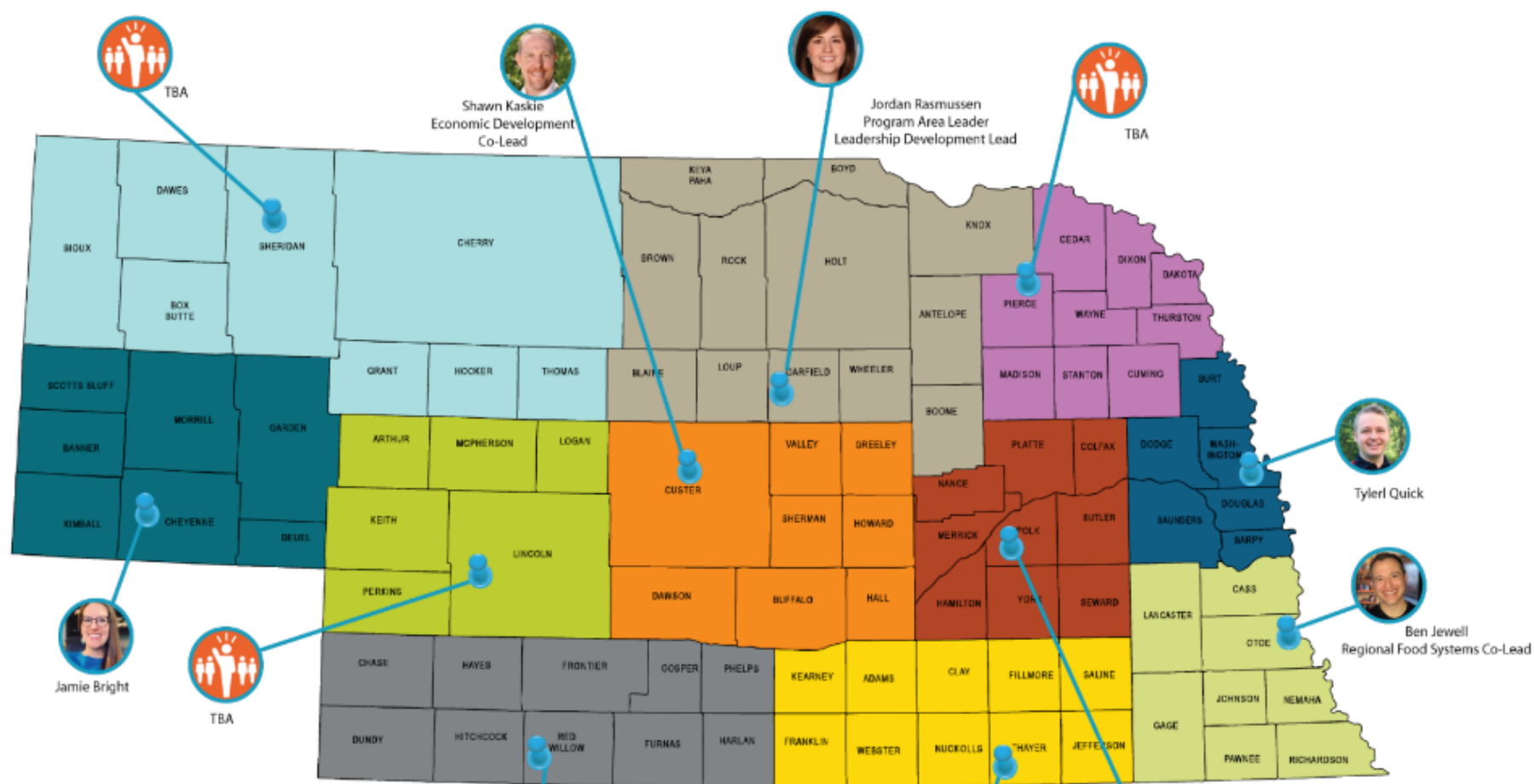


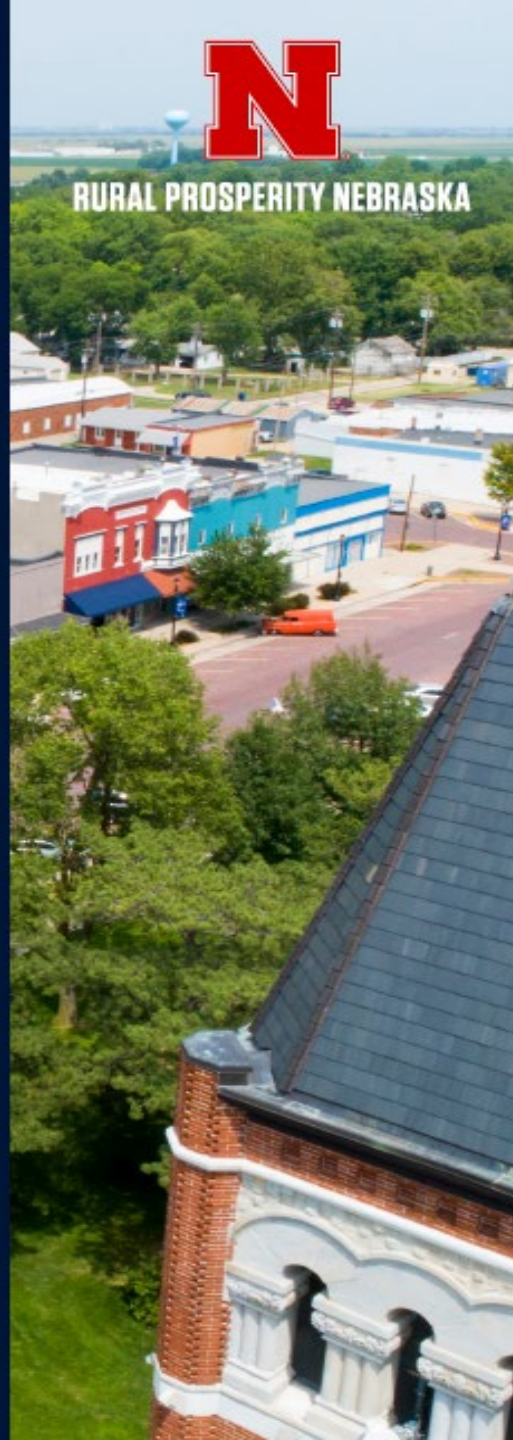


RURAL PROSPERITY NEBRASKA

ACCOUNTABILITY REGIONS



FIRST IMPRESSIONS



ONLINE



We provide a comprehensive evaluation of your online presence. Our analysis focuses on online branding, online accessibility, and website design. The program includes a presentation of our findings and a proposed action plan tailored to your community's wants and needs.

- **Market:** Communities of 30-10,000 residents
- **Timeline:** Approx. 2 weeks
- **Who initiates the process:** City government, chambers of commerce, convention and visitors bureaus, economic development groups
- **Cost:** \$300 for specialists' travel and administration fees

PEER TO PEER



We match your community with a similar-sized community within 120 miles. Each community identifies a board of 5-10, and together you work with a facilitator on maximizing existing tourism assets, discovering how visitors view your community, and providing and receiving feedback. Results are presented in a formal evaluation session.

- **Market:** Communities of 30-10,000 residents
- **Timeline:** Approx. 2-3 months
- **Who initiates the process:** City government, chambers of commerce, convention and visitors bureaus, economic development groups, tourism committees, downtown/Main St. committees
- **Cost:** Travel costs for facilitators, for groups to conduct peer evaluations, and for evaluation board to meet with peer community

PROFESSIONAL



We create a team of experts in marketing, food and beverage, tourism, event planning, and community development to identify your community's existing strengths, opportunities for improvement, and possible future initiatives regarding tourism in your short-, mid-, and long-term strategic plans. Results are presented in a formal evaluation session.

- **Market:** Communities prioritizing tourism in their strategic plans
- **Timeline:** Approx. 4-6 months
- **Who initiates the process:** City government, chambers of commerce, convention and visitors bureaus, economic development groups, downtown/Main St. committees
- **Cost:** \$5,000 for specialists' travel and administration fees

First Impressions



Kearney, NE

K-State Research and Extension

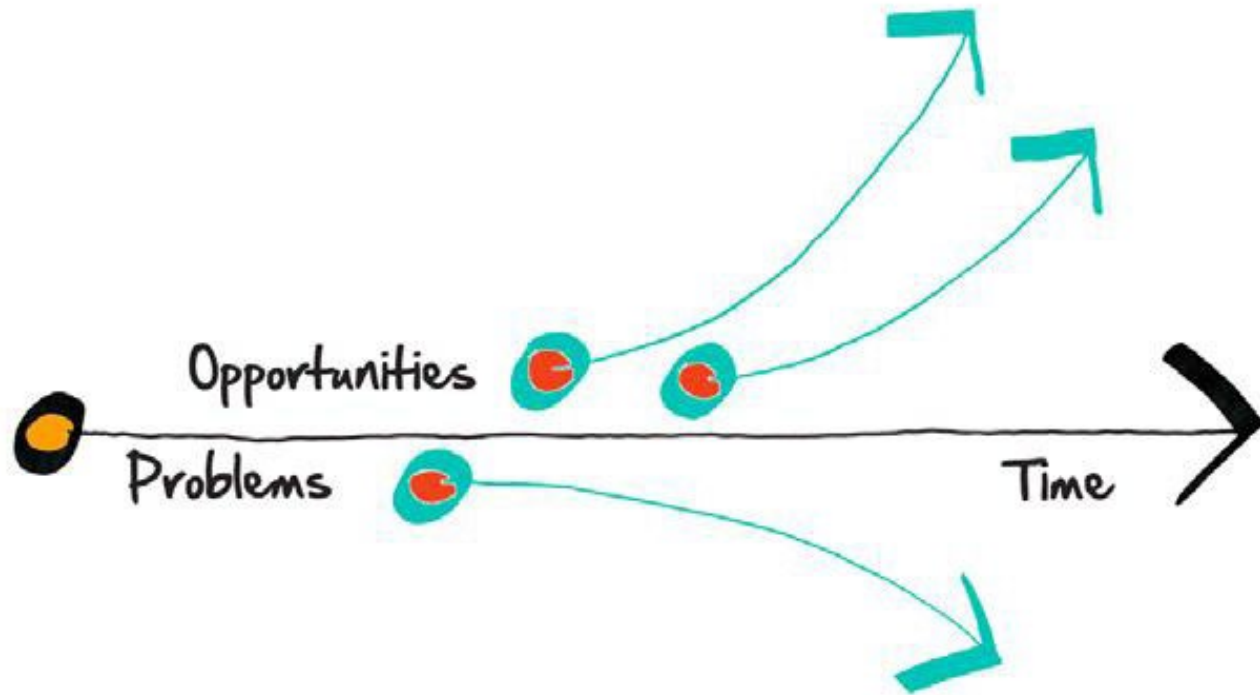
- Hays, KS asked for First Impressions. Kearney agreed to be its partner; Distance is just at 2.5 hours. This is our first multi-state assessment.
- Volunteer visitors in both communities were trained and photos were taken of Kearney in the middle of September.
- Five visitors visited Kearney during the month of July.
- Kearney uses the results for further discussion and action plans.

- **Feedback:**
How does a first-time visitor view my town?
 - Evaluate successes.
 - Set goals and priorities for next steps.
- **If you don't agree with the observation:**
 - ***Be curious:*** Why does the visitor see it this way?
 - Is the observation worth considering?
 - What can we do to change it– or the perception?

Curiosity: A strong desire to know or learn something.
-Oxford Living Dictionary

Asset Based Community Development

People move in the direction of their conversations



Ben Winchester, Senior Research Fellow, U of MN

- In a survey of newcomers to rural areas, the reasons people move to a rural community are:
 - Simpler pace of life,
 - Safety and security,
 - Affordable housing,
 - Outdoor recreation,
 - Quality schools
 - ***“A job” isn’t in the top 10 reasons.***
- Communities can work together to attract newcomers and create quality of life for everyone.

- “In small towns everyone knows each other.” **False!**
- *Get to know each other*, invite them to a newcomers’ meal.
- If you bring 7 people to a 700-citizen town every year in 10 years, you’ll have a 10% increase. It matters! It is a challenge with housing, but it is achievable.
- We are our own worst enemies. We must monitor our customer service and what we say. It matters.
- Don’t say, “You have to live here twenty years to be an insider.” And don’t act like it either.

- Housing will be freed up as the Baby Boomers retire and move closer to medical services.
- Rural communities need retirement housing (not nursing facilities, but maintenance free) to retain seniors.- *Ben Winchester, Senior Research Fellow, University of Minnesota*



*Ben Winchester was our guest on the
First Friday Call.*

See the recording at:

<https://www.ksre.k-state.edu/community/business/entrepreneurship/>

- 2022 NE Certified Population: 33,792 ↑ 9.76% since 2010
- 2020 U.S. Census: 33,790
- 2010 U.S. Census: 30,787
- Median household income: \$62,295 **\$69,597**
- High school or GED 92.6% **91.7%**
- At least a B.S. Degree 37.9% **32.9%**
- Median Age: 32.1 years **37.4 years**
- Persons 65 and Over 14.7% **17%**

Blue: Nebraska Comparison Data

- Moved since previous year (2021/22 data):

Consider margin of error – Example: Census.gov lists “Moved within same county” as a +/-1,280 margin of error for Kearney.

20%

12.6%

10.76% - within Buffalo Co; 7.1% from other county in NE; 1.77% from another state; 0.43% from abroad

- Poverty rate

(% of people below poverty line)

15.5%

11.2%

Race/Ethnicity

White: 84%

Black: 0.9%

Asian: 2%

Other: 0.2%

Not Hispanic or Latino:
90.3%

American Indian: 0.3%

Native Hawaiian/Other

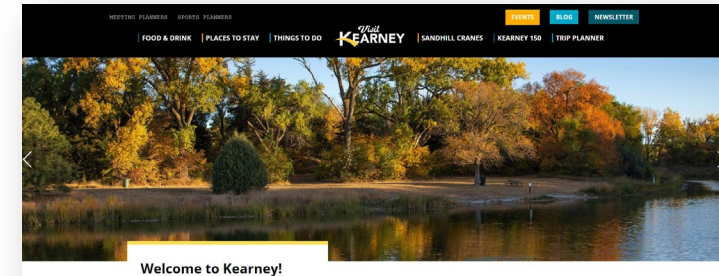
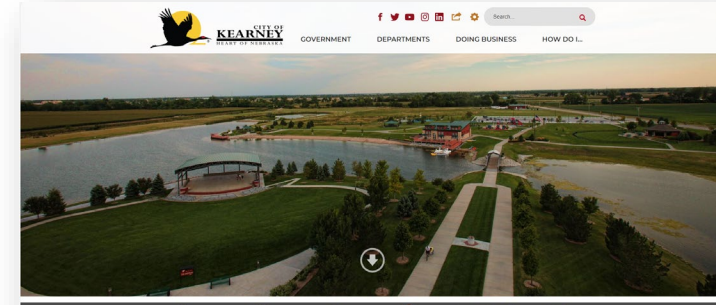
Pacific Islander: 0%

Two or more races: 2.9%

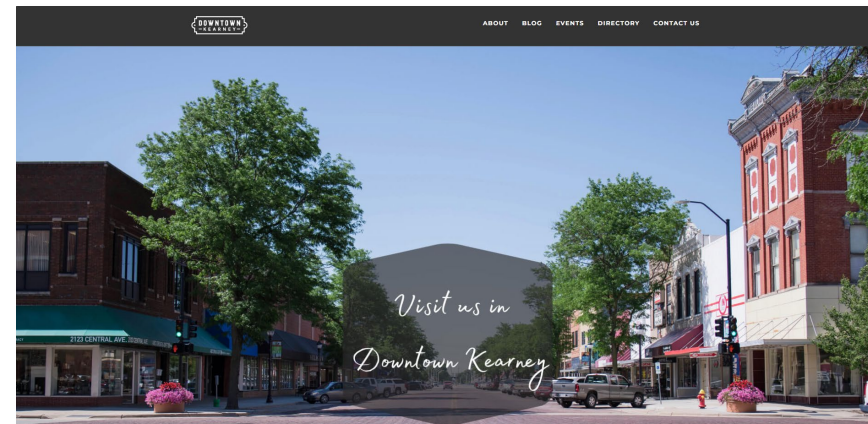
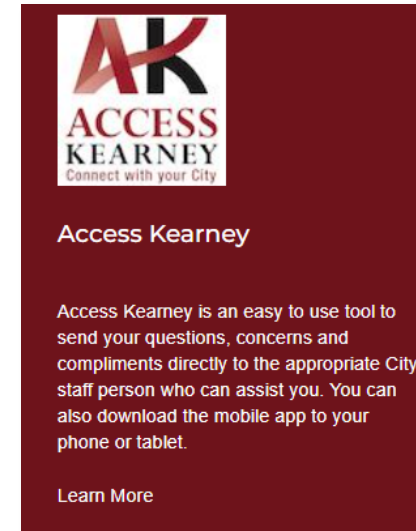
Hispanic or Latino:
9.7%

Website

- City of Kearney and Visit Kearney websites were both full of useful information.
- Easy to find.
- Sites listed information about local attractions people may not know of otherwise.
- VisitKearney.com was the second link on Google's results page for one visitor. Dynamic and good use of pictures – user friendly.
- Information found online matched what was seen in the community.

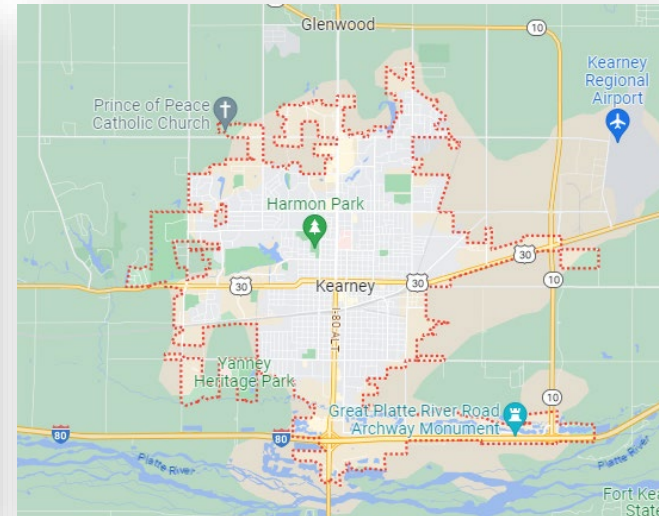


- The city website had a form for reporting concerns, and an app. The app wasn't explained very clearly, so it might be something people in town know how to use?
- The city's event calendar did not load very well on some mobile devices.
- One of the initial search results was Trip Advisor.
- Also found downtownkearney.com



“Five-Minute” Impression

- Streets were clean, as was the city as a whole.
- Streets were congested with a lot of traffic.
- The city has a very large footprint. If you don't have your own mode of transportation it could be hard to get to shopping in the north, the library in the south, and everywhere in between.
- Busy in a good way – lots of retail, restaurants, and service businesses seen while driving through downtown with only a few buildings appearing to be for sale or lease.



Map image obtained from Google Maps 11-6-23

“Five-Minute” Impression

- A lot of flowers noted while driving through downtown.
- The brick streets were very bumpy.
- Quite a few bicyclists observed using the bike trails.
- The large power substation isn't great to look at when coming into town. Some wondered if a large “welcome” billboard could be put up to cover at least part of it.
- It was easy to see where the visitor's bureau was when taking the first exit coming into town. It was also easy to see the Chamber and Economic Development Center.



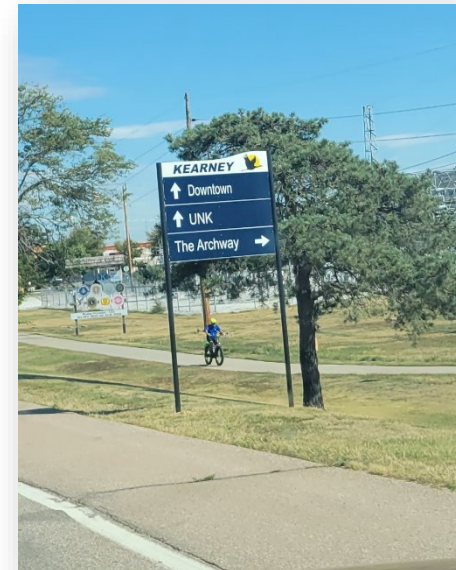
“Five-Minute” Impression

- Multiple notes about the Viaero Center was one of the first things people saw as they came in from the south. They wondered what it was used for (and later found out after speaking with CVB staff during their visit).
- The brightly colored metal banners downtown received a positive reaction. They looked nice and probably last longer than fabric alternatives.



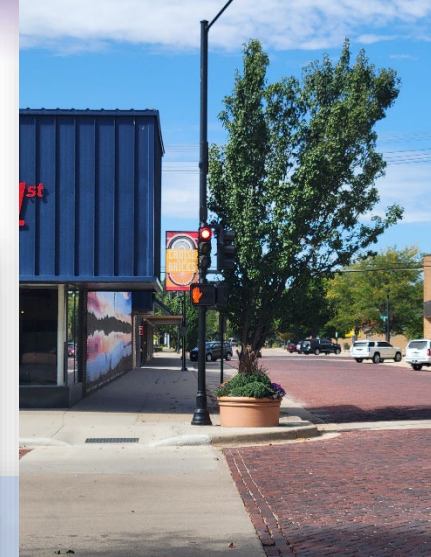
“Five-Minute” Impression

- Good directional signage observed throughout town. Most felt the signs were large and easy to read (street and attraction signs).
- Some visitors did miss the welcome signage.
- The lines and turn lane/directional arrows on the roads need to be repainted in higher traffic areas, especially in the north part of town.



Downtown Business Area

- Nice, clean downtown.
- People noticed the signs on the street lights advertising upcoming events.
- Traffic lights were easy to see.
- Impressive, colorful planter boxes on the street corners. Very impactful. Good job on beautification!



Downtown Business Area



- Though the roads were rough, the streets were nice and wide.
- Some visitors understand the bumpiness comes with the territory of having brick streets and it gives the area personality.
- The width and condition of the sidewalks was noted as a positive.
- After getting into downtown instead of just driving through, some empty storefronts were observed.

Downtown Business Area

- If a storefront was empty, it was easy to tell it had been empty for a while and neglected.
- Some boarded up windows and an awning with weeds growing out of it were noticed.
- Many of the first floors of buildings were occupied, but it didn't appear like the upper floors were being utilized.
- The tops of most buildings were nice and noted to be well maintained.
- Great to see so much space being used, especially the large furniture store and the dentist office in the movie theater.
- The part of downtown north of the railroad tracks was nicer than the south. Buildings had more architectural detail and personality.



Downtown Business Area

- Visitors found a variety of businesses while downtown, including Redman's Shoes and Ranchwear, which had a nice selection of boots.
- The Alley Rose Restaurant was also observed while visitors were downtown.
- ABC Drug was noted to be a gift store as well as a pharmacy.
- The Rustic Patch had handmade items.
- Home Within had a home décor selection.



- K-Town Cakery offered custom cakes and utensils. Visitors felt this place was awesome and should be advertised way more than it was. They were really good at convincing people to buy their products. Visitors bought treats and extra to take home with them.
- The co-working space was noted to be a great asset and should look into utilizing more co-working space apps to get travelers in the doors (Proximity as an example).



Downtown Business Area



- A tour in Nest Space and Central Mercantile resulted in visitors declaring these locations to be very impressive. The Nest's manager gave a great tour and answered a lot of questions.
- Visitors were surprised to see three theaters. They did note one of them was the dentist office and felt that was a great use of space.
- Other businesses noted by visitors while downtown: clothing, specialty services, tattoo parlors, beauty salons, music stores, and furniture.
- Good mix – robust shopping and useful services, though not many dining options.

Downtown Business Area



- Excellent customer service at all shops visited and the restaurant.
- The Nest and Central Mercantile had very friendly people working who did not mind answering questions. Positive attitudes!
- The Nest was locked due to being members-only, but the manager noticed the visitors and offered a tour.
- One group, not initially greeted upon entering, felt at the time of their visit that Central Mercantile and the K-Town Cakery were both understaffed, but they were friendly and the place smelled great.
- Staff at the dentist office let visitors look around the great use of space at the theater.

Public Amenities Downtown

- Trash bins and bike racks were observed.
- Only one recycling bin was noted.
- A lot of benches were found downtown. Visitors appreciated how they were angled and not just straight on, giving them a better view of the street instead of just buildings alone.
- Some noted that wi-fi showed up temporarily but faded out. It would've been nice to see more free wi-fi access for visitors who may not have good cell coverage.
- Others saw no wi-fi access downtown.
- No public restrooms were observed.



Downtown Parking and More

- Parking was easy. An adequate number of spaces and not difficult to walk to different locations from one spot.
- Quite a few murals were seen – fun to look at.
- The trees and fresh flowers in the planters were noted to be awesome.
- Some trash and cigarette butts were seen on some of the sidewalks which was disappointing since there were so many available bins close.



- Multiple strip mall type facilities were noted in town with a wide variety of shops.
- The shopping area on the north end of town is what you would expect for an outdoor mall.
- The Wednesday farmer's market had some fun people, tasty produce, and treats. Visitors were disappointed that it was set up in the mall parking lot, figuring if it's been around for 40 years it should have a home in one of the beautiful parks in town. It was a small market that wasn't marked well.
- The Hill Top Mall looked a bit dated.

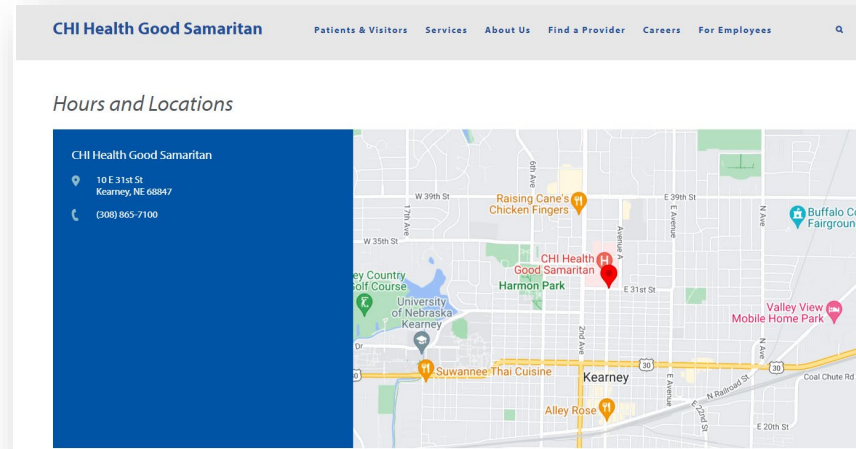


- *A drive-by is not how industry will find you, check with your local Eco Devo director to make sure your site is listed on LocationOne @ Nebraska Department of Economic Development.*

Observation:

- There appeared to be multiple commercial/industrial-type buildings for sale at the time of the visits.
- No signs indicating any land for sale or lease for expansion or building new facilities.
- Visitors drove past the industrial park at the east exit. There seems to be a lot of room there to expand if the agriculture land was available for purchase.
- Multiple visitors noticed the solar farm and wondered how that was working out.
- One of the industrial areas mentioned was on the way to Cabela's at the exit. It was neat and clean and appeared to have room to expand.

- The CHI Health Good Samaritan facility is very nice and new looking.
- Also noted was the Kearney Regional Medical Center south of town.
- The availability of hospital and emergency services seemed adequate for the community's size.



- There appeared to be a good variety of medical services observed in person and during online searches.
- Some visitors lost count of how many clinics they encountered – there really seemed to be an abundance of specialty clinics in a good way.
- Services were spread out so different areas of the city had options.
- A lot of medical supply stores and pharmacies observed.



- There were some long-term care facilities noted, but some visitors forgot to write down the names.
- One of the facilities was noticed downtown.
- Visitors were very happy to see the veterans' home.
- When searching online, multiple options for assisted living and similar facilities came up.



		Nebraska
• Occupied Housing Units:	13,397	767k
• Owner Occupied:	60.3%	66.8%
• Renter Occupied:	39.7%	33.2%
• Vacant Housing Units	969	74k
- For rent:	300	
- For sale:	65	
- Sold, not occupied:	0	
- Seasonal/recreational:	46	
- All other vacants:	499	
• Average Household Size:	2.36	2.4

Blue = Nebraska Comparison Data

Data Source: Census.gov 2020 Census
& ACS 5-year Narrative Profile (Household Size)

Nebraska

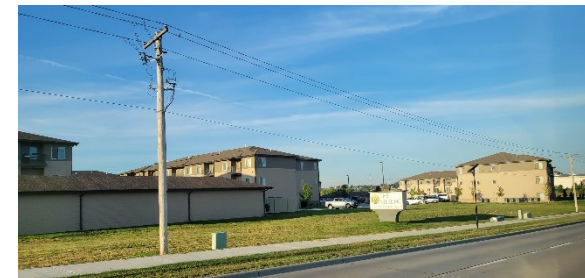
- Mean Travel Time to Work: 14.6 mins 18.8 mins
- Households without a computer*: 764 (5.7%) 141.7k (7.2%)
- Households without broadband internet: 1,487 (11.1%) 250k (12.7%)

* Includes smartphones, tablets, other wireless devices

- Some felt that there was a substantial number of homes for sale in the city.
- Others felt the housing supply was short which limits variety.
- Housing in multiple price ranges was seen, including: trailer homes, college houses, upscale duplexes, single-family starter homes, and very large homes on the lake.
- The housing closer to the university campus seemed more run down.
- House costs observed online started at about \$200k and increased as they got closer to the water.
- Zillow indicated 93 properties on the market at the time of the search.



- The Kearney Housing Authority had useful information on what properties were for rent.
- There were a few rental signs seen in town, but not as many as would probably be seen in April or May since it's a college town.
- One of the apartment complexes looked very new and seemed to be an excellent option for families starting out in the city.
- There were some trailer houses available, but didn't look to be appealing options.
- One visiting group was told about University Village which was being built to alleviate housing strain and connect the community to campus a bit more. The view from the site made it appear to be more on-campus housing for students, so the benefit to the community wasn't immediately clear.
- Not much for rent listed on apartments.com.



- The **Nebraska Investment Finance Authority** is a resource to find out about affordable housing planning and financing, emergency rental assistance, and more.

<https://www.nifa.org/>



- Preschool through University of Nebraska-Kearney was represented.
- All look to be well maintained.
- A Christian school system was also identified.
- The UNK campus was nice.
- Visitors also learned of a community college and a cosmetology school.
- Schools appear to have room to grow if necessary.



- The Kearney Public Schools website had information available about the quality of education and the details were current.
- Top 30% test scores in the state – 8/10 seemed pretty good!
- The site was easy to find as one of the first results in a search.
- The site was also very easy to navigate.
- District appears to be moving in the right direction.
- The University didn't show up readily in searches for schools in Kearney.



Comments:

- Other than the preschool options noted earlier, visitors didn't see other childcare offerings while on their visit.
- An online search showed nearly 20 options, but no details on pricing.



Buffalo County Information:

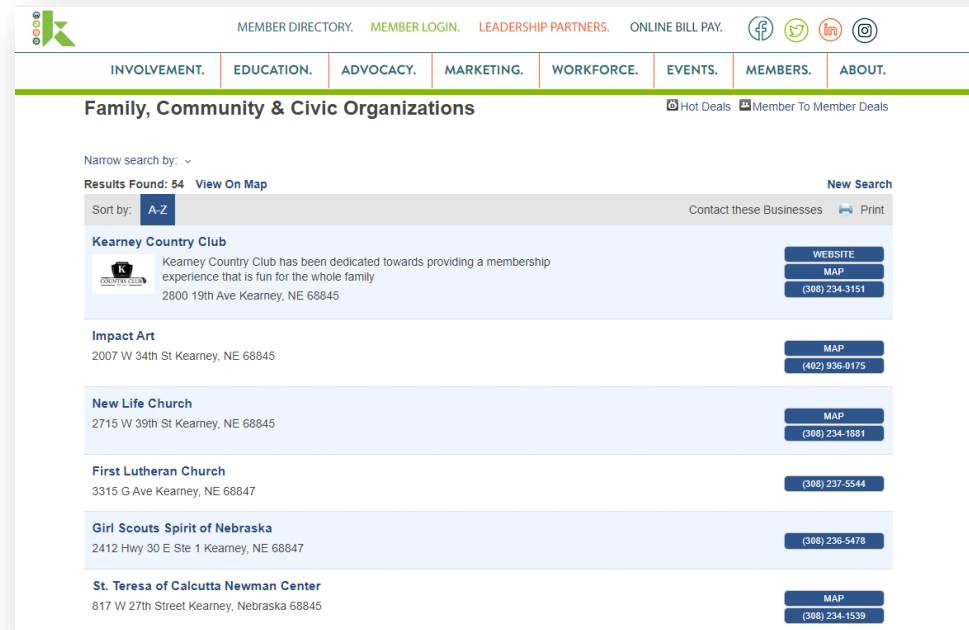
- Sources for childcare can be found on the Nebraska Health and Human Services website with links to the Nebraska Child Care Referral Network and Nebraska Resource and Referral System.
- <https://dhhs.ne.gov/Pages/Search-for-Child-Care-Providers.aspx>



- One visitor noted encountering about 20 different churches.
- At first glance the visitors thought the First Baptist Church was the gymnasium for the elementary school – a very impressive building.
- Others thought the First Baptist Church was the city's sports complex, complete with summer outdoor ninja obstacle course.
- St. James church looked modern and inviting.
- The Christian school in town was observed but visitors weren't sure what denomination it was affiliated with.
- There was a Catholic hospital.



- One visitor noted they didn't encounter any obvious civic organization activity or signs.
- Others noted that some of the murals were sponsored by local civic organizations.
- Some did see a road sign that listed quite a few civic organizations such as Kiwanis and Rotary.
- The Chamber features 16 organizations in the civic category. The country club was listed as one of them which didn't seem like a good fit.



- The Downtown Kearney website did list a calendar of upcoming civic events.
- It was felt at some point the Masons were very involved in downtown Kearney as they were referenced on several buildings.
- Visitors liked the stars on the sidewalk.
- It was noted that the Optimist Club had a project sign downtown.
- There were some indications of sponsorships by civic groups at the fairgrounds.



Public Infrastructure



- Some construction was apparent around the interstate, all seemed to be in an effort to improve traffic flow.
- Streets were kind of rough all over, especially Lakeview and Main. Second Street was very nice.
- Street signs were consistent and easily readable making it easy to get around town.
- No issues encountered while parking in areas outside of downtown.

- Visitors were received very well at City Hall. It was a very pleasant experience.
- Mary at City Hall was given high praises. She was very kind and helpful. It was expressed that every city should have someone like her on staff. The visitors would like to thank her for making their visit great.
- After a friendly reception, materials about parks, trails, the library, restaurants, and public art were presented to visitors.
- There was not any information on housing referrals to offer.



- Visitors were surprised that the fire department was volunteer in a city this size.
- The fire station was well taken care of.
- Visitors did not encounter law enforcement while in town – either the buildings or vehicles.



- The library seemed to be a bit of a distance from the general public, but looking at a map, it's right in the middle of town.
- Encountering the railroad track and going over the bridge may make it seem to be farther away than it really is.
- This is an awesome looking facility with a book-themed exterior.
- Plenty of parking was available.



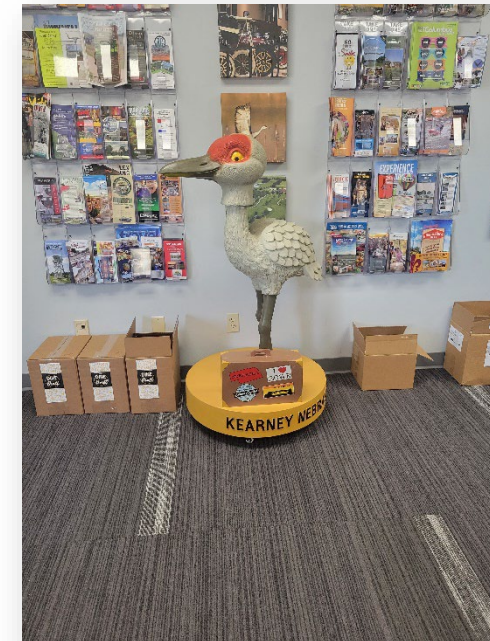
- Visitors were very impressed with the quality of the parks in town.
- Some were surprised with how great the parks were.
- The bike and water trails were a positive note with the bike repair station at the entrance to the water trail receiving praise.
- The trails were visible as soon as visitors arrived in town.
- Harmon Park was super impressive – one of the city pools was there. The golf course was in good condition.



- Yanney Park was also noted to be “really cool” with visitors spending a considerable amount of time there. The final scope of the park project looks like it will be a treasure for the city.
- Visitors received a tour of the senior center at Yanney Park and were impressed with that facility.
- Parks were very inviting and it looked like the work happening during the visits will continue to grow these areas.



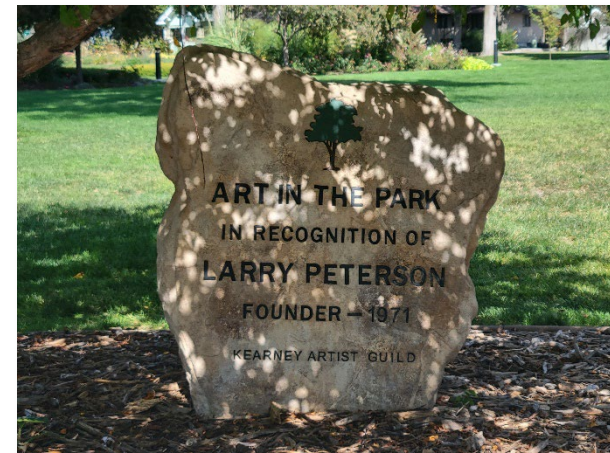
- This is the Sandhill Crane Capital of the World, though it didn't seem like everyone embraced that.
- There were references around town in the Senior Center, Welcome Center, a mural downtown, and a statue at Yanney Park.
- Based on the pre-visit web search, visitors thought they would have encountered more signage related to this on their visit.



- The slogan “The Heart of Nebraska” was observed.
- The new sports complex looks like it will be exciting and a great draw to the city – there were multiple mentions of this.
- The Big Apple Fun Center appears to be a popular attraction.
- Visitors asked around about the ice rink and everyone acted like it was old news and not very exciting.
- The Peterson Senior Activity Center was a nice facility for those 50 and older. Visitors went on a tour and appreciated the trails, floral areas, and its location.
- The Archway Museum was unique.



- CityofKearney.org was full of events for those taking the time to look before arriving.
- The highway patrol was having a meeting at one of the convention centers and it was reported that hundreds of troopers would be in attendance.
- Art in the Park was listed on the calendar but was outside of the visitors' time frame.
- Posters and flyers for community shows were seen in town, as well as a concert series, and the Senior Games.
- Movies in the theater downtown.
- Kearney is celebrating its 150th anniversary this year and there was a series of events dedicated to this.



- What might draw people to the community? Some felt the Archway Museum would do that.
- Others thought Harmon Park was a hidden gem. It didn't come up during the pre-visit web search.
- Visitors noted again they were blown away by Yanney Park, it's trails, paddle boats, splash pad, amphitheater, gardens, and senior center. One mentioned they would definitely come back to town for a concert on the water and let their kids try out the swan boats (they'd like the observation tower, too).
- The botanical garden has endless opportunities.
- The Crown Plaza and conference center was beyond impressive. Staff showed visitors around and they learned more about the setup for the law enforcement event that was to serve 2,500 attendees.
- Visitors expressed disappointment at missing MONA as it was closed for renovation, but it will be a significant draw for tourism once finished.

Visitor's Center or Chamber

- Visitors did stop at the Chamber and Visitors Center. Some said if they weren't looking for it specifically that they would have missed it. They are excited it's moving to a new facility as the current one appeared cramped.
- Others felt it was easy to find as signs led visitors straight to it. Staff was friendly and dropped what they were doing to visit.
- People were very helpful in answering questions.
- Guides were provided as well as promotion of Yanney Park. The Chamber CEO spoke about the new sports complex.
- The EcoDevo office was also visited.



What would bring you back?

- K-Town Cakery.
- The Children's Museum.
- The Big Apple.
- The theater that is volunteer-led and plays old movies.
- A great family trip would include Yanney Park, lunch at the Mercantile, dessert at K-Town Cakery, then dinner at Joy's Table.
- Dinner for one of the groups at Joy's Table was perfection. There was live music on Wednesday night.
- O'Malley's was unique and would be of interest when bringing people back to town.
- Additional praise for Cunningham's on the Lake, especially their vegetarian options.
- No shopping options really stood out that would bring people back, but the parks definitely would.

- Very clean city and clean neighborhoods.
- CityofKearney.org is an amazing website full of information and it does a great job of highlighting everything related to the city.
- Friendly service everywhere.
- City seems to have great momentum.
- Desserts downtown were fabulous!
- The Archway Museum.
- The new sports complex will be a huge win surrounded by convention centers and hotels. It will also make the key leaders (CVB, Chamber, EcoDevo) more visible.
- Amazing parks. Yanney especially, along with the Senior Center.
- The new housing construction project on campus.
- Stellar hotels and convention centers.
- Private investment by community members to make things happen.
- City prioritizes beautification.
- Younes is clearly a major developer in town which is on display at the Crowne Plaza Hotel and Event Center. Having a key investor and a facility which allows the community to attract a variety of groups is a great asset.

- Right now, the construction near the interstate. It will make things better eventually.
- Lack of public transportation.
- While some visitors noted there was housing for all income ranges in town, it may not have been for sale or rent meaning there would be benefit in new, income-based or income-appropriate housing.
- The city appears to be landlocked.
- Not every space is currently utilized downtown. There would be a more positive impact on tourism and community growth if this could be remedied. Strategic filling of downtown vacancies is needed.
- The city is growing at a rigorous pace, but infrastructure needs to keep up with it.
- Is childcare adequate?

What will you remember?

- Friendly people.
- Clean community with a lot of potential.
- There are a few major donors that care a great deal about the city.
- The parks were amazing and one visitor noted they would come back just to explore them more. Hands down – Yanney Park.
- The water and flowers everywhere.
- The Mercantile.
- One visitor asked themselves 4 questions about Kearney: 1. Would they take their family for a weekend? Yes they would. 2. Would they go back multiple times per year? Probably not. They felt they could see and do everything they wanted in one weekend. If they needed to visit a larger city, Salina, KS was closer, and Wichita was about the same distance as Hays is to Kearney. 3. Would they go once a year? Probably, yes. It would be a weekend trip with the family and especially if there was an event going on. 4. Would they move there? No, not because it's a bad place or something is wrong, they're just happy in Hays, KS and have no reason to leave at the moment.
- Cracked/rough roads.

- Remember that potential new residents are researching before they come. Use your City and School websites to highlight your many assets.
- What are you proud of? Show us online.
- Tell your positive stories. Make your residents want to contribute to a positive story.

N o o n e c a n d o e v e r y t h i n g ,
b u t e v e r y o n e c a n d o s o m e t h i n g .

Thank you to our volunteer visitors.

Set Next Steps:

- Start talking! Find ways to discuss what you heard in small groups of every kind.

Contact us with questions or requests for resources:

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Kansas Community Empowerment Program Co-Coordinator

K-State Research and Extension

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RURAL PROSPERITY NEBRASKA