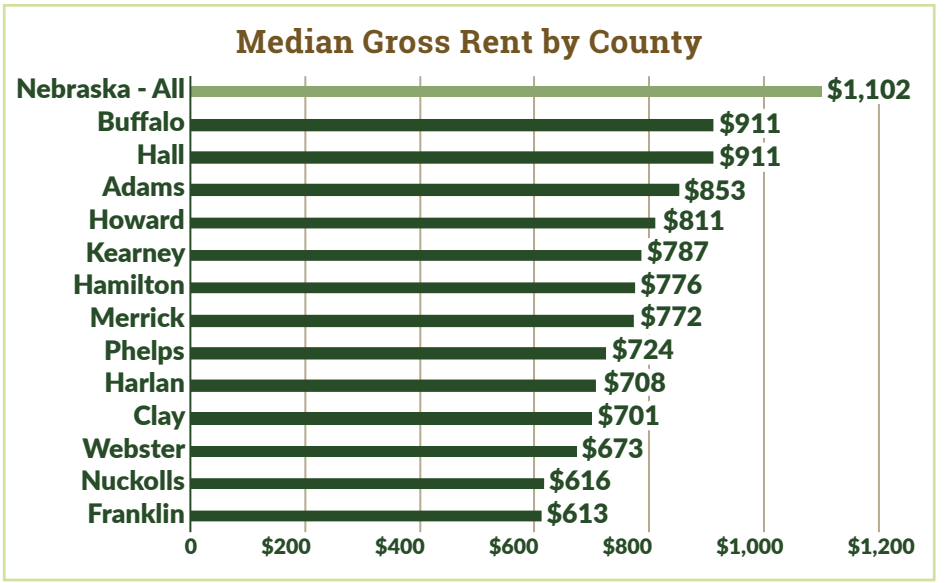


Chart 26

Sources: [21]USA Facts: "What is the home ownership rate in the U.S.?" (Updated 4/14/26), U.S. Census Bureau County Profiles (1/7/26 analysis), U.S. Census Bureau County Profiles (12/1/25 analysis), Zillow, Realtor.com (12/17/25 analysis). Photo: Multi-family housing construction in Hastings, Source – City of Hastings

"Reducing the risk of home building in bedroom communities is a need. We cannot do it alone and need to offset the risk, so they build in smaller communities that need housing."

Dusty Newton, Administrator
Village of Elm Creek

Lack of affordable, entry-level housing was identified as a weakness. This is understandable for households that are younger, have a lower income, are starting a career, and/or need to relocate. Using the percentage of 0–1-bedroom occupied housing units as a proxy for availability of entry-level housing, Chart 27 shows the severe lack of available entry-level housing in many SCEDD counties.

Chart 28 shows the mean (average) asking prices of houses for sale in a select group of SCEDD counties. These counties were selected because, other than Clay County, they're further away from I-80 and presumably have a lower cost of living.

Whether housing is a strength or weakness depends in large part on location and what population is being served. Housing is more accessible, affordable, and appropriate (e.g., right sized for the person's income/life stage) in some counties and for some age/income groups than for others. Though there is no "one size fits all" solution that will address all housing problems (e.g., housing needs in Adams, Buffalo, and Hall Counties might differ from those in counties further away from I-80), the need for entry-level housing is present across all SCEDD counties.



Source: U.S. Census Bureau County Profiles (12/1/25 analysis) Photo: McHargue Subdivision in Central City, Source – LeAnn Jochum

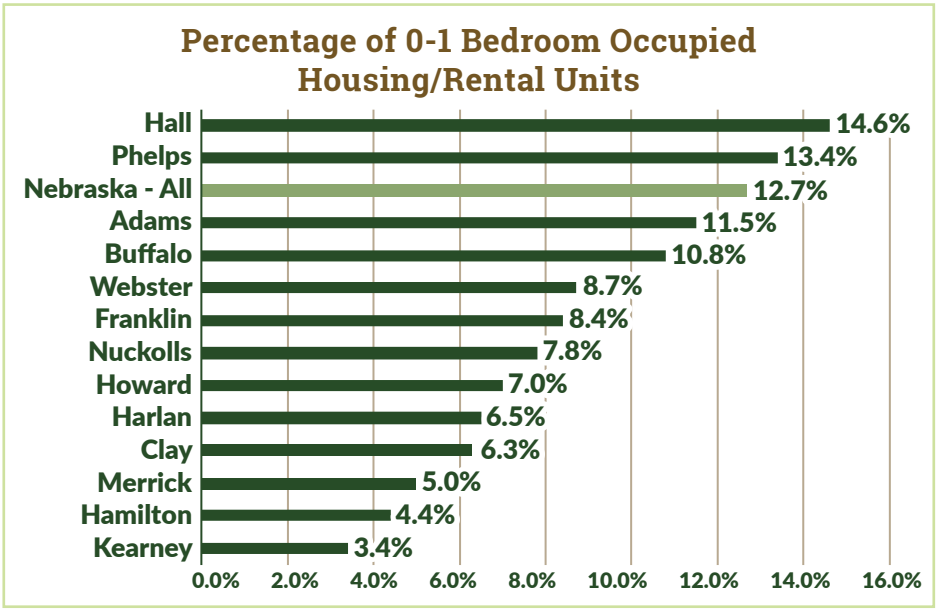


Chart 27

"Workforce housing prices are rising despite new builds. Supply is increasing but demand is too, keeping prices high."

Miles McGinnis, Economic Development Director, City of Central City

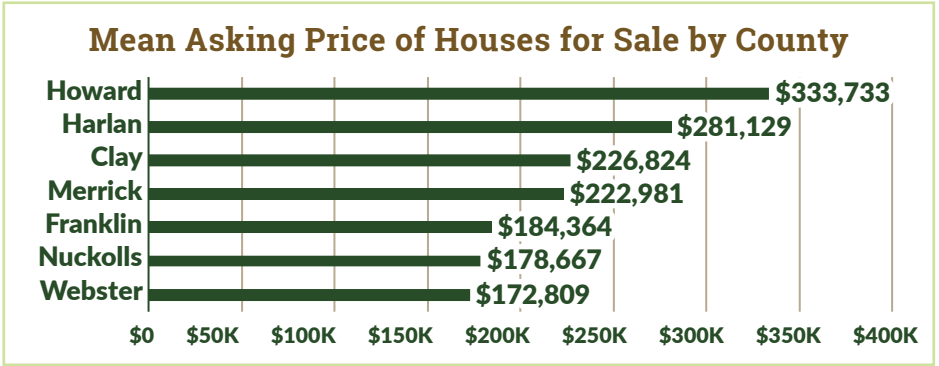


Chart 28

Priority #2: Housing

Evaluation Framework:

The objectives and action items presented below are listed from higher to lower rank order based on feedback received from stakeholders. For example: Objective #1 is a higher priority than Objective #2; the first action item under any objective is a higher priority than any other action item under that objective.

Objective #1: Affordability/Availability

- Cultivate partnerships required to build new housing/rental units.
- Educate communities on programs that support entry-level housing.
- Convene workshops on multi-city/village collaboration and strategic planning.
- Conduct housing needs assessments.

Objective #2: Infrastructure/Investment

- Streamline processes to address older/vacant properties (rehab vs demolition).
- Cultivate relationships with local/regional developers to reduce their risk and incentivize development.
- Educate communities on programs that develop infill and vacant properties.
- Educate communities on resources for infrastructure funding.
- Cultivate/develop local investment clubs.

Objective #3: Rehabilitation

- Educate communities and stakeholders on programs that incentivize housing rehabilitation.
- Develop vacant property registries (VPR) to stimulate inventory turnover.
- Cultivate owner-occupied housing rehab programs.

Objective #4: Information/Awareness

- Educate communities on resources available for both property owners and renters.
- Encourage the development and utilization of online platforms where rental availability information is shared.
- Convene meetings/discussions to address political resistance and stigmas to mixed-use zoning, low-income housing, and housing on a spectrum to grow a community.

Potential Partners

- City/village administrators, clerks, economic developers, elected officials
- Housing agencies
- Local developers
- Local investment clubs
- Landlords
- Large employers

Metrics

- Number of educational opportunities
- Number of units and/or grant and Rural Workforce Housing (RWH) loan applications
- Number of communities that have advanced initiatives to produce housing units
- Number of new resource providers

Methodology:

To develop the evaluation framework of the housing priority area, SCEDD first hosted two separate online meetings with a total of eight housing subcommittee members to identify strategic objectives and actions. SCEDD then conducted an online survey of these subcommittee members along with economic and private sector developers to rank each objective and action; seven people participated in the survey.

Priority #3: Childcare

Summary: Access to affordable, reliable childcare remains a significant challenge for families and employers across the SCEDD region. In Nebraska, childcare is one of the largest household expenses for families with young children. The average annual cost per child was $13,383 for home-based care and $18,147 for center-based care.[22] This places a substantial financial burden on working families.

The economic impact of childcare extends beyond families who directly pay for services. Parents and other relatives often reduce work hours or exit the labor force entirely to provide unpaid childcare, resulting in lost income and reduced workforce participation. Limited access to childcare also restricts discretionary spending for families who are able to afford care, affecting local businesses and the broader regional economy.[23]

Inadequate childcare availability has direct consequences for employers, as well. Research shows it contributes to underemployment in the following ways:

- Increased employee absenteeism
- Higher workforce turnover
- Employees shifting from full-time to part-time work
- Workers declining opportunities to increase hours
- Employees forgoing promotions or advancement opportunities

These challenges lead to measurable losses in both parent income and employer productivity across Nebraska.

"Access to child care means so many things. In some counties there is access, but people are not using as the cost of care outweighs what the workforce can afford."

Shonna Werth, Community Systems and Engagement Manager, Communities for Kids (C4K)

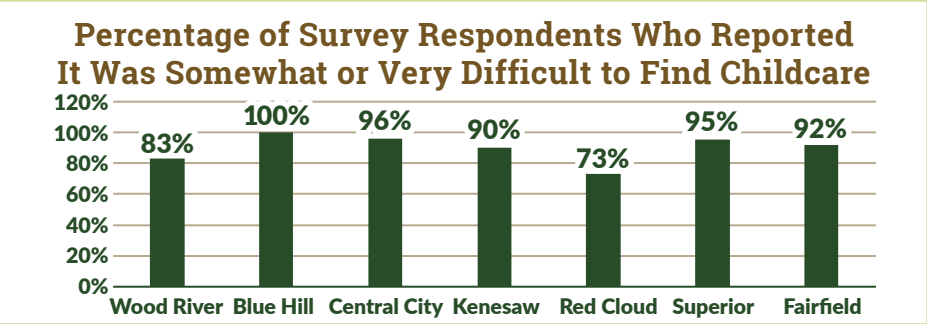


Chart 29

"Many working parents still struggle to access affordable, quality child care, which costs the state's economy an estimated $1.0 billion each year in lost earnings and productivity."

First Five Years Fund

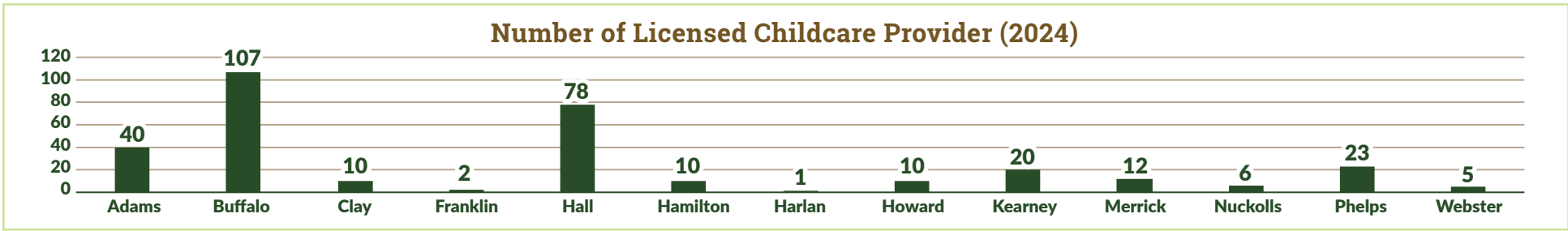


Chart 30

Local data from community engagement efforts further illustrate the severity of the issue. SCEDD has conducted community needs assessment surveys in a number of its communities. Chart 29, in presenting some of the survey results, reveals widespread difficulty accessing childcare.

These findings demonstrate that childcare access is a persistent barrier to workforce participation, economic stability, and community growth throughout the SCEDD region.



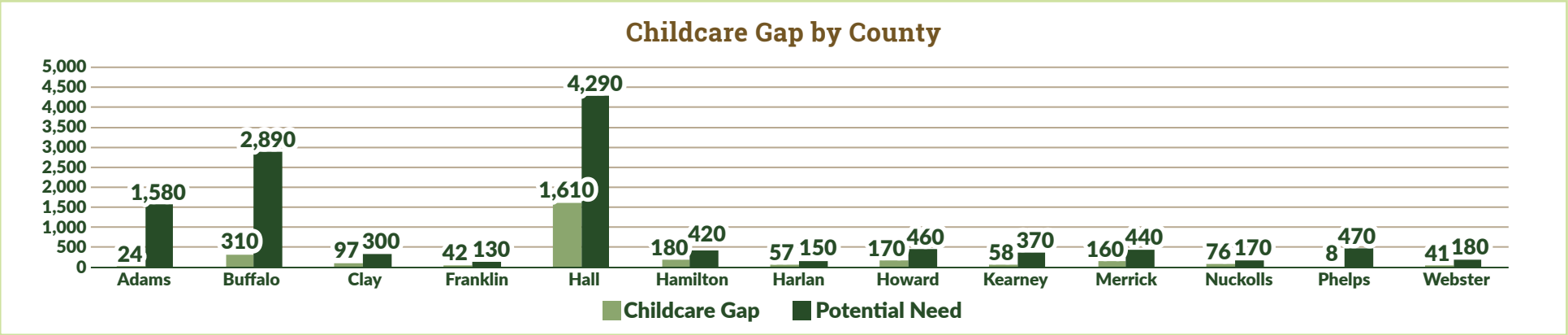


Chart 31

In addition to a cost issue, the SCEDD region faces a childcare supply constraint. Licensed childcare providers are unevenly distributed, with some SCEDD counties having very few providers. Rural counties are especially vulnerable to service gaps if even one provider closes. Limited supply reduces parental choice, limits care for nonstandard work hours, and creates "childcare deserts" that undermine economic development.

High childcare cost burdens combined with limited licensed provider capacity make childcare a critical economic infrastructure issue for SCEDD, directly affecting workforce participation, employer productivity, and long-term regional growth.

"There are no shortcuts to addressing all the child care needs. We walk alongside entities by looking at the whole landscape, the needed partners, funding sources; every community has different assets that can work."

Shonna Werth, Community Systems and Engagement Manager, Communities for Kids (C4K)

Sources: [22]First Five Years Fund: "Nebraska" (Updated 6/15/26), [23]First Five Nebraska: "Unlocking Nebraska's Potential: Child Care as a Key to Nebraska's Economic Future" (October 2025), SCEDD Community Needs Assessments Surveys (CNASs) conducted on behalf of communities: Wood River (2022), Blue Hill (2023), Central City (2024), Kenesaw (2024), Red Cloud (2024), Superior (2024), and Fairfield (2026), Nebraska Department of Health and Human Services (1/27/26 analysis of 2024 data), Buffett Early Childhood Institute at the University of Nebraska (01/27/26 analysis). Photo: Stick Creek Kids Child Development Center, Source – Tally Creative via SCEDD

Priority #3: Childcare

Evaluation Framework:

The objectives and action items presented below are listed from higher to lower rank order based on feedback received from stakeholders. For example: Objective #1 is a higher priority than Objective #2; the first action item under any objective is a higher priority than any other action item under that objective.

Objective #1: Increase Childhood Workforce

- Support awareness of early childhood as a career.
- Educate childhood workers on available career development/training/resources.
- Convene meetings of key stakeholders to share best practices in funding/staffing/etc.
- Support advocates in their annual assessments on childhood worker satisfaction.

Objective #2: Cost-Sharing Solutions

- Encourage sharing of best practices and potential funding models among peers.
- Solicit input from key stakeholders and research to identify successful funding models.
- Educate interested stakeholders on potential funding models.

Objective #3: Increase Childcare Slots

- Support advocates in their annual assessments of childcare capacity.
- Convene meetings of key stakeholders to share best practices.
- Educate stakeholders on different types of childcare options.
- Educate providers and families on models with extended-hour slots.

Objective #4: Subsidies to Low-Moderate Income (LMI) Families

- Explore funding/grant opportunities.
- Explore business sponsorships.
- Establish foundations to award scholarships to qualified households.

Objective #5: Advocacy/Regulatory Reform

- Explore impact of regulations on operating costs.
- Explore impact of regulations on staffing.
- Convene meetings of key stakeholders to determine how to best advocate for regulatory reforms.



Potential Partners

- Nonprofit childcare advocacy organizations
- Current childhood providers
- Major employers
- City/village administrators/economic developers, state/local officials
- Community foundations
- Community action networks and partnerships

Metrics

- Number of educational opportunities
- Number of grant applications
- Number of communities reached
- Number of legislative reforms started and enacted

Methodology:

To formulate possible strategic objectives and actions for the childcare priority area, SCEDD reviewed CEDS from other economic development districts, interviewed a prominent advocacy/resource provider, and conducted an online survey of childcare owners/educators, childcare advocacy/resource providers, city/village administrators or representatives, business owners, and school administrators to rank each objective and action; one-hundred-two (102) people participated in the survey.

Photo: Elm Creek Childcare initiative celebration, Source – Buffalo County Development Council

Priority #4: Industry/Workforce Development

Summary: According to the SWOT survey, workforce (and its development) is viewed as a strength, an opportunity, and a threat. While "skilled workforce" is viewed as a strength (4.00 out of 5.00), workforce shortages are viewed as one of the more serious threats (4th-highest threat). The attraction and retention of young families and workers is seen as the 2nd-highest opportunity; the development of a high pay, high demand workforce is the 5th-highest opportunity.

As shown in Chart 8 in the "Industries/Economies" portion of the summary background section, agriculture drives much of the SCEDD region's economics. Agriculture is the top industry. The agricultural sector is viewed, by far, as the top strength. However, an economy overly reliant on one industry is less economically resilient. Diversification of industries is one of the top two objectives within this priority area.

As we can see in Figure 7, industry/workforce development is interconnected with the other priority areas: community development/ quality of life, housing, and childcare. Addressing one area indirectly affects each of the other areas in a sort of mutually reinforcing loop. Community development, including the preservation of valued buildings and infrastructure for redevelopment, positively impacts housing and childcare, which impacts industry and workforce development. Industry and workforce development then impacts quality of life. Industry and workforce development then impacts quality of life.

"Elected officials want business development boiled down to a succinct soundbite of how this program was successful in other communities and how it can be applied here."

Andrew Brittenham, City Manager
City of Superior

"We need to see what other states are doing to recruit our people. Especially if there's a program that's working for one of the states right next to us."

Jeff Hofaker, Executive Director
Phelps County Development Corporation



Figure 7

Photo: Grain Place Foods Manufacturing facility in Marquette, Source – Aurora Development Corporation

Priority #4: Industry/Workforce Development

Evaluation Framework:

The objectives and action items presented below are listed from higher to lower rank order based on feedback received from stakeholders. For example: Objective #1 is a higher priority than Objective #2; the first action item under any objective is a higher priority than any other action item under that objective.

Objective #1: Retain, Recruit & Grow Workforce

- Explore how businesses can improve, innovate, and expand through consultation, connection to resources, and funding opportunities.
- Encourage sharing of best practices for workforce retention and recruitment among cities, villages, chambers, and businesses.
- Educate community and economic leaders on resources that support retention and recruitment.
- Educate community partners on expansion of apprenticeships to meet high demand workforce needs

Objective #2: Diversification Beyond Agriculture

- Support communities that attempt to diversify their local economy by supporting industries beyond agriculture.
- Educate key stakeholders on how economic resilience increases with greater economic diversity.
- Collaborate with agencies that provide services/resources for startups and new entrepreneurs.
- Assess vacant underutilized buildings for potential redevelopment.

Objective #3: Increase Awareness of Financial Resources and Literacy

- Educate community and economic leaders on availability of business assistance through economic development entities.
- Convene meetings of entrepreneurs and business owners on available governmental programs.
- Provide financial literacy/business planning consultation services.
- Offer financial assistance and consultation services to established and new small business owners.

Objective #4: Promote Tourism

- Increase awareness of statewide initiatives to promote local events and unique industries.
- Convene meetings of key stakeholders to share best promotional practices.
- Educate key stakeholders on the value of regional/local tourism promotion partnerships.
- Encourage mentoring and connection between established tourism businesses and aspiring entrepreneurs.

Potential Partners

- Nebraska Department of Economic Development
- Nebraska Manufacturing Advisory Council
- Local economic development entities
- Center for Rural Affairs (CFRA)
- Nebraska Business Development Center
- Chambers of Commerce
- Nebraska Enterprise Fund
- Center on Rural Innovation (CORI)
- Nebraska Department of Tourism
- US Environmental Protection Agency (EPA)
- Local banks
- Agriculture boards
- Prominent past/retired citizens who are inclined toward philanthropy
- Higher Education: Central Community College system, University of Nebraska system, University of Nebraska at Kearney, Hastings College

Metrics

- Number of meetings held
- Number of communities, businesses, and entrepreneurs helped
- Number of referrals and businesses assisted by SCEDD
- Number of new promotion partnerships
- Number of new initiatives (e.g., scholarship to former residents if they come back)

Methodology:

SCEDD conducted an online survey of interested stakeholders to rank each proposed objective and action; 13 people participated in the survey. SCEDD then hosted two separate online meetings that included a combined ten subcommittee members to discuss the survey results, potential partners, and useful metrics as well as to provide qualitative feedback.

Adams County

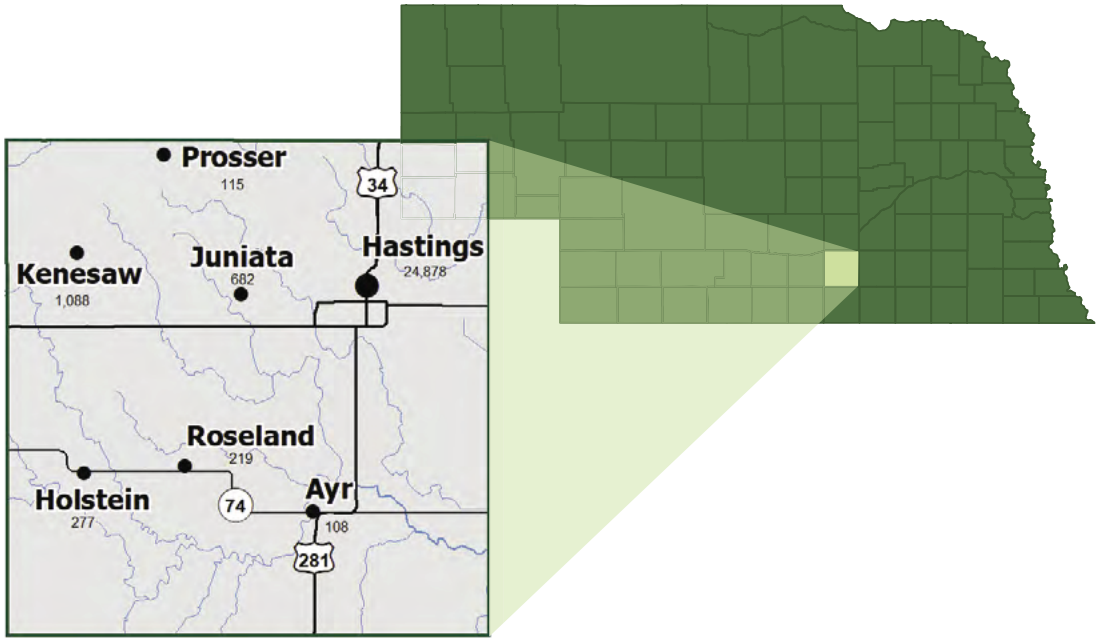
[1]2025 Population	31,071
[2]Total Employer Establishments	989
[3]Total Housing Units	13,934
[3]Total Households	13,076

Comparison of Adams County to Nebraska		
	Adams County	Nebraska (All)
[1]Change Since 2020 Census	-0.4%	2.9%
[3]Median Age	38.7	37.4
[4]Average 2025 Unemployment Rate	2.9%	3.0%
[3]Median Household Income	$68,365	$76,376
[3]Bachelor's Degree or Higher	29.6%	34.6%
[3]Without Health Care Coverage	5.8%	7.1%





[Top] Hastings Kool-Aid Days Parade
[Bottom] Kenesaw Renovated Civic Auditorium



Sources: [1]Stats America County Profiles (observed on 7/27/26): from U.S. Census Bureau, [2]U.S. Census Bureau County Profiles (observed on 7/27/26): from 2023 Economic Surveys Business Patterns, [3]U.S. Census Bureau County Profiles (observed on 7/27/26): from 2024 American Community Survey 5-Year Estimates, [4]Stats America County Profiles (observed on 7/27/26): from U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, Map Source: University of Nebraska at Lincoln Institute of Agriculture and Natural Resources All Things Nebraska County Report Card (population figures on map from 2020 Decennial Census). Photos: Source – City of Hastings. Source – Village of Kenesaw

Buffalo County

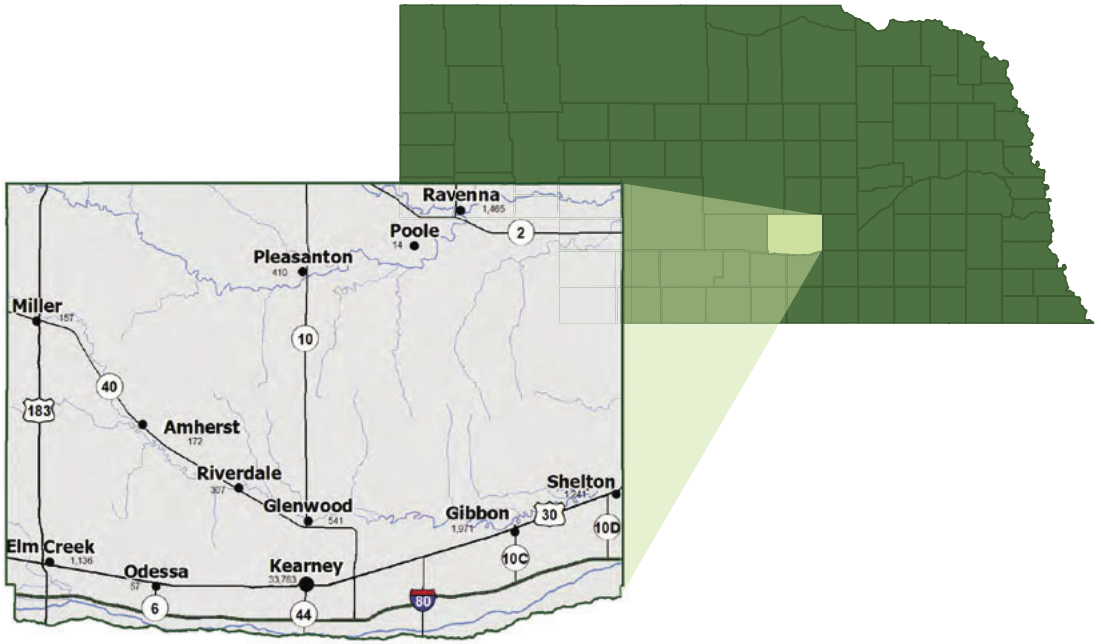
[1]2025 Population	51,172
[2]Total Employer Establishments	1,777
[3]Total Housing Units	21,286
[3]Total Households	19,984

Comparison of Buffalo County to Nebraska		
	Buffalo County	Nebraska (All)
[1]Change Since 2020 Census	2.2%	2.9%
[3]Median Age	35.1	37.4
[4]Average 2025 Unemployment Rate	2.5%	3.0%
[3]Median Household Income	$75,911	$76,376
[3]Bachelor's Degree or Higher	34.4%	34.6%
[3]Without Health Care Coverage	7.0%	7.1%





[Top] Museum of Nebraska Art Ribbon Cutting
[Bottom] Great Platte River Road Archway



Sources: [1]Stats America County Profiles (observed on 7/27/26): from U.S. Census Bureau, [2]U.S. Census Bureau County Profiles (observed on 7/27/26): from 2023 Economic Surveys Business Patterns, [3]U.S. Census Bureau County Profiles (observed on 7/27/26): from 2024 American Community Survey 5-Year Estimates, [4]Stats America County Profiles (observed on 7/27/26): from U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, Map Source: University of Nebraska at Lincoln Institute of Agriculture and Natural Resources All Things Nebraska County Report Card (population figures on map from 2020 Decennial Census), Photos: Source – Buffalo County Development Council. Source – JNabb, Nebraska Tourism

Clay County

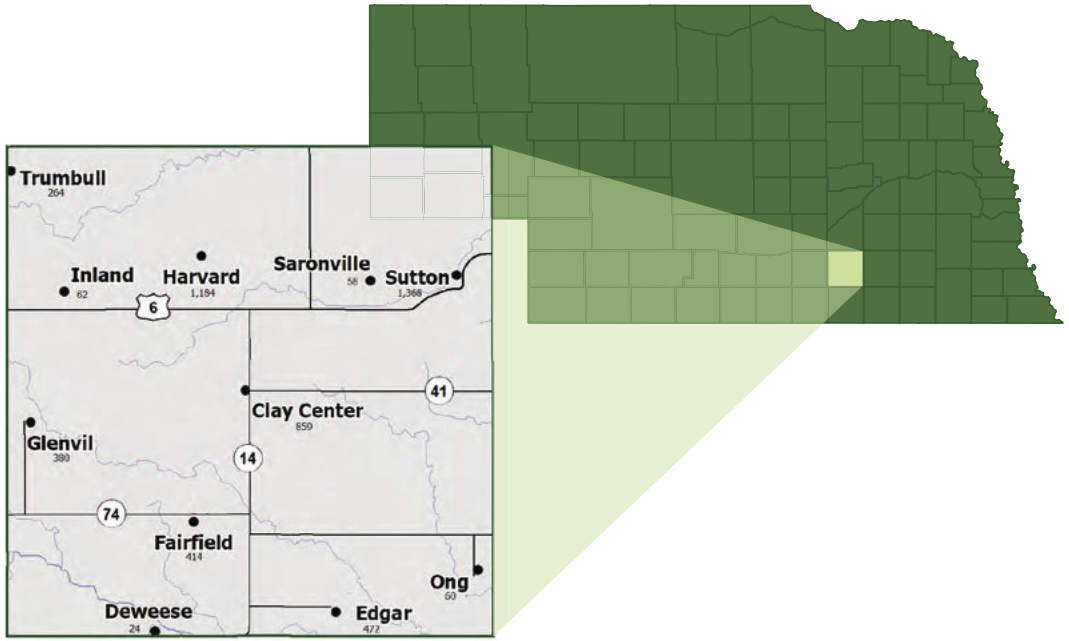
[1]2025 Population	6,170
[2]Total Employer Establishments	183
[3]Total Housing Units	2,817
[3]Total Households	2,490





[Top] Fairfield Library
[Bottom] Sandy Creek Marching Band

Comparison of Clay County to Nebraska		
	Clay County	Nebraska (All)
[1]Change Since 2020 Census	1.1%	2.9%
[3]Median Age	39.1	37.4
[4]Average 2025 Unemployment Rate	2.9%	3.0%
[3]Median Household Income	$78,986	$76,376
[3]Bachelor's Degree or Higher	22.3%	34.6%
[3]Without Health Care Coverage	6.6%	7.1%



Sources: [1]Stats America County Profiles (observed on 7/27/26): from U.S. Census Bureau, [2]U.S. Census Bureau County Profiles (observed on 7/27/26): from 2023 Economic Surveys Business Patterns, [3]U.S. Census Bureau County Profiles (observed on 7/27/26): from 2024 American Community Survey 5-Year Estimates, [4]Stats America County Profiles (observed on 7/27/26): from U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, Map Source: University of Nebraska at Lincoln Institute of Agriculture and Natural Resources All Things Nebraska County Report Card (population figures on map from 2020 Decennial Census), Photos: Source – City of Fairfield Library. Source – LeAnn Jochum

Franklin County

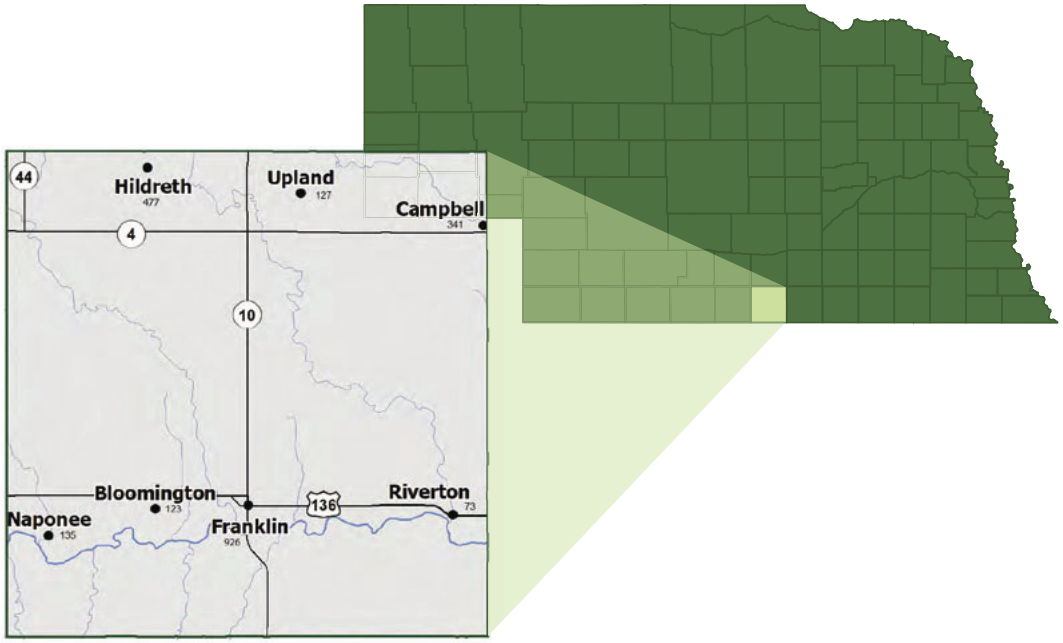
[1]2025 Population	2,795
[2]Total Employer Establishments	82
[3]Total Housing Units	1,531
[3]Total Households	1,293

Comparison of Franklin County to Nebraska		
	Franklin County	Nebraska (All)
[1]Change Since 2020 Census	-3.3%	2.9%
[3]Median Age	49.0	37.4
[4]Average 2025 Unemployment Rate	2.7%	3.0%
[3]Median Household Income	$60,195	$76,376
[3]Bachelor's Degree or Higher	21.3%	34.6%
[3]Without Health Care Coverage	4.4%	7.1%





[Top] Park Ribbon Cutting in Franklin
[Bottom] Hildreth Welcome Sign



Sources: [1]Stats America County Profiles (observed on 7/27/26): from U.S. Census Bureau, [2]U.S. Census Bureau County Profiles (observed on 7/27/26): from 2023 Economic Surveys Business Patterns, [3]U.S. Census Bureau County Profiles (observed on 7/27/26): from 2024 American Community Survey 5-Year Estimates, [4]Stats America County Profiles (observed on 7/27/26): from U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, Map Source: University of Nebraska at Lincoln Institute of Agriculture and Natural Resources All Things Nebraska County Report Card (population figures on map from 2020 Decennial Census), Photos: Source – ABCreative. Source – LeAnn Jochum

Hall County

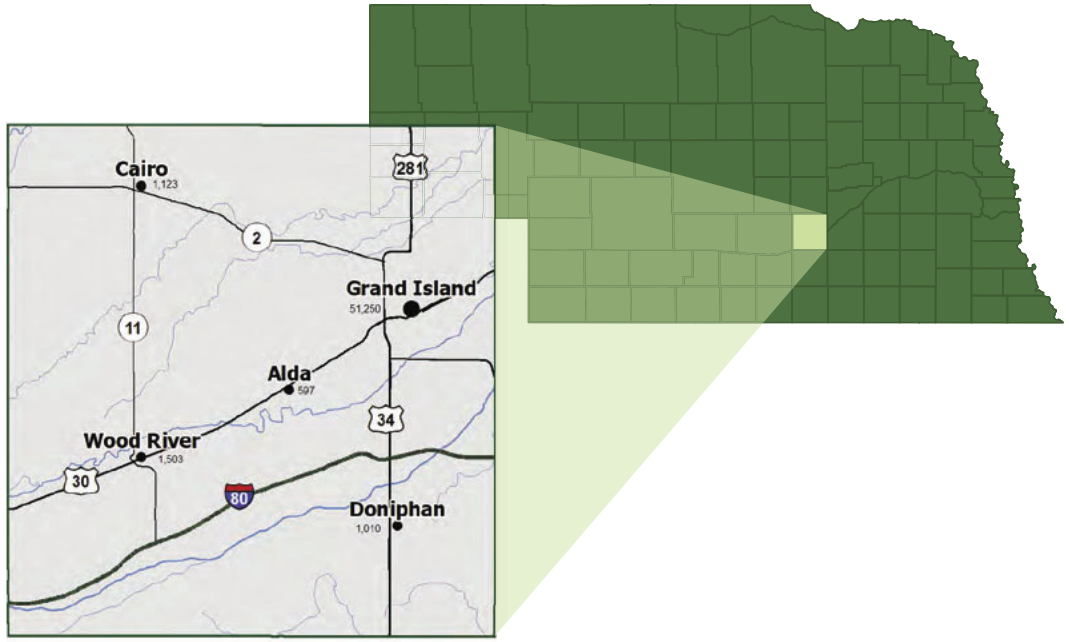
[1]2025 Population	63,633
[2]Total Employer Establishments	1,857
[3]Total Housing Units	25,569
[3]Total Households	24,587

Comparison of Hall County to Nebraska		
	Hall County	Nebraska (All)
[1]Change Since 2020 Census	1.2%	2.9%
[3]Median Age	36.1	37.4
[4]Average 2025 Unemployment Rate	3.7%	3.0%
[3]Median Household Income	$69,251	$76,376
[3]Bachelor's Degree or Higher	21.5%	34.6%
[3]Without Health Care Coverage	12.9%	7.1%





[Top] Centura Cairo Bandfest
[Bottom] Wood River Stick Creek Kids Ribbon Cutting



Sources: [1]Stats America County Profiles (observed on 7/27/26): from U.S. Census Bureau, [2]U.S. Census Bureau County Profiles (observed on 7/27/26): from 2023 Economic Surveys Business Patterns, [3]U.S. Census Bureau County Profiles (observed on 7/27/26): from 2024 American Community Survey 5-Year Estimates, [4]Stats America County Profiles (observed on 7/27/26): from U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, Map Source: University of Nebraska at Lincoln Institute of Agriculture and Natural Resources All Things Nebraska County Report Card (population figures on map from 2020 Decennial Census), Photos: Source – LeAnn Jochum. Source – City of Wood River

Hamilton County

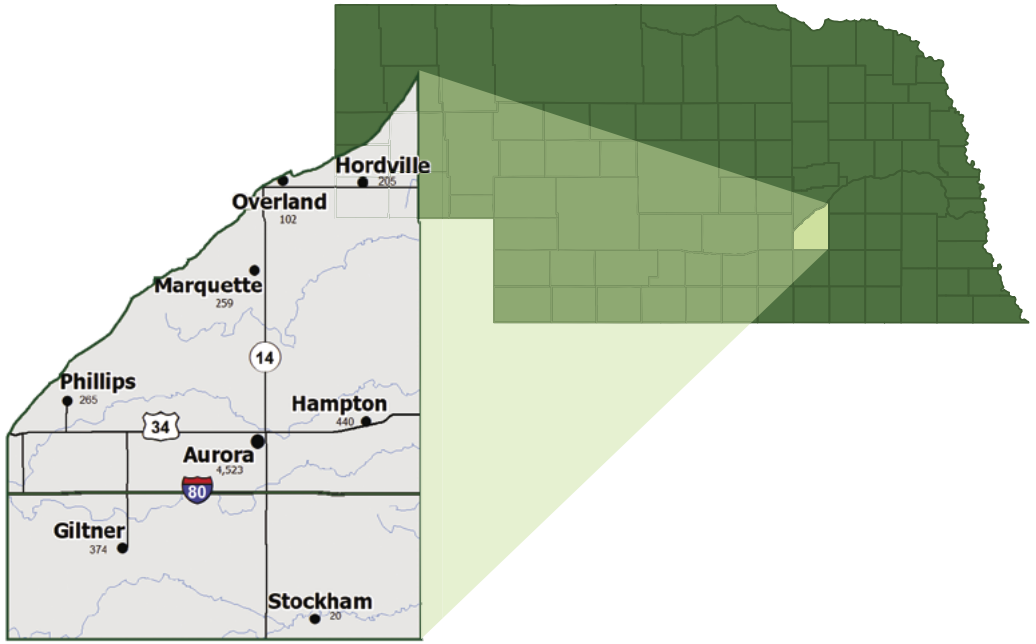
[1]2025 Population	9,678
[2]Total Employer Establishments	327
[3]Total Housing Units	4,133
[3]Total Households	3,628

Comparison of Hamilton County to Nebraska		
	Hamilton County	Nebraska (All)
[1]Change Since 2020 Census	2.6%	2.9%
[3]Median Age	42.0	37.4
[4]Average 2025 Unemployment Rate	2.3%	3.0%
[3]Median Household Income	$83,994	$76,376
[3]Bachelor's Degree or Higher	31.3%	34.6%
[3]Without Health Care Coverage	6.1%	7.1%





[Top] Giltner Daze Car Show
[Bottom] Aurora Downtown Halloween Parade



Sources: [1]Stats America County Profiles (observed on 7/27/26): from U.S. Census Bureau, [2]U.S. Census Bureau County Profiles (observed on 7/27/26): from 2023 Economic Surveys Business Patterns, [3]U.S. Census Bureau County Profiles (observed on 7/27/26): from 2024 American Community Survey 5-Year Estimates, [4]Stats America County Profiles (observed on 7/27/26): from U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, Map Source: University of Nebraska at Lincoln Institute of Agriculture and Natural Resources All Things Nebraska County Report Card (population figures on map from 2020 Decennial Census), Photos: Source – Arminda Kring. Source – Aurora Chamber of Commerce

Harlan County

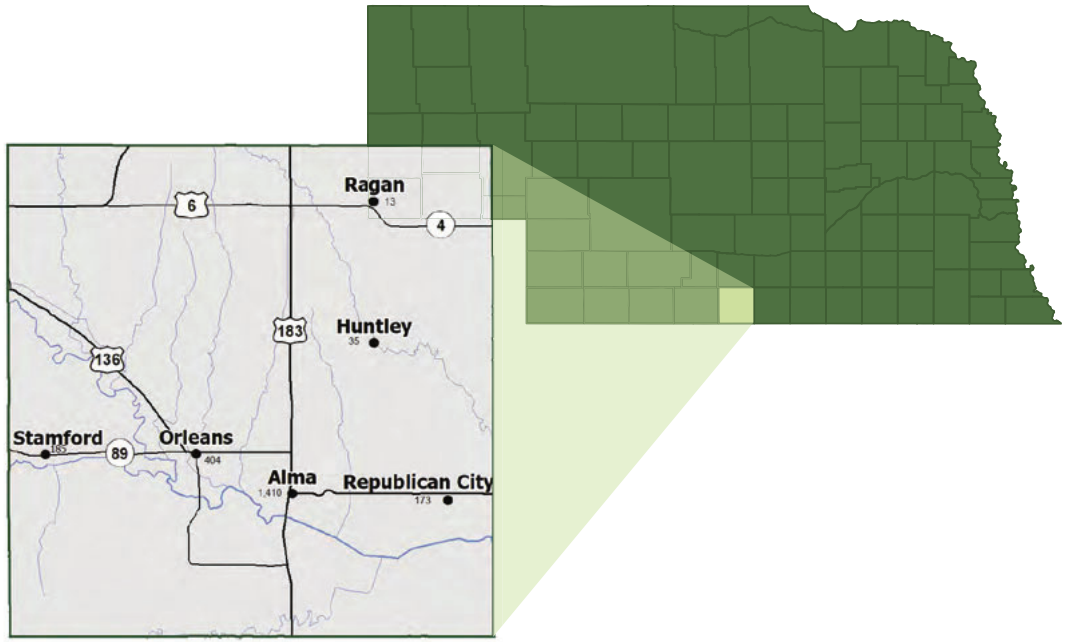
[1]2025 Population	3,000
[2]Total Employer Establishments	87
[3]Total Housing Units	1,884
[3]Total Households	1,197

Comparison of Harlan County to Nebraska		
	Harlan County	Nebraska (All)
[1]Change Since 2020 Census	-2.4%	2.9%
[3]Median Age	47.3	37.4
[4]Average 2025 Unemployment Rate	2.3%	3.0%
[3]Median Household Income	$70,625	$76,376
[3]Bachelor's Degree or Higher	29.2%	34.6%
[3]Without Health Care Coverage	8.5%	7.1%





[Top] North Shore Marina Campground on Harlan County Lake
[Bottom] Orleans Library Tree Planting



Sources: [1]Stats America County Profiles (observed on 7/27/26): from U.S. Census Bureau, [2]U.S. Census Bureau County Profiles (observed on 7/27/26): from 2023 Economic Surveys Business Patterns, [3]U.S. Census Bureau County Profiles (observed on 7/27/26): from 2024 American Community Survey 5-Year Estimates, [4]Stats America County Profiles (observed on 7/27/26): from U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, Map Source: University of Nebraska at Lincoln Institute of Agriculture and Natural Resources All Things Nebraska County Report Card (population figures on map from 2020 Decennial Census). Photo: Source – North Shore Marina

Howard County

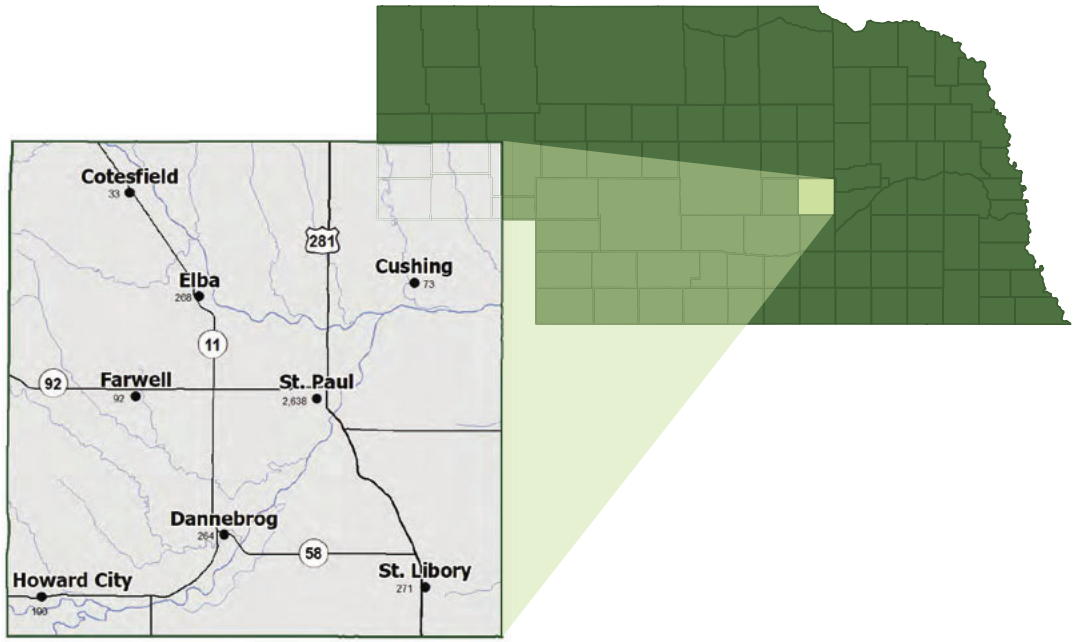
[1]2025 Population	6,538
[2]Total Employer Establishments	176
[3]Total Housing Units	2,894
[3]Total Households	2,504

Comparison of Howard County to Nebraska		
	Howard County	Nebraska (All)
[1]Change Since 2020 Census	1.0%	2.9%
[3]Median Age	42.2	37.4
[4]Average 2025 Unemployment Rate	2.5%	3.0%
[3]Median Household Income	$76,767	$76,376
[3]Bachelor's Degree or Higher	26.0%	34.6%
[3]Without Health Care Coverage	6.8%	7.1%





[Top] St. Paul Tennis Court Ribbon Cutting
[Bottom] Dannebrog Danish Capital of Nebraska Sign



Sources: [1]Stats America County Profiles (observed on 7/27/26): from U.S. Census Bureau, [2]U.S. Census Bureau County Profiles (observed on 7/27/26): from 2023 Economic Surveys Business Patterns, [3]U.S. Census Bureau County Profiles (observed on 7/27/26): from 2024 American Community Survey 5-Year Estimates, [4]Stats America County Profiles (observed on 7/27/26): from U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, Map Source: University of Nebraska at Lincoln Institute of Agriculture and Natural Resources All Things Nebraska County Report Card (population figures on map from 2020 Decennial Census). Photos: Source – City of St. Paul. Source – SCEDD

Kearney County

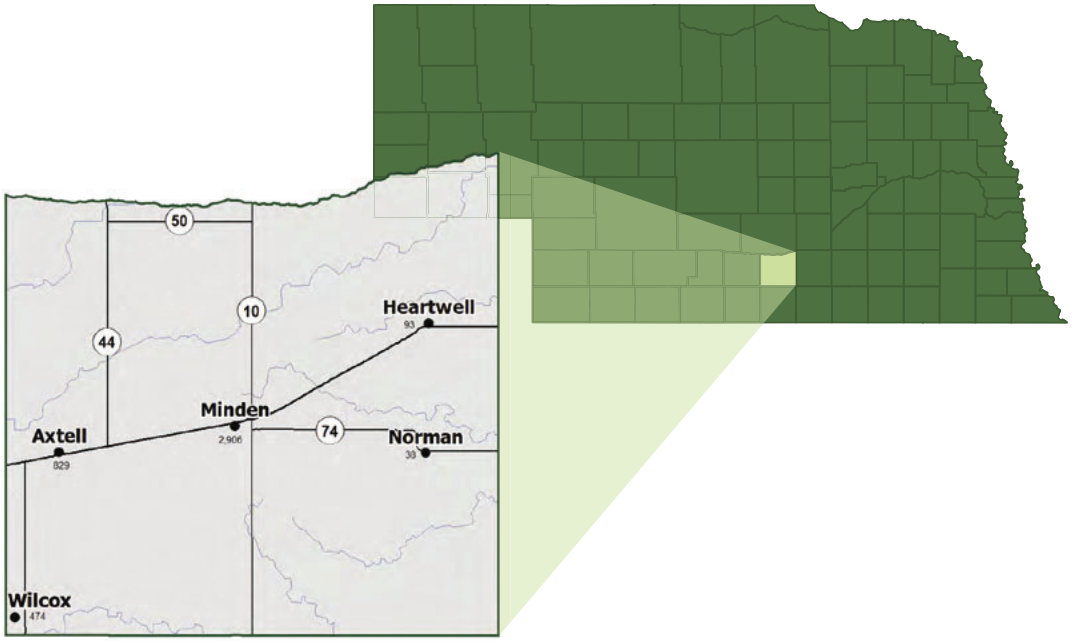
[1]2025 Population	6,790
[2]Total Employer Establishments	180
[3]Total Housing Units	2,988
[3]Total Households	2,814

Comparison of Kearney County to Nebraska		
	Kearney County	Nebraska (All)
[1]Change Since 2020 Census	1.5%	2.9%
[3]Median Age	40.2	37.4
[4]Average 2025 Unemployment Rate	2.5%	3.0%
[3]Median Household Income	$78,631	$76,376
[3]Bachelor's Degree or Higher	34.5%	34.6%
[3]Without Health Care Coverage	6.1%	7.1%





[Top] Harold Warp Pioneer Village Museum Restored Carousel
[Bottom] Axtell Aquatic Center



Sources: [1]Stats America County Profiles (observed on 7/27/26): from U.S. Census Bureau, [2]U.S. Census Bureau County Profiles (observed on 7/27/26): from 2023 Economic Surveys Business Patterns, [3]U.S. Census Bureau County Profiles (observed on 7/27/26): from 2024 American Community Survey 5-Year Estimates, [4]Stats America County Profiles (observed on 7/27/26): from U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, Map Source: University of Nebraska at Lincoln Institute of Agriculture and Natural Resources All Things Nebraska County Report Card (population figures on map from 2020 Decennial Census). Photos: Source – Minden Courier. Source – Village of Axtell

Merrick County

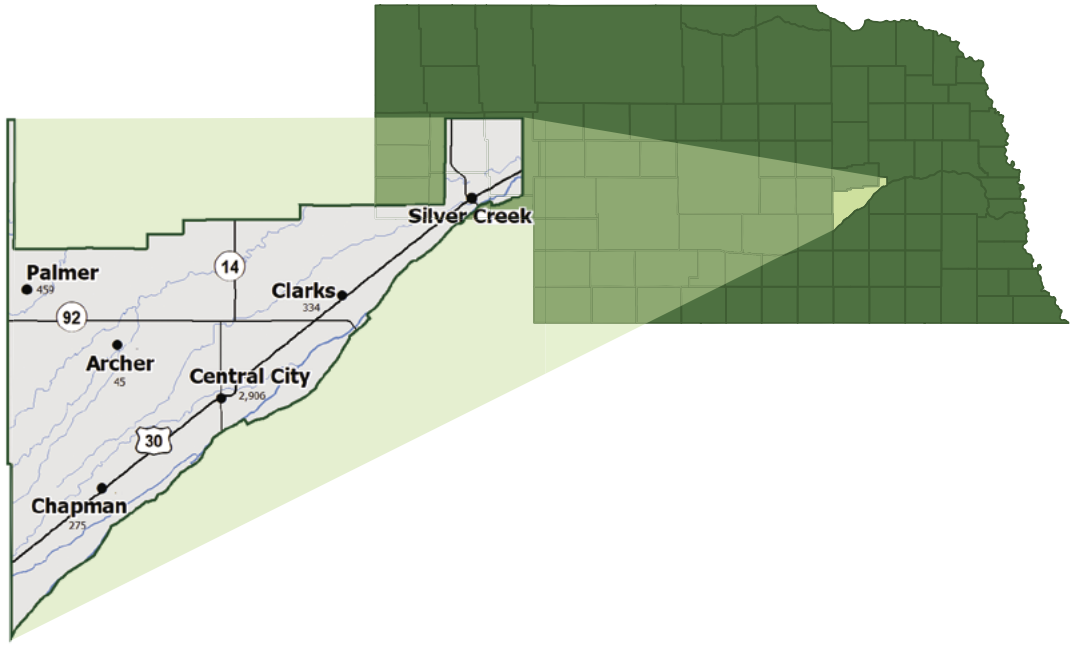
[1]2025 Population	7,905
[2]Total Employer Establishments	249
[3]Total Housing Units	3,598
[3]Total Households	3,205

Comparison of Merrick County to Nebraska		
	Merrick County	Nebraska (All)
[1]Change Since 2020 Census	3.1%	2.9%
[3]Median Age	43.2	37.4
[4]Average 2025 Unemployment Rate	2.3%	3.0%
[3]Median Household Income	$68,354	$76,376
[3]Bachelor's Degree or Higher	18.3%	34.6%
[3]Without Health Care Coverage	5.3%	7.1%





[Top] Downtown Central City
[Bottom] Central City High School Bison Activity Dome



Sources: [1]Stats America County Profiles (observed on 7/27/26): from U.S. Census Bureau, [2]U.S. Census Bureau County Profiles (observed on 7/27/26): from 2023 Economic Surveys Business Patterns, [3]U.S. Census Bureau County Profiles (observed on 7/27/26): from 2024 American Community Survey 5-Year Estimates, [4]Stats America County Profiles (observed on 7/27/26): from U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, Map Source: University of Nebraska at Lincoln Institute of Agriculture and Natural Resources All Things Nebraska County Report Card (population figures on map from 2020 Decennial Census). Photos: Source – LeAnn Jochum. Source – NTV News

Nuckolls County

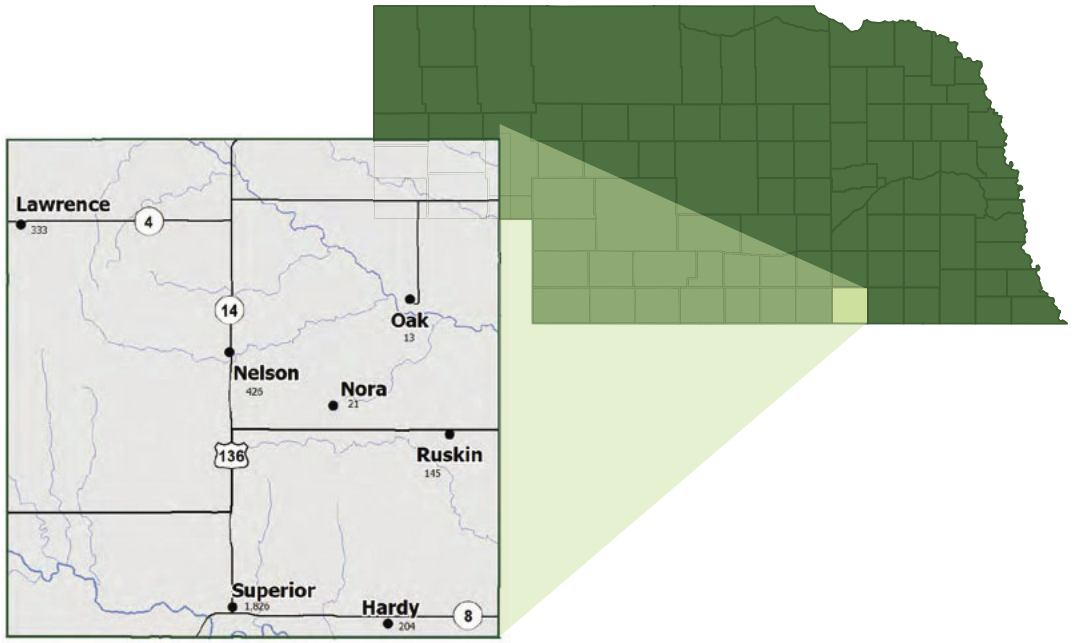
[1]2025 Population	4,100
[2]Total Employer Establishments	156
[3]Total Housing Units	2,220
[3]Total Households	1,919

Comparison of Nuckolls County to Nebraska		
	Nuckolls County	Nebraska (All)
[1]Change Since 2020 Census	0.1%	2.9%
[3]Median Age	50.6	37.4
[4]Average 2025 Unemployment Rate	2.4%	3.0%
[3]Median Household Income	$73,976	$76,376
[3]Bachelor's Degree or Higher	23.1%	34.6%
[3]Without Health Care Coverage	9.3%	7.1%





[Top] Downtown Superior
[Bottom] Nelson Auditorium



Sources: [1]Stats America County Profiles (observed on 7/27/26): from U.S. Census Bureau, [2]U.S. Census Bureau County Profiles (observed on 7/27/26): from 2023 Economic Surveys Business Patterns, [3]U.S. Census Bureau County Profiles (observed on 7/27/26): from 2024 American Community Survey 5-Year Estimates, [4]Stats America County Profiles (observed on 7/27/26): from U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, Map Source: University of Nebraska at Lincoln Institute of Agriculture and Natural Resources All Things Nebraska County Report Card (population figures on map from 2020 Decennial Census), Photos: Source – Tally Creative via SCEDD. Source – City of Nelson

Phelps County

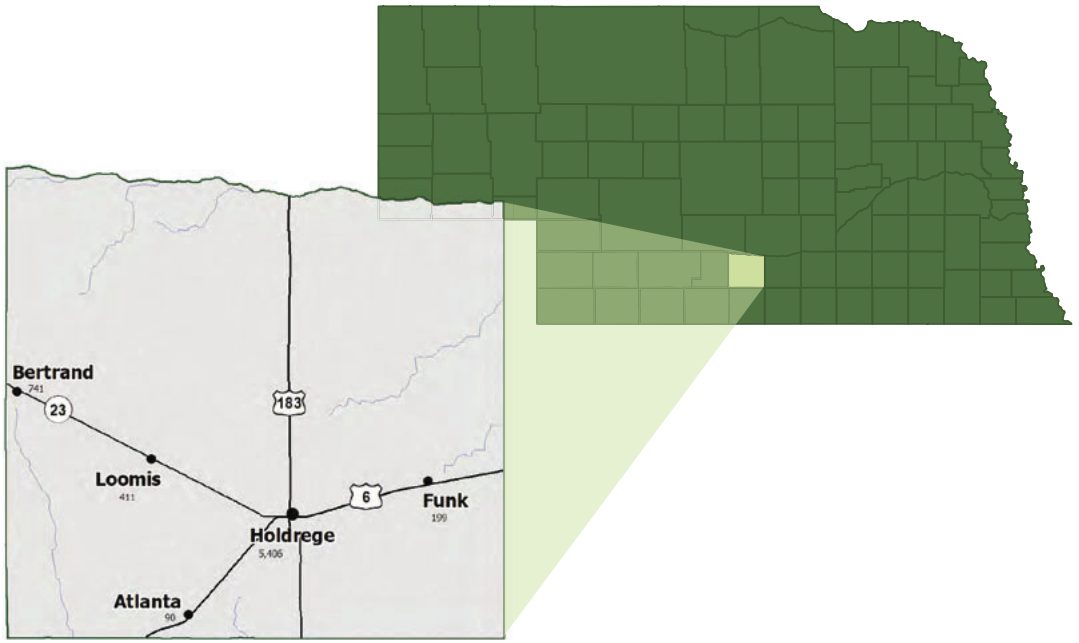
[1]2025 Population	8,994
[2]Total Employer Establishments	353
[3]Total Housing Units	4,170
[3]Total Households	3,916

Comparison of Phelps County to Nebraska		
	Phelps County	Nebraska (All)
[1]Change Since 2020 Census	0.3%	2.9%
[3]Median Age	41.4	37.4
[4]Average 2025 Unemployment Rate	2.3%	3.0%
[3]Median Household Income	$68,919	$76,376
[3]Bachelor's Degree or Higher	29.9%	34.6%
[3]Without Health Care Coverage	6.2%	7.1%





[Top] Rural Speakeasy Restaurant
[Bottom] The Mailbox Mural by Dan Toro, Iron Horse Arts District in Holdrege

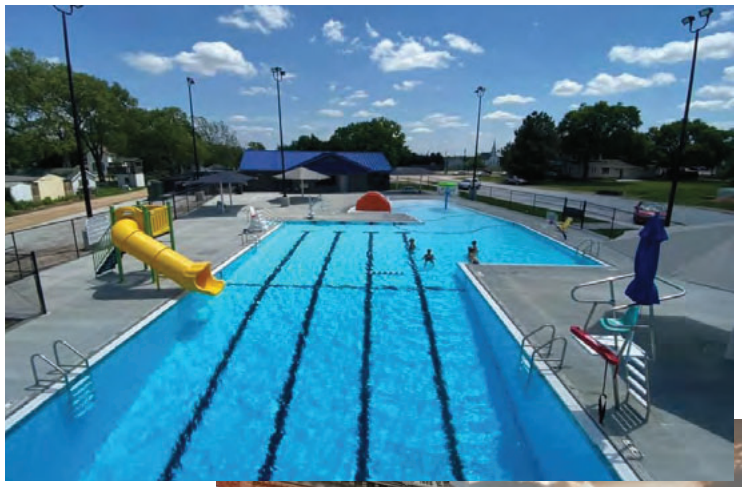


Sources: [1]Stats America County Profiles (observed on 7/27/26): from U.S. Census Bureau, [2]U.S. Census Bureau County Profiles (observed on 7/27/26): from 2023 Economic Surveys Business Patterns, [3]U.S. Census Bureau County Profiles (observed on 7/27/26): from 2024 American Community Survey 5-Year Estimates, [4]Stats America County Profiles (observed on 7/27/26): from U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, Map Source: University of Nebraska at Lincoln Institute of Agriculture and Natural Resources All Things Nebraska County Report Card (population figures on map from 2020 Decennial Census). Photos: Source – LeAnn Jochum. Source – Iron Horse Arts District

Webster County

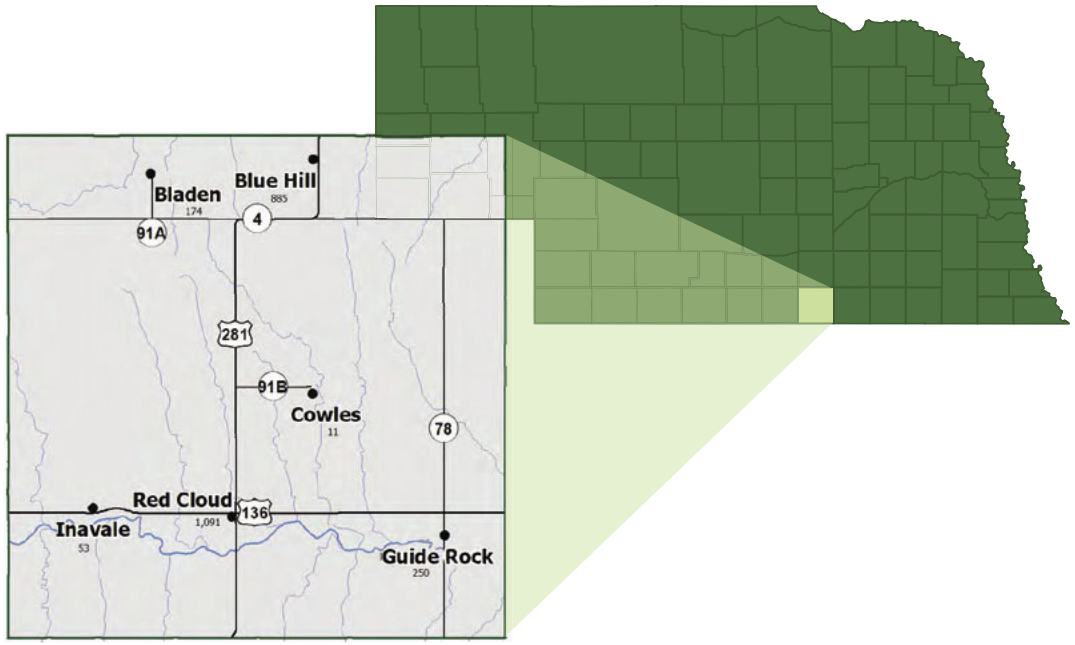
[1]2025 Population	3,336
[2]Total Employer Establishments	93
[3]Total Housing Units	1,764
[3]Total Households	1,493

Comparison of Webster County to Nebraska		
	Webster County	Nebraska (All)
[1]Change Since 2020 Census	-1.7%	2.9%
[3]Median Age	44.5	37.4
[4]Average 2025 Unemployment Rate	2.7%	3.0%
[3]Median Household Income	$64,347	$76,376
[3]Bachelor's Degree or Higher	21.2%	34.6%
[3]Without Health Care Coverage	5.8%	7.1%





[Top] Blue Hill Aquatic Center
[Bottom] New Moon Block, Downtown Red Cloud



Sources: [1]Stats America County Profiles (observed on 7/27/26): from U.S. Census Bureau, [2]U.S. Census Bureau County Profiles (observed on 7/27/26): from 2023 Economic Surveys Business Patterns, [3]U.S. Census Bureau County Profiles (observed on 7/27/26): from 2024 American Community Survey 5-Year Estimates, [4]Stats America County Profiles (observed on 7/27/26): from U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, Map Source: University of Nebraska at Lincoln Institute of Agriculture and Natural Resources All Things Nebraska County Report Card (population figures on map from 2020 Decennial Census). Photos: Source – Tally Creative via SCEDD. New Moon Block featuring the Opera House and National Willa Cather Center, Source – Visit Red Cloud

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

SCEDD Board Members

Name	County/Position	Organization
Joe Patterson	Adams County	Adams County Commissioner
Bill Maendele	Buffalo County	Buffalo County Commissioner
Barb Barnett	Clay County	Clay County Zoning Administrator
Raquel Felzien	Franklin County	Franklin City Clerk/Treasurer
Becky Rother	Hall County	Grand Island Area Economic Development Corporation
Nicole SaBell	Hamilton County	Hamilton County Commissioner
Joe Schnuerle	Harlan County	Harlan County Supervisor
Laura Berthelsen	Howard County	St. Paul Deputy City Clerk
Robert Swanson	Kearney County	Kearney County Supervisor
Edward Dexter	Merrick County	Merrick County Supervisor
Dave Mussmann	Nuckolls County	Nuckolls County Supervisor
Theresa Puls	Phelps County	Phelps County Commissioner
Tricia Allen	Webster County (alternating)	Blue Hill City Clerk/Treasurer
Gene Horne	Webster County (alternating)	Red Cloud Mayor
Linda Glause	Mortgage Banking	AVP/Mortgage Underwriter – Five Points Bank
Marni Danhauer	Higher Education	Associate Dean of Extended Learning – Services & Training – Central Community College

SCEDD Staff

Sharon Hueftle	Executive Director
LeAnn Jochum	Deputy Director
Lori Ferguson	Community Consultant
Howard Wong	Community Consultant
Sheri Alber	Fiscal Officer
Kristy Borden	Grant Assistant
Jill Schroeder	Executive Assistant

CEDS Stakeholders & Sub-Committee Members

Tricia Allen, City of Blue Hill; Sara Arnett, Wood River Vision 20/20; Ember Batelaan, City of Hastings; Kelsey Bergen, Aurora Development Corporation; Mary Berlie, Grand Island Area Economic Development Corporation; Andrew Brittenham, City of Superior; Wanda Fedorchik, Buffalo County Community Partners; Raquel Felzien, City of Franklin; Kelly Gewecke, Nebraska Department of Economic Development; Alyssa Heagy, Next Point Home Development; Jeff Hofaker, Phelps County Development Corporation; Kelsey Knehans, Development Council for Buffalo County; Michael Krings, City of Minden; Kevin Kubo, City of Hastings; Shannon Landauer, Hastings Economic Development Corp/Chamber of Commerce; Trevor Lee, Development Council for Buffalo County; Jarrod McCartney, Discover Red Cloud; Miles McGinnis, City of Central City; Warren Myers, City of Sutton; Dusty Newton, Village of Elm Creek; Cassie Paben, City of Superior; Morgan Pearson, Nebraska Department of Economic Development; Sally Sadd, Phelps County Development Corporation; Matt Smallcomb, City of Gibbon; Leon Stall, City of Gibbon; Jami Tomlin, NextPoint Home Development; Zach West, Ravenna Economic Development Corporation; Lisa Woodgate, St. Paul Economic Development Corporation

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- Sterling Williams, volunteer independent consultant
- Shonna Werth, Associate Vice President of Early Childhood Programs at Nebraska Children and Families Foundation

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