

# Ft. Atkinson State Historical Park Tactical Plan

A Partnership Endeavor to Preserve a Historical Treasure

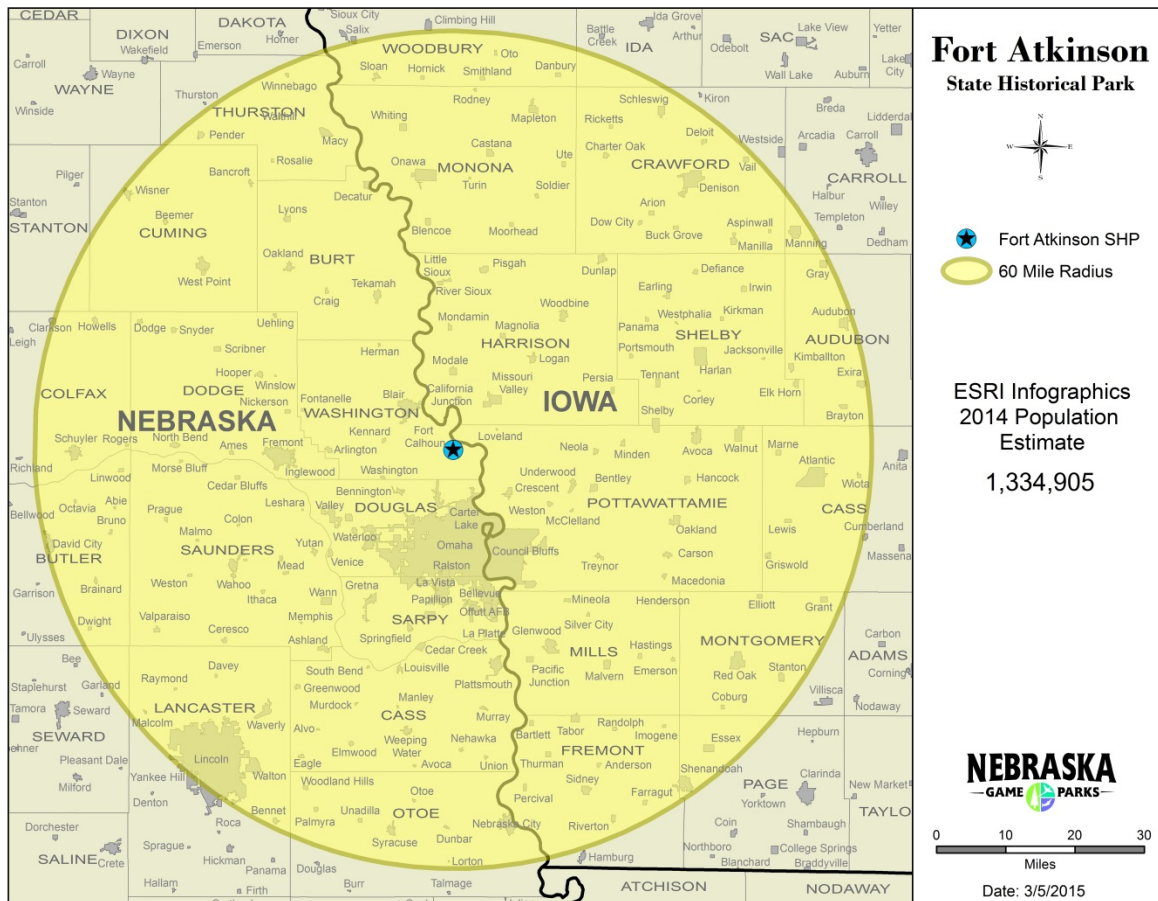


## FT. ATKINSON STATE HISTORICAL PARK TACTICAL PLAN

Fort Atkinson State Historical Park (SHP) is rich with history and is a great example of westward expansion in Nebraska. It is located within 20 miles of the largest metropolitan area in Nebraska (See Figure 1) and it is easily accessible. Fort Atkinson SHP (now referred to as the Fort) is at a crossroads on how it could be operated and managed for the future. The opportunity to make the Fort more than what it is now is a real possibility that needs to be explored. With opportunity, there are also challenges that include deferred maintenance items that need to be addressed with the infrastructure, displays that are antiquated in need of refreshment and new programming that needs to be established to market to a new clientele.

In an effort to identify the needs, challenges and opportunities for the Fort, Nebraska Game and Parks (NGPC) met with some concerned citizens as well as potential partners to come up with some conceptual ideas of how the Fort should operate in the future. The purpose of this tactical plan is to outline major goals and action items to propel the Fort forward for the future. The meeting's outcome was the creation of seven major goals, with the desire to show significant progress or completion of each in the next one to five years.

**FIGURE 1: VICINITY MAP OF FT. ATKINSON**



The vision statement of this plan is the overarching purpose that should be worked towards on a daily basis. It encompasses the major philosophy that NGPC wants to accomplish at this park. While there are seven major goals outlined in this plan, each of these goals can be tied back to the vision statement. The vision statement will be the guiding principle upon which the goals will be accomplished.

**Vision of Fort Atkinson SHP: *To be a viable tourist destination that offers quality historical interpretation of the westward expansion of the U.S. and Ft. Atkinson's role in this history that increases visitation to the Fort and the community of Fort Calhoun.***

To achieve the vision identified above, it is important to create strategies to accomplish the vision. This document serves as a tactical plan to guide NGPC and partners towards the future. This document is a five year action plan that helps achieve the strategic vision of the Fort. The plan will focus on seven core goals for the park and provide measurable action items to achieve the set goals. Below are the goals for the Fort.

**GOAL 1: CREATE SYNERGISTIC PARTNERSHIPS WITH GROUPS THAT HAVE SPECIAL INTEREST IN FT. ATKINSON SHP IN 2016.**

One of the most important keys to success for any park in Nebraska is the strength and commitment of its support system. One major component of that support system includes the non-profit organizations that support what the park does. There are several groups that have keen interests in the park and try to support different endeavors of the park. These groups include, but are not limited to, the Washington County Historical Association, the Friends of Ft. Atkinson, and the Fort Atkinson Foundation. But these efforts are not necessarily coordinated with one another. There are also other interests such as the City of Fort Calhoun and local businesses that have a desire to see Ft. Atkinson become a tourist destination and partnerships with these groups should be forged.



**Objective 1:** Determine the roles of each of the partner groups and what they want to accomplish.

**Action Item 1:** Have a series of meetings to identify the desires of each partner on an individual basis with NE Game and Parks.

**Action Item 2:** Have a joint meeting with all partners to share the desires of each organization.

**Action Item 3:** Annually create tactics for each partner to achieve.

**Objective 2:** Create an Advisory Committee with representation from all partners, including NE Game and Parks, City of Fort Calhoun, and interested businesses to meet at least two to three times a year to ensure a cohesive approach is occurring with all actions each group is moving forward on.

**Action Item 1:** Determine Advisory Committee members and have kick off meeting.

**Action Item 2:** Create an action plan with Committee for specific accomplishments for the next five years that the Advisory Committee carries out.

**Objective 3:** Coordinate activities with the City of Fort Calhoun during their Strategic Planning process that they are undertaking.

**Action Item 1:** Park staff will continue to attend Strategic Planning meetings that the City is hosting.

**Action Item 2:** Planning & Programming and Parks Divisions will coordinate a meeting with leaders of the City to discuss this plan and how it can be incorporated within the Strategic Planning efforts.

**GOAL 2: RAISE VISITATION TO FT. ATKINSON SHP BY 25% IN THE NEXT FIVE YEARS.**

Visitation at the Fort has been stable for the past seven years, with approximately 29,000 visitors per year. Because of its location and being within 60 miles of approximately 1.3 million people, this park



should be able to bring in a larger amount of individuals than what it has. This park is a hidden gem and there is much opportunity to raise awareness of this park. When raising awareness about the Fort, it is important to look at the demographics of the area and look at strategies to market in ways that are successful with the existing public. In the 60 mile vicinity of the Fort, the largest income group is \$50,000 to \$74,999, which is more than the average for the United States. This could

show that there is a potential of people that have discretionary income and are highly educated. There is a correlation between those that are highly educated and those interested in historical parks and history in general. It would be beneficial to find some marketing strategies that pinpoint some key messaging to attract people who fall into this income bracket.

Looking at race and ethnicity, this area mirrors the demographics of the state, with 83% of the population claiming Caucasian as their race. It is important to note that almost 10% of the population claim Hispanic as their ethnicity, so bilingual needs should be addressed. Brochures, signage, displays and activities could be key ways to market the park and serve the needs of our bilingual visitors.

The population of this area is also relatively young, with the largest group consisting of males, ages 25-29. This information shows that new marketing strategies and interpretation that is forward thinking and appealing to younger audiences will need to come into play when trying to capture new market segments. The information above is a part of the demographics of the area, however further study could be beneficial to come up with the best media plan to market the park in a successful manner.

**Objective 1:** Complete an Assessment on existing programming, media efforts and maintenance needs for the Park.

**Action Item 1:** Work with Outdoor Education Specialists, interpreters, and Parks Administration to assess the existing programming available at the park.

**Action Item 2:** Work with Communications Division and Parks Administration to examine the existing media efforts that are directed solely at Ft. Atkinson.



**Action Item 3:** Work with Engineering Division (or consultant) and Parks Administration to determine the upcoming maintenance needs for the next year, five years and beyond.

**Objective 2:** Create a public media campaign that showcases the Fort to multiple audiences.

**Action Item 1:** Further study the demographics of the area to provide information to Communications Division to create a marketing strategy for the Fort.

**Action Item 2:** Work with Communications Division to come up with a marketing strategy for the Fort.

**Action Item 3:** Use social media to reach a different clientele.

**Action Item 4:** Work with partners, such as NE Tourism Commission and the City of Ft. Calhoun to showcase the activities and opportunities of the Fort to a larger audience.

**GOAL 3: CHANGE DISPLAYS AND PROGRAMMING ON AN ONGOING BASIS.**

The Interpretive Center at the park provides a lot of displays that showcase the history of the fort. However, some of the displays at the Fort have not been changed since they were built in 1985 that

used a museum design from the 1970s. The displays were designed by Nebraska State Historical Society (NSHS) personnel and many of the display items are from the collection of NSHS. Technological advances have occurred since the displays were put into place and it's time to determine how we can bring the Fort's displays up to date. Displays at the park are visual with accompanying text to explain the varying details. While the information in the displays has not necessarily changed, the way visitors view interpretation has. It is important to meet the needs of the visitors to ensure they have a meaningful, interactive experience that creates an emotional connection and makes them come back time and time again.

In the past 15 years, staff at the Fort has changed, added to or built 12 of the 30 displays within the visitor center. There have also been improvements done regarding the displays on the grounds, which have included an interpretive sign on farming and gardening, funded by the Foundation, a Memorial to the Deceased, also funded by the Foundation and other improvements such as the erection of the period correct flagpole have taken place. Much work has been done by the Fort's staff to improve on the existing displays, but with limited resources, staff has not completed the update that they desire to attract new visitors.

Programming is one of the biggest draws to a State Historical Park. It allows visitors to get a glimpse of the past and experience it firsthand. Many of these programs rely on volunteers, specifically all the living history interpretations that take place. There are a several programs in place at the Fort. Table 1 provides a listing of the current programming at the park. With the population within 60 miles of the park, it is important to provide good programming and marketing of those activities to drive people to the park. At this time, the Fort does have a couple of events that are not specific to its historical significance and this should be expanded on to try and attract different segments of the population.

**TABLE 1: EXISTING PROGRAMS AT FT. ATKINSON**

<b>Program Name</b>	<b>Date</b>	<b>Attendance</b>	<b>Comments</b>
Living History Weekends	1 <sup>st</sup> weekend of month; May through October (6 weekends)	1,000+ per weekend	Utilizes 50-90 volunteers
Candlelight Tour	1 <sup>st</sup> Saturday in November	150	Reservation only, proceeds go to Friends of Ft. Atkinson
School/Bus Tours	Throughout the year	Approximately 60+ groups (average 40 people per group)	2 hour minimum tour
American Legion 5k run/walk			3 <sup>rd</sup> year and growing
Ft. Calhoun High School cross-country invitational		100 runners with 600-800 spectators	
Coalition of Historical Trekkers Annual Meeting	Every other year in April		Interpreters from mid 1700s to 1840 meet together

**Objective 1:** Complete an inventory of all displays available at the Fort to understand the resources available and their lifespans.

**Action 1:** Create a system to house and document all displays at the Fort.

**Action 2:** Work with Parks Administration to evaluate the effectiveness and lifespans of all displays.

**Action 3:** Work with Engineering Division and Parks Administration to set up a maintenance schedule for those displays that have not surpassed their lifespans.

**Action 4:** Create a storage space adequate to store all display items (artifacts and exhibit materials) that are not out for the general public to view, as needed.

**Objective 2:** Create a Displays Action Plan.

**Action 1:** Determine through the inventory process what can be renovated and what needs to be replaced.

**Action 2:** Research new opportunities for displays that are technologically savvy and appealing.

**Action 3:** Provide cost estimates and timelines to replace and renovate all displays identified in the plan.

**Action 4:** Prioritize list of displays to be renovated and replaced and complete at least two projects per year.

**Action 5:** Identify funding sources for new displays.

**Objective 3:** Determine capacity to provide additional programming at the park.

**Action 1:** Brainstorm with partners regarding additional programming.

**Action 2:** Research the operational needs for the additional programming including supplies, marketing and staffing.

**Objective 4:** Create new programming at the Fort.

**Action 1:** Provide new programming that is conducive to the park's historical value and the strategic vision.

**Action 2:** Create new programming that brings in "non-traditional" park visitors.

**Action 3:** Create interpretation along the existing trail system that compliments other programming.

**Action 4:** Create evaluation tools or processes to assess the effectiveness of all new programming.

**Action 5:** Identify funding sources for additional programming.

**GOAL 4: FOCUS ACTIVITIES ON VISITOR CENTER, INCLUDING INFRASTRUCTURE UPGRADES.**

The Harold Andersen Visitor Center should become the central point of all activity within the Fort. It should be the starting point of a person's visit and provide guidance on what can be seen and experienced at the park. Currently, the Visitor Center consists of two display wings, a resale/lobby area and a theater.

As stated before, most all of the displays at the Visitor Center are in need of an update or replacement. Not only do they not meet current accessibility standards, they also do not meet the needs of today's visitor. Significant upgrades should be made to the Visitor Center, including necessary infrastructure upgrades. These upgrades could include theater renovations, display renovations, restroom renovations, technology, and accessibility.

**Objective 1:** Develop an Assessment tool for Visitor Center to identify deficiencies and needs for the building.

**Action 1:** Create a team that includes park, operations, and engineering personnel to identify the challenges in the Visitor Center Building's infrastructure.

**Action 2:** Explore changing the entrance to the Fort to encourage all traffic to stop at the Visitor Center

**Action 3:** Generate a list of potential funding sources to finance project list.

**Action 4:** Prioritize list of deficiencies identified in assessment.

**Objective 2:** Take prioritized list and identify potential funding sources to complete all projects.

**Action 1:** Share project work among partners so multiple projects can be worked on at one time.

**Action 2:** Ensure that all capital projects are included within the Capital Budget for NGPC to complete.

**Action 3:** Parks and Engineering Divisions work together to certify that projects continue to move forward in a timely manner.



**GOAL 5: CREATE SIGNATURE EVENTS AT FORT IN 2016 AND EXAMINE NICHE MARKETING AND OTHER AVENUES FOR MARKETING THE FORT.**

The park has an excellent opportunity to create signature events that tie the Fort to the community as



well as create additional exposure to populations that may not have another reason to frequent the park. These signature events do not necessarily have to showcase or focus on the history of the Fort, but should be conducive to the natural environment that is the park. This could involve creating a partnership with Metro Community College to create a culinary event reminiscent of the farm to table events that are popular across the United States. Another potential event could be building a stage and creating partnerships with local theater groups in the Omaha area to have performances at the park. The possibilities are endless due to space available and the population in close proximity.

In NGPC's Strategic Plan, "Focusing on the Future, A Plan for Nebraska's Fish, Wildlife and Parkland Resources," it identifies key concepts regarding State Historical Parks and one of those items is creating niche markets. Because of the Fort's unique resources, staff should spend time determining what niches it could meet. For example, due to the type of Fort this is, perhaps kids

camp could be incorporated into the events offered at the park. Or could this area be a venue for significant events such as weddings, reunions, graduation receptions...etc. to the local communities within 30 miles. These are things that should be explored in detail for this park.

It is important to look at the distinctive types of messages that could be used to promote the Fort. The park has historical significance including its strong Lewis & Clark Trail connection, it is the first U.S. military post west of the Missouri River, it was a very large, active garrison, it was a gateway for the fur trade and was a jumping off point for several early southwest expeditions to the Mexican settlements. All of these elements could be used for different messages about the Fort. Not only does the Fort have great historical significance, its location and geography provides some opportunities to create additional messages. Another opportunity is the State's 150<sup>th</sup> anniversary which will occur in 2017 and the Fort could play a unique role in the celebrations that are being planned. The Fort will also celebrate its 200<sup>th</sup> anniversary in 2019/20.

**Objective 1:** Create a list of potential signature events.

**Action 1:** Provide information to local partners to gauge interest and determine best fit.

**Objective 2:** Choose two events to hold for 2016.

**Action 1:** Engage local partners to assist in hosting signature events.

**Action 2:** Create planning committee for each event and develop details of each event, which includes marketing for the events.

**Action 3:** Formulate budget for each event and work to create sponsorship opportunities for partners to co-host events.

**Action 4:** Evaluate events to determine if these occasions should be repeated the following year.

**Objective 3:** Brainstorm with partners the potential of niche markets for the Fort.

**Action 1:** Create small team to explore niche markets and identify 2 potential opportunities to develop in 2016.

**Action 2:** Formulate planning committee to facilitate these 2 identified opportunities and provide them the resources necessary.

**Objective 4:** Create a long term plan for different signature events and niche markets.

**Objective 5:** Parks and Communication divisions will work together to create a multichannel marketing campaign that is conducive to the large demographic make-up of the 60 mile radius surrounding the Fort.

**Action 1:** An analysis will be completed to determine the best channels to use to market the opportunities that are offered at the Fort.

**Action 2:** A budget will be determined for the different marketing channels and priorities will be set for the modes used.

**Action 3:** A marketing plan will be developed by 2017.

**Action 4:** Communications will develop messaging that is consistent with the NGPC brand and outlined within the marketing plan.

**Objective 6:** Parks and Communication divisions, in conjunction with partners will determine the specific messages they want to relate to the public regarding the Fort for the next four years.

**Action 1:** A list will be developed of specific messages and then prioritized to determine the messaging for the next four years.

**Action 2:** Survey work will be completed to analyze which of the messages may resonate with the largest audiences.

**Action 3:** After analysis is completed, the list will be reviewed and modifications will be made.

**Action 4:** Communications division will use analysis and creative staff to design the messaging that was determined to be most successful as well as tie messaging in to new events and programming.

**GOAL 6: ASSESS INFRASTRUCTURE AND DEVELOP GOOD PRACTICES FOR THE MAINTENANCE OF THE FORT.**

Preservation of the grounds and the buildings of the Fort are of great importance. Some of the first steps of making sure the Fort is being well maintained is to assess where we are currently in regards to the infrastructure of the park. There are some opportunities at the Fort to build the fourth wall of the Fort as well as repair, renovate and change some of the existing infrastructure of the area. If the Fort is not in good condition, it will be difficult to get people to visit the park area.

It is also important to develop good maintenance practices regarding the unique infrastructure of the Fort. It will be imperative that staff is adequate to address the maintenance needs of the facility. Part of good maintenance can include working on re-creating the natural habitat to a specific time period of the Fort and provide interpretive opportunities with that.



**Objective 1:** Preserve the grounds and building infrastructure of the Fort.

**Action 1:** Complete an assessment on the grounds and building infrastructure to determine the needs for investment in the future. This could be through a private firm or could be through the Engineering and Parks Divisions.

**Action 2:** Work with NE Game and Parks staff and partners to determine the priorities for additional work needed regarding infrastructure.

**Action 3:** Provide cost estimates and timelines for maintenance, replacement and renovation of infrastructure identified as a need and develop a future maintenance schedule.

**Action 4:** Look to complete one major project regarding infrastructure every two years to ensure funding is raised and available.

**Objective 2:** Determine any additional maintenance practices that should take place on an on-going basis.

**Action 1:** Complete an assessment of current practices by season and identify needs from the staff regarding what items they would like to see accomplished throughout the year.

**Action 2:** Create a maintenance schedule from the input of staff. Determine cost estimates and staffing needs to implement maintenance schedule.

**Objective 3:** Parks, Horticulture and Wildlife divisions will work together to re-create the natural resources to a specific time period and provide unique interpretation opportunities for users to experience.

**Action 1:** Determine which time period works best with the existing resources and is easily maintained to create a natural resources landscaping plan that includes costs and schematic designs.

**Action 2:** Horticulture will be provided a budget to create the historic natural resources plan created for the park.

**Action 3:** Create an interpretive program that focuses on the natural resources of the landscape of the era chosen.

**GOAL 7: INVESTIGATE REVENUE GENERATING PROJECTS THAT CAN MAKE FT. ATKINSON A SUSTAINABLE PARK UNIT WITHIN THE NEBRASKA STATE PARK SYSTEM.**



It is important to create a sustainable park system because it allows for the parks to be viable destinations for future generations without the uncertainty of general fund dollars that are provided to NE Game and Parks. State Historical Parks have challenges, which include, but are not limited to, minimal staffing, small budgets, and marginal marketing. Historical parks, due to their size, have the issue of attracting repeat visitors because there isn't as much park area to

traverse and the displays stay relatively static.

The proximity to population and the potential partnerships the Fort has positions the park to be successful in becoming a sustainable park in the future. This goal can be linked with several of the other goals mentioned above. Within this goal, there are action items for some key components to make the park sustainable, these include: preservation of the Fort infrastructure, lodging opportunities, consignment food service, better marketing (some information identified in Goal 5) and furthering partnerships (see Goal 1 for information on partnerships).

There is a specific objective identified (Goal 4) that addresses the Visitor Center separate from this goal because it is important to have a central location of all activity within the park. The Center houses the staff offices as well as where much of the information about the Fort is located. It is important to

address the Center as a separate infrastructure need because of direction NE Game and Parks wants to see this park installation evolve.

Lodging opportunities could also come into play for visitors to the park. Because of the living history weekends, there could be some benefit to provide for lodging. There may not be enough camping prospects in the region and the Fort could fulfill that niche, besides being a Historical Park. This is something that should be explored for the future.

With the potential surge in signature events and other activities, there may be a need for food consignment for these occasions. It is not necessary to have food service at all times for the Fort, so this opportunity should be explored in further depth to determine if it is feasible and warranted by the public.

With the location of the Fort, there are many different segments of the population that could be explored to further market to. The demographics of the area tell us that there are many people that would be interested in coming to the Fort if they knew about it. It will be important to increase awareness, using multiple marketing channels, which could include, but should not be limited to, social media, print news, television, and radio.

**Objective 1:** Parks and Planning & Programming staff will complete a feasibility study on the potential lodging opportunities that could be located within the Fort.

**Action 1:** Determine the type of lodging opportunities that could be available for the existing infrastructure at the Fort.

**Action 2:** Conceptually lay out the opportunities within the existing infrastructure and determine the additional needs for the lodging.

**Action 3:** Create a business model that takes into the following costs: development, maintenance, staffing, market analysis of the development, and marketing for any lodging opportunity identified.

**Action 4:** If determined that a lodging opportunity is cost effective and of interest to NE Game and Parks and partners, move forward with fundraising and development.

**Objective 2:** Parks division staff will examine the feasibility of small food consignment opportunities, which include, but are not limited to, events and busy times at the Fort.

**Action 1:** Identify the events and activities that could support food consignment and determine if there are enough of these undertakings to further investigate the opportunity to do food consignment at the Fort.

**Action 2:** Determine the type of food service desired for the Fort.

**Action 3:** Create a list of potential vendors and determine if a Request for Proposals (RFP) is necessary to undertake to secure a vendor(s).

**Objective 3:** Communications division, with assistance from the Parks division will create a Marketing Plan to effectively bring the Fort top of mind to a diverse group of people.

**Action 1:** Research the demographics of the area in depth to understand the clientele in the region and determine the major groups of people that NE Game and Parks should market to.

**Action 2:** Work with the NE State Historical Society to understand the reasoning behind heritage tourism and create a media campaign that showcases Historical Parks, starting with the Fort.

**Action 3:** Determine the best approach to use to the different niches of people identified in Action 1.

**Action 4:** Create a marketing plan that successfully markets to broad groups as well as the niche groups identified.

**Action 5:** Implement Marketing Plan.