GO BIG FUTURE

2026 REPORT

NE CHAMBER FOUNDATION
FUTURE FORWARD

Table of Contents

Executive Summary 2

What We Learned in 2026 4
Lesson 1: Give people more reasons to live here 4
Lesson 2: Modernization is an economic development strategy 5
Lesson 3: Build companies around existing strengths 7
Lesson 4: Readiness requires an earlier commitment 8
Lesson 5: Make zoning decisions more consistent and predictable 10
Lesson 6: Continue to align employers and educators 10
Lesson 7: Better prepare workforce infrastructure ahead of growth 12
Lesson 8: Organize the work across and outside Nebraska 13

How We Learned It 14
Why was Go Big Future established? 14
What is Go Big Future? 14
- Launching a movement 15
  - February | Go Big Future Launch Forum 15
  - March | All the Above Energy 16
  - April | Nebraska Impact Wrapped 17
  - May | Tech, Talent and Transformation 17
  - June | Energy in Action 17
- Building momentum in August 19
  - September | Ag Tech and Beyond 19
  - October | Nebraska's Human Advantage 19
- Defining Nebraska's future 19

How do we know Go Big Future is working? 20

An Agenda Worth Carrying Forward 21

Executive Summary

Nebraska has substantial advantages and the means to build a more prosperous future.

Realizing that potential will require greater ambition in growing existing companies, building new businesses and attracting investment. Together, those efforts can create a broader market of good jobs and give people more reasons to stay, return and build a career here. Our communities give people roots. A growing economy gives them more ways to build a future around those roots. Nebraska can offer that future to our children and grandchildren, and to the people, businesses and innovators who choose to make their home here.

Over the last year, the Nebraska Chamber Foundation's Go Big Future initiative brought business owners, entrepreneurs, investors, educators, researchers, utility leaders, economic developers and public officials into that conversation. Through presentations, industry panels, facility visits, a statewide input survey and facilitated working sessions, the Foundation put its research before leaders whose experience could help translate it into a cohesive direction for growth.

Across those discussions, a common view repeatedly emerged: Our opportunities depend on how well we orient our state's assets, leaders and institutions around a common vision. At the August event, Speaker John Arch said about Nebraska: "[Though] we are small, we can move. We can influence our future… we are in a unique position to move quickly, to be nimble."



"[Though] we are small, we can move. We can influence our future...we are in a unique position to move quickly, to be nimble."

John Arch
Speaker of the Nebraska Legislature
August 18, 2026

Go Big Future was organized around three topics central to Nebraska's economic future: energy, technology and workforce. Each phase of Go Big Future drew on earlier questions and brought additional perspectives to the work. Conversations about energy demand led naturally to broader concerns about infrastructure and investment readiness. Workforce discussions spanned education, career advancement, housing, child care and talent attraction. In considering technology, the year revealed opportunities both to modernize existing businesses and to build new companies around Nebraska's research and industry strengths. Together, Go Big Future unquestionably showed how decisions in one area shape what becomes possible in another.

This report connects those discussions to the Foundation's research, describes work already underway and identifies practical choices for continued effort. Eight lessons described in this report can be neatly organized into five themes below.

1. **Nebraska's growth depends on strengthening existing businesses and building new ones.** Modernization and entrepreneurship offer distinct, complementary ways to create more valuable work in Nebraska. Existing businesses need refined incentive pathways, practical expertise and employee training to adopt technology, improve productivity and compete for new business. Entrepreneurs need customers, commercial leadership and capital to turn promising ideas into growing companies. Nebraska can do more to connect both with the research, expertise and industry strengths already present.

2. **Nebraska must prepare for investment before the next opportunity arrives.**
Sites, energy, water and infrastructure require planning and investment well before a company chooses a location. State, regional, local and utility partners must coordinate that preparation and help communities build the capacity to compete. Sustaining broader growth will also require clearer zoning and siting standards and more predictable local decision frameworks. That work can make more of Nebraska ready for foundational investment.

3. **Workforce development must create more opportunities for people to advance.**
Nebraska needs a broader market of good jobs and the education and training capacity to prepare people for those jobs. Employers and educators must connect instruction, credentials and practical skills to employment and career progression. Expanding that capacity requires instructors, equipment, training seats and opportunities to learn on the job. Better longitudinal data collection and buy-in from partners across the workforce continuum can improve the likelihood of success. A graduate, a returning Nebraskan or a worker already on the payroll should see a path to more skilled, better-paid work.

4. **Housing and child care are essential to Nebraska's growth strategy.**
Business expansion and talent attraction depend on whether people can find a home, obtain child care and build a life in a community. Nebraska must better plan for those needs alongside business growth. Earlier coordination among employers, communities, developers and care providers can strengthen the capacity to deliver this economic infrastructure at the pace of job creation. Doing so will make job opportunities attainable for more families and help communities retain the people already there

5. **Nebraska needs a shared direction, message, and the capacity to carry it forward.**
The state's businesses, higher education and economic development organizations have substantial capabilities. Connecting their efforts around shared strategies and messaging can make those capabilities more effective. Regional strategies should give partners clear responsibilities, while business recruitment, university outreach, talent attraction and tourism must reinforce a common understanding of what Nebraska offers. Progress both in organizing and delivering on these improvements will require institutions to commit resources, follow through and use results to guide our state's next decisions.

One key refrain heard this year is that Nebraska needs sustained, strategic action. The Nebraska Chamber of Commerce & Industry has begun policy development work on three items raised during Go Big Future: business modernization, site and infrastructure readiness and responsible zoning and siting practices. The Chamber will continue to develop policy and programs in partnership with our stakeholders, both pertaining to the three initiatives just mentioned but as well around other items identified in this report. The Foundation will continue its separate mission of researching, educating and convening. Hopefully this report offers ideas for others to pursue with current and new stakeholders. Collaboration was the initial ethos of this initiative and was a theme we heard time and again.

The purpose of this report is to give Nebraska's leaders a clearer direction and a practical sense of where they can contribute. The work ahead will require institutions to assign responsibility, commit resources and sustain their efforts long enough to produce results. Nebraska has the means to offer its people a more prosperous future. The choices we make now will determine how fully we realize it.

What We Learned in 2026

Eight lessons that will define Nebraska's future growth

LESSON 1

Give people more reasons to live here

At the February launch, former Nebraska Department of Economic Development Director KC Belitz described the competitive challenge plainly: "It's no longer cheap land, cheap labor, cheap power." Advantages that helped Nebraska grow for years are no longer sufficient. Heath Mello, president and CEO of the Greater Omaha Chamber, then asked how Nebraska should organize itself to compete. He argued for immediate improvements alongside longer-term reforms required to win more jobs and investment.



"It's no longer cheap land, cheap labor, cheap power."

K.C. Belitz
Former Director, Nebraska Department of Economic Development
February 24, 2026

Nebraska's advantages are substantial. Capitalizing on them takes work. Go Big Future brought together leaders from businesses, universities, public agencies and communities to examine where their responsibilities meet and how they can turn those shared responsibilities into growth.

Dana Bradford, CEO of C3 Brands, put it plainly at the launch. "Jobs are the chickens. Eggs are the people. You got to have the jobs, [and then] you get the people." Bradford asked Nebraska to recognize the fundamental importance of growing and attracting companies. Other states understand that value. Nebraska's existing businesses are recruitment prospects for somebody else.

"Jobs are the chickens. Eggs are the people."

Dana Bradford
CEO, C3 Brands
February 24, 2026



Dr. Josie Schafer offered a complementary explanation in April at Nebraska Impact Wrapped. Her work at UNO's Center for Public Affairs Research distinguishes a "job opening" from a market of opportunities. In her discussion of migration trends, young professionals who left Nebraska sought a wider range of opportunities, with more prospects for advancement and choice. "Job opportunities mean having options that match my skills and interests, offer good pay, and allow me to learn and grow professionally throughout my life. It's not just about having a job, but knowing I can continue to develop my career here rather than having to move somewhere else to find new opportunities."

Filling today's openings still matters. But today's vacancies are no argument against creating more opportunities. Building a broader market of good jobs gives a graduate, a returning Nebraskan or a prospective resident confidence that a career can develop here. It gives a spouse a better chance of finding suitable work. It gives current employees more reasons to develop new skills and a path to greater responsibility. A person should be able to change employers or careers without having to leave Nebraska. A recruitment strategy gets easier when Nebraska has more opportunities to offer.

The Foundation's "Nebraska Economic Competitiveness Assessment 2024" distinguishes hiring demand from employment growth. An occupation can lose jobs overall and still generate substantial openings as workers retire or move on. Meeting those needs is essential, but the number of openings alone tells us little about whether Nebraska is expanding its economy or creating better opportunities.

This will require an affirmative commitment to both expansion and attraction. As this report will discuss, modernization can help incumbent firms increase productive capacity and compete for more business, especially in light of tighter labor markets. New firms create value (and jobs) through new products and markets. Recruiting investment expands the base further and creates demand for suppliers and skills. These efforts reinforce one another when Nebraska organizes them around industries in which it already has knowledge, customers and institutions with expertise.

We heard another example at our April event. The Greater Omaha Chamber, Lincoln Partnership for Economic Development and Nebraska Department of Insurance Director Eric Dunning were working to attract more employment from insurers already domiciled in Nebraska. They asked: "[w]hat can we do working collaboratively to try to increase employment presence with companies that are already here?" The effort brought two cities and a state agency together around a specific business development opportunity. Nebraska already had a relationship with these companies, and a coordinated recruitment effort could help turn that relationship into a larger economic presence. Similar opportunities deserve deliberate attention across the industries in which Nebraska has an established advantage.

Helping existing firms expand, supporting new companies and recruiting investment must therefore be central to Nebraska's workforce strategy. Though counterintuitive, greater competition for talent can signal a growing employment base. Employers also have a role through competitive compensation, professional development and visible paths to advancement.

LESSON 2
Modernization is an economic development strategy



"The tech must reduce work. It can't add complexity."

Sarah Pillen
Co-CEO, Pillen Family Farms and DNA Genetics
February 24, 2026

"The tech must reduce work. It can't add complexity," Sarah Pillen said at the Go Big Future Launch event. Her test, drawn from her experience as co-CEO of Pillen Family Farms and DNA Genetics, is whether technology helps the business produce more with less work. Modernization increases output and makes better use of the people and resources a business already has.

The Foundation's 2024 study, "Nebraska Manufacturing Competitiveness," identified a policy obstacle. Employers described labor constraints, difficulty financing improvements and the limits of incentives designed around large additions to headcount. The report recommended updating relevant economic development incentives to emphasize "capital investment and modernization that leads to greater innovation and GDP growth." A policy that measures value only by new hires can miss those gains.

An employer investing in equipment, software or a better production process can grow without immediately adding employees. That investment may help the firm take on additional orders, improve quality or compete for work it would otherwise lose. Nebraska should assess modernization against productive capacity, competitive position and the development of more valuable work.

In May at Tech, Talent & Transformation, Mike Cassling, chairman of Cassling, CQuence Health, and the Aksarben Foundation, described how technology could expand health care capacity. AI can flag urgent images for faster review, anticipate a CT scanner failure before it interrupts service and reduce paperwork that consumes clinical time. Each improvement helps skilled employees deliver more care. Cassling also emphasized the skills employees need to interpret data, recognize when a tool is wrong and exercise judgment about its results. Modernization therefore requires investment in both the technology and the people using it.

Brian Zimmer, co-owner and chief strategy officer at Don't Panic Labs, picked up that thread in October at the Nebraska's Human Advantage event: "[R]edesigning work with the people who do it requires leadership." His account of AI placed responsibility with the people introducing it. Leaders must give employees room to learn, test changes and take responsibility for the results. As Zimmer put it, "we can't learn new things or discover new things at full production speed."



"Redesigning work with the people who do it requires leadership."

Brian Zimmer
Co-owner and Chief Strategy Officer, Don't Panic Labs
October 15, 2026

Those business needs should inform Nebraska's public policy. Financial assistance can help a firm make an investment; choosing the right equipment and preparing employees to use it also takes expertise. Smaller firms may need help evaluating equipment and financing, and rural executives may have fewer nearby specialists to call. The Foundation's manufacturing research identified those barriers and called for practical assistance with automation and modernization.

Nebraska should pursue an aggressive modernization effort: incentives that reward capital investment and productivity growth, practical help choosing and implementing improvements and training that prepares employees to use them. Employers can connect that training to opportunities for advancement and higher wages as employees take on more valuable work.

LESSON 3

Build companies around existing strengths

Nebraska's established industries should be more than a market for technology developed on the coasts. Dan Hoffman, CEO of Invest Nebraska, gave the Go Big Future launch audience a Nebraska example of how a new company begins. He recounted the origins of CompanyCam, a software company serving contractors, in founder Luke Hansen's experience with his family's roofing business. Hansen turned an incumbent company's problem into a new firm's solution. Nebraska's established industries are full of people who have problems that need solving. Our task is to make it easier for people with solutions to find customers, capital and the help to build a company.

In May, founders and investors discussed how proximity to Nebraska customers helps them develop useful products. Jacob Hansen, co-founder and CEO of AGEO Autonomy and ALA Engineering, described developing technology for the cattle-feeding industry near the people who would use it. "We get to go actually spend multiple days with lot managers."

The Foundation's 2025 study, "Nebraska's Technology & Innovation Future," recommended putting those industry relationships to work. Nebraska's established companies represent potential customers as well as potential investors. A customer who tests, buys and helps improve a product gives a young company revenue and a better understanding of its market.

Universities also have work to do. Businesses need a faster path to putting their research to use. September's panel during the Ag Tech & Beyond event identified changes already underway: Dr. Jennifer Nelson described UNL's efforts to simplify industry-sponsored research agreements and accelerate technology licensing. Dr. Russell McCulloh emphasized how agreements, budgets and timelines determine how quickly a partnership can begin. "The time to execution is absolutely critical," he said. These reforms deserve sustained institutional attention. Universities and business partners should match Nebraska's investment in research with a serious commitment to helping businesses apply it, develop products and grow here.

Business and investment partners have a complementary role. Universities also need stronger connections to the Nebraskans who can turn discoveries into companies. Nelson described a researcher with a promising idea asking: "Who's going to be my CEO?" Identifying and developing that leadership requires support from Nebraska's business and investment community. Faster, market-ready research and stronger commercial leadership are complementary halves of the same mandate to help promising ideas become businesses that grow here.

Ted Abernathy's May presentation gave substance to the challenge of tying together companies, higher education and other partners in service of a broad strategy. His North Carolina examples spanned extension, research parks, community colleges, biotechnology production and entrepreneurial networks. State leaders identified competitive advantages, set priorities, built capacity and assigned responsibility for implementation. They then returned to the strategy as conditions changed.



"Proximity is not the same thing as connectivity."

Ben Williamson
Co-Founder and General Partner, Grit Road Partners
September 24, 2026

In September, Ben Williamson made the organizational challenge clear: "Proximity is not the same thing as connectivity." His work at Grit Road Partners places him among producers, entrepreneurs, universities and investors whose interests overlap but may not automatically align. A viable idea still needs a willing customer, capital and a team that can see it through.
Williamson also tied innovation to the growth argument Bradford and Schafer had made earlier in the year. "Young growing companies generate a disproportionate amount of net new jobs in this country. Full stop. . . [A] [r]obust innovation ecosystem is not just about producing startups, to be clear, but it's about giving the people the best reason to build their careers, their companies and their lives in the state."

Capital remains a critical gap. Programs like the Business Innovation Act have gone a long way to spur early-stage financing for young companies. Even so, May's entrepreneurs described the difficulty of financing growth, and the Foundation's technology research identified a need for investment beyond the earliest stages. Customer relationships do not replace the capital needed to scale. New companies can play an outsized role in Nebraska's growth strategy. We have customers who understand the problems, researchers developing solutions and entrepreneurs ready to build. Universities should continue simplifying research agreements and licensing, while business and investment partners connect founders with customers, commercial leadership and capital appropriate to their stage of growth.

LESSON 4
Readiness requires an earlier commitment

In April at Nebraska Impact Wrapped, Jason Ball, president and CEO of the Lincoln Chamber of Commerce, described the priorities he hears from companies looking at Nebraska. First came sites with energy, then workforce, then incentives. Ball put the sequence plainly: "The incentives conversation is important, but it always comes last." A competitive incentive package matters much less if there isn't a location to meet the project's basic needs.



"The incentives conversation is important, but it always comes last. Access to sites, infrastructure, supply chains, markets and workforce availability — all the speed necessary — are the first considerations that Nebraska must be prepared for."

Jason Ball
President and CEO, Lincoln Chamber of Commerce
April 22, 2026

Five months later, Alec Gorynski made the same point while presenting the AgWorks Corridor's economic development strategy at Ag Tech & Beyond. "The critical decision factor is speed to market. How fast can I get up and running in this location relative to another place?"

The Foundation's economic competitiveness assessment likewise identified development-ready sites and infrastructure as areas requiring attention. Available land becomes a competitive advantage when a community can show how it and its partners will meet a project's infrastructure needs.

Preparing smaller communities for investment can open more of Nebraska to growth. August's facilitated discussions clarified what that preparation requires. Participants identified aging municipal electric and water systems, limited funding and incomplete information about available sites, their infrastructure needs and their development potential. For communities struggling to maintain basic infrastructure, preparing for additional growth requires resources they cannot readily supply themselves.

The state should take a more active role because the benefits of preparing for investment extend beyond the community that bears the initial cost. The state needs to identify which sites could serve its growth industries, what infrastructure they require and who will prepare them. Sequencing that work can make sites usable sooner. Local leadership will remain essential, but statewide coordination can supply technical expertise and direct resources toward projects with a credible path forward. That coordination gives communities with different resources a practical way to pursue shared opportunities.

Site and infrastructure investment enhances rural competitiveness. Communities near producers, processors and industrial customers have opportunities to grow, but often lack the resources to prepare sites on their own. State and regional support for engineering, due diligence and financing can help turn opportunities into projects. For rural Nebraska, that means more room for businesses to expand and more reasons for people to stay or come home.

Energy is central to this preparation. "From Demand to Delivery: Energy, Infrastructure, and Powering Nebraska's Growth," prepared for the Foundation by Aurora Energy Research in 2026, describes growth in electricity demand across industry, including agriculture and manufacturing, alongside the needs of major new users. Our research and a year of discussion makes clear that Nebraska needs urgent investment in power generation and transmission to support growth. Expanding Nebraska's manufacturers, agricultural processors and other industries will require reliable power soon.

NPPD's Courtney Dentlinger connected energy investment directly to rural growth in March at the All the Above Energy event. She described industrial prospects that would add value to Nebraska's agricultural production and create jobs across the state. Serving that growth requires investment in power assets and the workforce to build and operate them, with planning that begins well before a project arrives. State, utility and regional partners should plan together for the industries Nebraska intends to grow and the infrastructure each requires. Investments that support multiple employers or a broader regional opportunity make a strong case for state participation.



"The infrastructure needed to support Nebraska's future growth will require significant investment and a sense of urgency. Success depends on strong partnerships and shared commitments that help balance risk while creating opportunities for communities and customers across the state."

Tim McAreavey
Vice President of External Relations, Omaha Public Power District (OPPD)
February 24, 2026

Preparation carries risk. OPPD's Tim McAreavey acknowledged it in February: "The infrastructure needed to support Nebraska's future growth will require significant investment and a sense of urgency. Success depends on strong partnerships and shared commitments that help balance risk while creating opportunities for communities and customers across the state." March's discussion of the Pierce County Energy Center showed how utilities, developers, and a major customer can structure commitments to manage that exposure. Policy should continue to distinguish broadly useful infrastructure from investments built principally for one customer, with stronger customer commitments addressing the latter's risks.

State, regional, and utility partners should identify promising sites, assess their infrastructure needs and coordinate engineering, due diligence and financing before a prospect is ready to build. A more ambitious state investment agenda could help communities prepare before they could finance that work alone, with attention to the benefits shared across a region and the commitments supporting each project.

LESSON 5

Make zoning decisions more consistent and predictable



> **"Siting projects at the county level is significantly delaying or preventing projects from moving forward."**
>
> **Survey Respondent**
> Go Big Future Input Survey, July 2026

A survey respondent prior to the Go Big Momentum Forum put the concern plainly: "Siting projects at the county level is significantly delaying or preventing projects from moving forward." Other respondents called for clearer state siting guidance and more technical support for local officials. Investors need to understand the standards, the information required and the route to a decision. Local officials need the expertise to evaluate proposals and explain their consequences. When either side lacks those conditions, time and uncertainty become costs of doing business in Nebraska.

There are direct costs: engineering and development work, financing commitments and resources tied up while a decision remains unresolved. One developer stated in March, "If we have a statewide directive that offers consistency and clarity, that can help lower those costs and lower the barrier for us to get power onto the grid, into the state." Delay also costs Nebraska the investment that goes elsewhere for a clearer or faster path to operation. Speaking at Nebraska Impact Wrapped, Omaha Public Power District CEO Javier Fernandez stated, "Nebraska cannot compete for economic growth with slow or uncertain processes."

The Foundation's Aurora report records stakeholder proposals that also surfaced in the series. They include clear, objective statewide standards and predictable, time-bound local permitting processes that preserve local input while preventing de facto bans and open-ended project delays. Stakeholders also proposed technical resources for counties, an appeals or review process and setbacks grounded in evidence.

Zoning and siting reform is part of preparing Nebraska for industrial growth. The Foundation's research identifies rising power needs from agricultural processing, manufacturing and other industries. Meeting that demand requires additional generation and transmission, both of which depend on substantial capital and a predictable path to approval. Clear standards and timely decisions would help Nebraska compete for those investments. If we want the jobs and production, we have to make it possible to build the infrastructure they require.

LESSON 6

Continue to align employers and educators

Nebraska can prepare more people for high-demand careers by expanding the programs that train them. Employers and educators must pair recruitment with enough instructors, training seats and workplace experience to turn that interest into a career.

"It is a throughput problem." Jim Sutfin, the Chamber's workforce consultant and a former Millard schools superintendent, challenged the assumption in April that every shortage reflects a lack of student interest. He described preparation programs unable to accommodate willing students and organizations unable to supply enough supervised work experience. In a field where training requires faculty, equipment, an internship or apprenticeship placement or a qualified preceptor, expanding recruitment alone will not produce another graduate.

Employers and educators need to identify those constraints together. An employer's forecast should specify occupations, skills, location and timing. Education partners should identify what they need to prepare more people. That may mean more instructors and equipment, or more employers able to host and supervise trainees. Programs and funding streams may need redesign and additional resources to address those constraints. Financing matters for students as well: expanding seats will do little for a qualified person who cannot afford to complete the training. Education and employer partners should examine financial aid and tuition assistance alongside program capacity.

The Foundation's previous research highlighted advanced curricula, short programs for current workers and certificates that build toward further learning to better connect education with work. Some of that work is already underway. The Tech, Talent & Transformation panel in May described that approach in the statewide NeMAC Microcredential program. Metropolitan Community College's Gary Girard described employers helping design curriculum and delivery, and sharing in the investment needed to launch the program. Doug Rood of Collins Aerospace in York discussed how Collins is now leaning on the program to support development of their current employees.

Bryan Health President and CEO Russ Gronewold, the Chamber's incoming board chairman, gave the Ag Tech & Beyond audience an example of that same approach. Bryan examined its future needs by profession and compared them with education partners' plans. Facing a shortage of surgical technologists, Bryan recruited from within, inviting employees in roles such as nutrition and environmental services to enter a career accelerator. The effort connected Bryan's staffing needs with advancement for employees already there.

Those examples give practical meaning to Dr. Schafer's account of opportunity across a lifetime. A worker already on the payroll should be able to see a path to more skilled, better-paid work. Employers and educators need to make the preparation attainable, whether through a short credential, supervised experience or further study.

NU President Jeffrey Gold's April remarks and UNO Chancellor Joanne Li's comments in May complemented the community college examples. Dr. Gold discussed noncredit learning, badges and ways to show the competencies behind a student's coursework. Chancellor Li described frequent employer-driven curriculum discussions. Gold also described the public P20 collaboration among higher education and K–12 partners, focused on attainment, workforce and credentials. His emphasis was on "what we can do not separately but what we can do together."

Together, Gold's and Li's remarks suggest a more durable business–education relationship than periodic requests for additional graduates. Continuing to strengthen these partnerships will give employers an ongoing way to explain how work is changing. And in response, educators can request help to tailor relevant programs toward the skills students will need, without leaving graduates to discover a mismatch after they enter the workforce.

Better workforce data can show whether those new program investments are working. Labor Commissioner Katie Thurber told the May panel that even "little bits of information like job title" would strengthen the state's understanding of employment. Expanded wage files and longitudinal workforce data could help policymakers examine whether training leads to work in the intended field, whether skills carry into another occupation and whether people advance in a career. Enrollment and completion counts alone cannot show what happens after training. Employers, education partners and the government must work together to obtain that information so that Nebraska can make sounder investments. The same attention should extend to credentials. A credential has greater value when employers understand the skill it represents, educators recognize how it builds toward further learning and the person earning it can see where it leads.

Nebraska has work to build on. Employers and educators should identify priority training constraints, commit the instructors, equipment and placements needed to address them and use employment outcomes to judge progress. Curriculum design must remain an ongoing partnership as business needs change. The measure is whether people can enter and advance in the careers Nebraska needs.

LESSON 7

Better prepare workforce infrastructure ahead of growth

Throughout the series, participants identified housing and child care as essential pieces of workforce readiness, just as power and water are part of preparing an industrial site. A community pursuing business growth must also prepare for the people it hopes to attract. The Foundation's 2025 study, "Unlocking Nebraska's Potential: Child Care as a Key to Nebraska's Economic Future," prepared in partnership with First Five Nebraska and UNL's Bureau of Business Research, estimated $1.74 billion in annual Nebraska business output losses attributable to workers' child care barriers. Additionally, nearly half of those surveyed in August identified housing availability and affordability as the most significant workforce challenge.

Elizabeth Everett discussed the issue during October's Nebraska's Human Advantage event. Representing the Early Futures Partnership and Child Care Can, a recently launched child care initiative, she described the gap between what care costs to provide and what families can afford to pay. "It's that infrastructure that's needed to support the workforce, but we just don't have enough of it."

Child Care Can offers a way to organize continued work on funding and access. Everett's discussion pointed to public investment alongside employer, philanthropic and family contributions. The Foundation's research examines approaches used in other states that Nebraska can consider.

Housing offers another opportunity to expand local capacity. In October, Nebraska Investment Finance Authority Executive Director Shannon Harner described a shortage of builders in rural areas and the difficulty of producing homes at the scale communities need. The Modular Ordering and Delivery (MOD) initiative offers one response to fragmented rural demand: combine orders across communities so producers have enough demand to plan and build at greater scale.

August participants also called for employers and economic developers to share recruitment and expansion plans earlier, assemble land for housing and align development with expected workforce needs. Those steps give communities a stronger basis for investing ahead of demand.

October's panel described efforts to prepare more people to provide housing and care. Dena Beck described Central Childcare Champions, which pairs experienced providers with prospective in-home providers as they navigate licensing and prepare to open. Denise Wilkinson described a parallel effort to build housing expertise through the SPARK Developer Academy in northeast Nebraska. The Academy invites prospective developers, contractors, local officials and economic development practitioners to learn the practical work of delivering a housing project. Both approaches develop local capacity to provide the housing and care growing communities need.

Communities, employers and regional partners should connect housing and child care plans with expected workforce needs. Earlier information about expansion, shared housing demand and support for local developers and care providers can help communities prepare. Child care funding discussions must address continuing operating costs as well as the cost of opening a facility.

LESSON 8

Organize the work across and outside Nebraska

These regional examples matter because Nebraska's economic opportunities rarely stop neatly at a municipal border. A worker may live in one community, train in another and take a job in a third.

Nebraska has a structure to build on. The 6 Regions, One Nebraska initiative, launched in 2024 by the Governor's Office, the Department of Economic Development and the Nebraska Chamber of Commerce and Industry, organizes regional community development work around the state's six community college districts. Its regional navigators aim to turn identified economic needs into projects, using shared information and regional partnerships.

The year's discussions also called for better organization in recruiting businesses and people. Too often, we present our advantages separately. In April, Jason Ball and Heath Mello made the complementary case for Omaha and Lincoln to pursue opportunities together. Companies evaluate the labor, infrastructure, suppliers and institutions available across a region. Our recruitment efforts should reflect how companies and people make decisions.

Ted Abernathy's May presentation showed how regional marketing can advance a broader economic strategy. In North Carolina's Research Triangle, for example, that meant promoting specific industry strengths and bringing university deans on recruitment trips to explain the research and expertise available to businesses. Nebraska can take a similar approach by connecting its recruitment efforts to the capabilities of current institutions.

August discussions also identified a practical concern, with some lamenting that businesses and prospective investors should know where to begin, what assistance is available and who will follow through. Nebraska's economic development partners should establish a clear starting point for inquiries, connect prospects with the appropriate local, utility, education and financing contacts and assign responsibility for carrying those conversations forward. This emphasis can give Nebraska's marketing a practical path from initial interest to investment.

Similarly, Nebraska's talent recruitment should connect people directly with the careers and communities its growth strategy will support. Regions pursuing manufacturing investment should bring employers, community colleges and economic developers together to promote the jobs taking shape and the training these new Nebraskans will need. Outreach to former residents should show how Nebraska's industries and career opportunities have changed since they left. Legal immigration should also be part of a coordinated effort to attract and retain talent. Across these efforts, employers and communities must make a clear case for both the work people can do here and the lives they can build around it.

Regarding immigration, the Foundation's 2024 study, "Immigration and America's Workforce Shortage: A Nebraska Challenge in Need of a National Solution," called for regional coordination among employers, schools, public agencies and community organizations. August's discussions illustrated why: Smaller employers need help navigating international hiring, and skilled newcomers face barriers to using their qualifications. Language instruction, access to qualified legal guidance, recognition of skills and a welcome into community life all affect whether recruitment succeeds.

Business recruitment, university outreach, talent attraction and tourism each introduce people to Nebraska. They should reinforce a common understanding of what the state offers and where its regions and communities intend to grow. State and local partners need to agree on the opportunities, identify who will pursue them and assign responsibility for following through. That work needs a budget, marketing expertise and a reliable way to connect inquiries with the partners who can help. Better marketing and better organization go hand-in-hand.

An additional next step is to turn regional priorities into specific work: identify the partners responsible, the resources required and how progress will be assessed. Measures should follow the work selected — such as usable sites, training completions and career advancement, or the housing and care capacity available to support growth. Partners should return to those results and adjust their efforts as conditions change.



How We Learned It

Go Big Future studies the past and present to illuminate what's next

APRIL 17, 2026

FLATWATER FREE PRESS

Stuck in Neutral: Nebraska used to be a leader in creating jobs and spurring growth. Not anymore.

A new Flatwater analysis shows the state has fallen behind its neighbors. Business leaders are diagnosing why – and hoping new efforts will reverse the troubling trend.

Why was Go Big Future Established?

The Nebraska Chamber of Commerce and Industry established its Foundation to research, educate and convene. Over the past several years, the Foundation has built a body of research on Nebraska's economic competitiveness, manufacturing, technology, energy, workforce and other issues that affect whether businesses and communities prosper. Supported and informed by companies and organizations operating across Nebraska, that work helps public and private leaders make better decisions about the state's future.

The goal behind Go Big Future was to put that research to work. The Foundation's investors and the Chamber's leadership asked for an ambitious, broad-based effort: share the findings, invite other Nebraska leaders into the discussion and develop a cohesive direction for growth.

What is Go Big Future?

MILESTONE EVENTS | LOCAL LEADERS | STATE SENATORS

JANUARY	**FEBRUARY** Go Big Launch Forum	**MARCH** All the Above Energy
APRIL Nebraska Impact Wrapped	**MAY** Tech, Talent & Transformation	**JUNE** Energy in Action
JULY	**AUGUST** Go Big Momentum Forum	**SEPTEMBER** Ag Tech & Beyond
OCTOBER Nebraska's Human Advantage	**NOVEMBER** Go Big: Defining the Future Forum	**DECEMBER**

Go Big Future brings Nebraska's economic research into conversation with the people who can put it to work. Across nine events in 2026, leaders from different industries and communities have explored the state's challenges, tested ideas and identified opportunities for growth. Now, the focus is on bringing those perspectives together around shared priorities and a direction for Nebraska's next decade.

Launching a movement in February



FEBRUARY

Go Big Future Launch Forum | LaVista

The series was designed to build understanding before asking for consensus. The **Go Big Future Launch Forum** kicked off the series in February, bringing leaders from across the state to LaVista to explore the Nebraska Chamber Foundation's economic research and identify the questions that would guide the year ahead. Subsequent events examined the forces shaping Nebraska's ability to grow and compete, including energy, technology and workforce development.

Early gatherings gave policymakers a closer look at the research and the realities behind it. By August, their perspectives joined the broader conversation, including hundreds of leaders from across Nebraska's industries and communities.

Opening and strategy: Tera Norris, Nebraska Chamber Foundation; Brent Comstock, BCom; Lance Fritz, former CEO of Union Pacific Railroad; Owen Palm, 21st Century Holdings; and Matt Williams, Flatwater Bank and former Nebraska state senator.

Research and economic development: Hunter Traynor, Nebraska Chamber of Commerce and Industry; KC Belitz, former Nebraska Department of Economic Development director; and Heath Mello, Greater Omaha Chamber.

Workforce: Dana Bradford, C3 Brands.

Energy: Josh Moenning, New Power Nebraska; and Tim McAreavey, Omaha Public Power District.

Technology and entrepreneurship: Dan Hoffman, Invest Nebraska; Sarah Pillen, Pillen Family Farms and DNA Genetics; and Emily Allen, Tech Nebraska.

MAY 11, 2026

NEChamber Launches "Go Big Future"

KRVN 880 Rural Radio

The Nebraska State Chamber Foundation has officially launched Go Big Future, a comprehensive initiative aimed at navigating the state's evolving economic landscape.



MARCH

All the Above Energy | Norfolk

Energy was an early focus. In March, All the Above Energy in Norfolk explored the opportunities and challenges surrounding Nebraska's unique public power model. In June, Energy in Action took state senators to Brownville and Nebraska City to see the state's power infrastructure firsthand and consider the demands of a changing energy landscape.

Research and framing: Gaurav Sen and Paden Williams, Aurora Energy Research; and Matt Williams, Nebraska Chamber.

Energy supply: Courtney Dentlinger, Nebraska Public Power District; Jason Fortik, Lincoln Electric System; Brandy Johnson, Black Hills Energy; and Chandler Elmore, Lightsource bp.

Community perspectives: Luke Virgil, Wayne Department of Economic Development; Kevin Connot, Advantage Consulting Group; and Leah Barrett, Northeast Community College.

Project collaboration: Jennifer Herron, NextEra Energy Resources; and Joe Lang, Omaha Public Power District.

APRIL 2, 2026

Aging power supply, local barriers: All The Above Energy event digs into Nebraska's energy crunch

Nebraska developers, utility staff, state policymakers and local government officials attended a Nebraska Chamber event in Norfolk to take stock of the state's energy challenges. Meeting demand means navigating a tangle of regulatory hurdles and uncertainty around new power plant development.

APRIL 24, 2026

Nebraska Chamber Foundation report urges energy-ready plan to power growth

Nebraska's energy demand is rising, and a new statewide study says meeting it will require more coordination, investment and a clearer strategy if the state wants to stay competitive for future growth.



APRIL

Nebraska Impact Wrapped | Lincoln

April's Nebraska Impact Wrapped introduced the Go Big Future mission and themes to an exclusive audience of state senators, state executive branch leaders and university partners. The discussion challenged policymakers to consider business investment, education and talent retention as key parts of Nebraska's growth agenda.

Economic development: Matt Williams, Nebraska Chamber; Heath Mello, Greater Omaha Chamber; and Jason Ball, Lincoln Chamber of Commerce.

Education and opportunity: University of Nebraska Systems President Jeffrey Gold; and Dr. Josie Schafer, University of Nebraska at Omaha's Center for Public Affairs Research.

E**ducation and workforce panel:** Bryan Slone, moderator; Dr. Gurpreet Dhillon, University of Nebraska at Omaha; Dr. Jim Sutfin, Nebraska Chamber workforce consultant; and Craig Head, Nebraska Farm Bureau.

Energy and public leadership: Javier Fernandez, Omaha Public Power District; and Speaker John Arch, Nebraska Legislature.



MAY

Tech, Talent and Transformation | Omaha

Strategy and leadership: Ted Abernathy, Economic Leadership; Mike Cassling, Cassling and CQuence Health; University of Nebraska at Omaha Chancellor Joanne Li; and Matt Williams, Nebraska Chamber.

Manufacturing and microcredentials: Jim Sutfin, moderator; Gary Girard, Metropolitan Community College; Katie Thurber, Nebraska Department of Labor; and Doug Rood, Collins Aerospace.

Startup ecosystem: Kate Engel, Nebraska Innovation Campus, moderator; Tullen Mabbutt, CompanyCam; Rick Knudtson, Workshop; and Chafik Barbar, Marble.

Venture capital and company growth: Laurel Oetken, Open Range, moderator; Shelby Strattan, Invest Nebraska; Brennan Costello, The Combine; Jacob Hansen, AGEO Autonomy and ALA Engineering; and Ben Jackson, Guardify.



JUNE

Energy in Action | Brownville and Nebraska City

NPPD and OPPD hosted the facility visits for state senators and legislative staff.

Utility leadership: Javier Fernandez, Omaha Public Power District; and Tom Kent, Nebraska Public Power District.

Economic development and utility panel: Brook Aken, Omaha Public Power District; Scott Benson, Lincoln Electric System; Brandy Johnson, Black Hills Energy; and Nicole Sedlacek, Nebraska Public Power District.

Cooper Nuclear Station briefing: Khalil Dia, site Vice President.

Each event added new context to questions Nebraska faces:

- What do state economic trends tell us?
- What resources or infrastructure will employers need to grow?
- How can the state meet its energy needs while preparing for new demands?
- Where do workforce, technology and infrastructure intersect?
- How can policymakers align with the private sector to advance Nebraska's economy?

Go Big Future examines these questions across industries and within different community settings. The result is a bigger, more accurate picture of Nebraska's challenges and opportunities, informed by people who understand them firsthand.



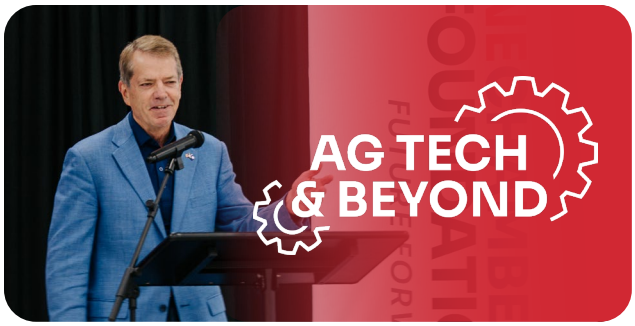
"Alignment is really driving investment decisions at a heightened rate. Our margin for error as a state has narrowed."

Hunter Traynor
Executive Vice President of Legislation & Policy,
Nebraska Chamber of Commerce & Industry
February 24, 2026

Building momentum in August

By August, the discussion had moved toward solutions. The Go Big Momentum Forum in Kearney asked Nebraska leaders to propose responses to the challenges examined earlier in the year. The Foundation used themes and feedback from the first months of the year to develop a statewide input survey. It circulated the survey in advance and analyzed the responses to show participants how other leaders were thinking about the same issues. Anonymous responses supplied a useful starting point for candid discussions.

In Kearney, participants moved among working sessions on workforce, technology and energy. Facilitators recorded obstacles and proposed responses, then reported those discussions to the full room.





SEPTEMBER

Ag Tech and Beyond | Fremont

September's Ag Tech and Beyond returned to themes about industry, research, talent and capital. The event supplied Nebraska examples of the relationships and capabilities examined in May.

Opening and leadership: Tera Norris, Nebraska Chamber Foundation; Joseph Young and Matt Williams, Nebraska Chamber; and Governor Jim Pillen.

Company growth: Joseph Young, moderator; Russ Gronewold, Bryan Health; Abram Babcock, Adams Land & Cattle; and Allen Fredrickson, Signature Performance.

Innovation, energy, and regional development: Ben Williamson, Grit Road Partners; Lexie Hain, Lightsource bp; and Alec Gorynski, Greater Omaha Chamber and Economic Development Partnership.

University research: Dan Hoffman, Invest Nebraska, moderator; Dr. Jody Herchenbach, University of Nebraska at Kearney; Dr. Tiffany Heng-Moss, University of Nebraska–Lincoln's Institute of Agriculture and Natural Resources; Dr. Jennifer Nelson, University of Nebraska–Lincoln; and Dr. Russell McCulloh, University of Nebraska Medical Center and Nebraska Medicine.

OCTOBER

Nebraska's Human Advantage | Virtual

October's Human Advantage programming examined what employers and communities must do to navigate our changing economy. The discussion brought us back to the most important consideration in Nebraska's need to grow: people.

Legislative discussion: Joseph Young, moderator; and former Nebraska state senators Matt Williams, Mark Kolterman, John Stinner, and Anna Wishart.

Artificial intelligence and leadership: Brian Zimmer, Don't Panic Labs.

Housing, child care and community growth: KC Belitz, moderator; Shannon Harner, Nebraska Investment Finance Authority; Elizabeth Everett, Early Futures Partnership and Child Care Can; and Dena Beck and Denise Wilkinson, regional navigators for 6 Regions, One Nebraska.

Defining Nebraska's future in November

And in November, **Go Big: Defining the Future Forum** was designed to synthesize the year's conversations around a shared vision for Nebraska's economic future.

How do we know Go Big Future is working?

All told, **537 Nebraskans engaged with Go Big Future** in person or virtually in 2026. That includes 466 event registrants — among them, Governor Jim Pillen and nearly three-fourths of Nebraska's Unicameral body. The group represents a wide cross-section of Nebraska's economy and includes representation from all six regions recognized by the Nebraska Chamber of Commerce & Industry.

Occupational Background	Event Registrants
Private Industry	194
Public Power & Utilities	38
Local Government & Economic Development (EDCs)	54
Higher Education & Research	54
Legislative & Policy	53
Business & Industry Associations	11
Workforce & K–12 Education	12
Community & Nonprofit Organizations	10
Other	4
Total	**430**

Event participants were concentrated amongst those in public and industry leadership. They all brought perspectives from across systems that influence Nebraska's ability to attract talent, support businesses, develop new technologies and compete for future growth. Go Big Future's **nine-part event series** was designed to explore shared challenges and workshop solutions.

Site traffic peaked at key moments — like in July 2026, when the Foundation circulated a survey inviting long-form input about Nebraska's workforce, energy and technology priorities. The survey generated **132 detailed responses** leading up to the August working forum, Go Big Momentum. Those survey responses directly shaped the event's programming.

As this movement drew the right people into the conversation, connected the research to real examples and identified priorities that Nebraskans can act on together, the scale of digital traffic points to a massive untapped audience. With thousands of Nebraskans now following the conversation online, **imagine how big we can go in the future.**



An Agenda Worth Carrying Forward

Perhaps Speaker John Arch said it best in August at the Go Big Momentum Forum in Kearney. After decades of legislative scrutiny on taxes, Speaker Arch called for wider conversation with a stronger focus on economic development.



"Growth is where we have to be focusing. Growth is what we have to be talking about."

John Arch
Speaker, Nebraska Legislature
August 18, 2026

Speaker Arch's argument reinforces the relationship Dr. Josie Schafer has described between opportunity and connection to place. Communities give people roots. A growing economy gives them more ways to build a future around those roots. That is the larger purpose behind the work described here. Nebraska needs an economy capable of supporting the excellent quality of life we have in communities around the state. Growth broadens the activity and resources to pay for our public services.

Sound decisions about taxes and spending will of course remain essential. But a state preoccupied only with dividing what it has now will give too little attention to what it could become.

The Chamber has drawn on the Foundation's research and input to begin policy work in three areas for the coming legislative sessions. These provide a focused beginning. Modernization supports the growth of businesses already here. Site and infrastructure readiness makes room for our next investments. And zoning and siting reform will help Nebraska reach the decisions investment requires. The Chamber develops policy and advocates in partnership with the stakeholders needed to carry it forward. Together, these areas are practical next steps toward the growth imperative heard throughout the year.

The appetite for a more organized effort was visible in the survey results from participants who attended the August forum in Kearney. Asked to choose between a lack of strategic clarity and a failure to execute as the greater obstacle, about 76 percent selected strategic clarity. Is this an exhaustive or statistically significant pool? No. But its importance is the signal it supplied: leaders engaged in this initiative want a clearer direction and a better understanding of how their efforts can contribute to a growing Nebraska.



“Collaboration happens at the speed of trust. And no faster.”

Ted Abernathy
Managing Partner, Economic Leadership
May 20, 2026

A broader statewide planning effort should draw on that input and on the work developed through Go Big Future. Its success will depend on whether institutions assign responsibility, commit resources, and return to the work long enough to see results. Ted Abernathy’s warning in May remains useful: “Collaboration happens at the speed of trust. And no faster.”

The Foundation has a continuing role in research, education, and convening. Its research can test assumptions and fill gaps in what Nebraska knows. Its convening can bring business, education, government, and community leaders back to questions they cannot resolve alone. Go Big Future should inform the next round of research and programming, while the Chamber and other partners pursue the policy and implementation work. Sustaining that research and those relationships will require continued investment and participation from businesses and other partners across Nebraska.

The investors who support our research wanted it to matter beyond the page. The leaders who gave their time to Go Big Future brought ideas, experience, and ambition to that assignment. We heard it clearly: Nebraska has the means to offer its people a more prosperous future. It will take choices made now, before the next prospect calls, before the next class graduates, before the next family decides where to live. This year’s work has given us a clearer direction. Now we have to commit the resources and do the work.

Let’s Go Big.



"We should never underestimate the power of a state that believes in itself. That's why the Nebraska Chamber's role extends beyond advocating for pro-business policies. We have a responsibility to convene leaders, bring regions and industries together, tackle difficult issues and help create an environment where Nebraska businesses can start, grow, invest and compete."

Joseph Young
CEO, Nebraska Chamber of Commerce & Industry
Source: Omaha World-Herald, October 2026

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