

FEATURE

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'REAL INVESTMENT. REAL CHANGE. RIGHT NOW.'

OMAHA INLAND PORT AUTHORITY ADVANCES INCLUSIVE ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT

The Omaha Inland Port Authority was officially created by the Omaha City Council on Jan. 9, 2024, and made possible by The Municipal Inland Port Authority Act passed by the state in 2021. OIPA is now a public entity dedicated to advancing inclusive economic development by combining property development, infrastructure investment, and community-focused programs to create long-term opportunities throughout Omaha, but its roots and strategic efforts are centered in the historically underinvested communities of North Omaha and eastern Omaha.

At its inaugural meeting in the summer of 2024, the OIPA board of commissioners elected as its president Nebraska State Sen. Terrell McKinney, who supported legislation introduced in the 107th legislative session by former Sen. Justin Wayne.

"We put the legislation together to make sure it took place," McKinney said. "The impetus was more so to make sure the money that was allocated from the Economic Recovery Act was going towards the [airport-area] business park, the Innovation District and such; it was to make sure that the projects were inside, that there was a focus around the projects and that the community also had a voice in what was planned."

OIPA focuses on projects in logistics, advanced manufacturing, technology, and affordable housing. Priority is given to developments that support job creation, infrastructure improvement, and equitable economic growth. A new North Omaha Innovation District, backed by \$30 million in state funding and managed by OIPA, aims to drive economic growth through specialized business hubs, startups, and innovative housing. The project includes community-driven plans for mixed-use development, entrepreneur support, and job creation in sectors like construction, agriculture, and tech.

OIPA is also managing the development of a \$90 million state-funded commercial and industrial business park near Eppley Airfield—identified in the North Omaha recovery plan signed into law as part of a legislative effort led by Wayne and McKinney and finalized as the North & South Omaha Recovery Grant Program—that is expected to boost economic growth, job creation, and industrial development. Both projects, operating within a 3,000-acre zone near Eppley Airfield, are designed to work together to foster industrial growth, high-tech startups, and community-focused development.

"We continue to remind people that we're still a work in progress; nothing is completed yet, we're still moving," McKinney said. "I think our role from a broad perspective, and our No. 1 mission, is to try to bring jobs back to the North Omaha community."





GARRY CLARK



BY STRENGTHENING NORTH AND EAST OMAHA, THE ORGANIZATION SUPPORTS THE CITY'S OBJECTIVES TO MAKE THE OVERALL COMMUNITY MORE ECONOMICALLY VIBRANT. IT ALSO GIVES US AN OPPORTUNITY TO CHANGE THE PERCEPTION OF NORTH OMAHA IN A GOOD WAY, BY BRINGING JOBS FOCUSING ON INNOVATION AND HELPING SMALL BUSINESSES.

—TERRELL MCKINNEY



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OIPA will also offer targeted grant programs that support housing, small business growth, and workforce training to build generational wealth and economic mobility. By strengthening North and east Omaha, the organization supports the city's objectives to make the overall community more economically vibrant, McKinney said. "It also gives us an opportunity to change the perception of North Omaha in a good way, by bringing jobs focusing on innovation and helping small businesses."

Economic and community development expert Garry Clark began serving as the organization's first executive director in July 2025. Within the relatively short period under his leadership, OIPA has brought in experienced professionals in economic development, real estate, industry, and planning. This growth has not only increased capacity, but is also showing community members and other stakeholders that OIPA is proficient at execution. Clark has also been focused on leveraging local expertise and institutional partnerships.

"I hit the ground running," Clark said. "I'm proud of the team that's been assembled."

"Just being able to hire staff and have people working on this day to day...it allows the community to have people directly on the ground every day that they can go to and connect with and ask questions," McKinney said. "Another success, I would say, is our interaction with the community, especially with the visioning for the Innovation District. I think we picked a good organization [real estate, economic development, and public policy consulting firm HR&A Advisors] to do that and the community felt like their voices were heard throughout that process. It made things a lot easier on our end, because we didn't have somebody that was misaligned and not necessarily listening and doing right by the community. That was big, that we were able to get that done and the community felt good about it."



Not resting on early successes, Clark said, funding is an ongoing endeavor for the developing organization. State allocations, tax increment financing, and state grants are among OIPA's present and potential funding sources. The goal for the organization is to eventually become self-sustaining through revenue generated from activity such as land sales, property leases, corporate sponsorships, and event hosting.

"We've been able to deploy our resources swiftly," he said. "We have great initial funding, \$120 million, but if you compare that to other major projects, it's probably \$100 million or more short."

OIPA also faces a challenge rooted in the past, Clark said. The North Freeway, constructed in the 1970s, was one of the most controversial street projects in the city's history. The roadway that connected I-480 and I-680 also split and segregated the Black community by creating a physical barrier, called a "concrete redline" by some locals, and its construction resulted in the demolition of some 2,000 businesses and homes. Detractors have since said the project fueled long-lasting mistrust, systemic racial injustice, a belief in intentional neglect by city officials, reduced property values, and other negative effects.

"You still have the trauma, technically from the past 60 to 100 years, for the community," he said. "And we also have lack of trust."

Rebuilding trust demands transparency and inclusion, as well as sustained connection, so an important early goal for Clark was to improve the organization's online presence.

"We needed a new website developed to engage the public and provide our information. Our slogan is 'Real Investment. Real Change. Right Now,'" he said. "We want to make sure people know that this is not operating in a silo, but it is a public engagement process. Everything that we do is shared on our website, and KPIs show on our website where we are."

Business leaders and community members interested in getting involved in OIPA activities are welcome to attend public meetings, explore procurement opportunities, apply for open positions, or contact the team to discuss partnerships. They may submit an application for membership on the Community Advisory Committee, which is to have nine or more members and is required to include—all within the inland port district—at least two owners of residential property, at least two owners of businesses, an Omaha City Council member and a state legislator; plus a youth representative or someone closely involved with youth in the community. A single member may meet more than one committee requirement.

Omaha is one of five inland port authority organizations established or proposed in Nebraska. Others are the Fremont Municipal Inland Port Authority (FMIPA), a partnership between the city of Fremont and Dodge County focusing on a 1,500-acre greenfield site suited for industrial development, and bordered by the Union Pacific Railroad and a four-lane divided highway; the South Sioux City Inland Port Authority, certified by the Nebraska Department of Economic Development to develop industrial and commercial sites; the proposed Lincoln County Inland Port Authority (Nebraska International Port of the Plains), expected to focus on developing large-scale industrial and commercial sites; and the Bellevue Inland Port Authority, a certified district focusing on expanding economic opportunities through port authority tools.

All five organizations in the state have emerged in the five years since the Municipal Inland Port Authority Act was passed in 2021, so every step OIPA takes is relatively unprecedented, McKinney said. The young organization is nevertheless making impressive progress.

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“The challenge is that it’s just something new and getting people to understand what an inland port authority is, what it can do, what it can’t do, the [details] around the project and getting the community to understand what the purpose of the projects are,” McKinney said. “I think that’ll be ongoing, but the more we start doing things and [the public] starts seeing more tangible results, a lot of the confusion and the questions will go away.”

OIPA maintains a regularly updated inventory of sites suitable for commercial, industrial, and mixed-use development, with access to infrastructure and supportive zoning. The organization also offers a selection of existing buildings ideal for office, logistics, manufacturing, and retail uses; these spaces are intended to help businesses get up and running. OIPA also offers comprehensive data covering workforce trends, demographics, infrastructure assets, market performance, and other key metrics to help businesses, developers, and investors make informed decisions.

“The short-term goals are, No. 1, getting the airport business park project off the ground, making sure that’s successful, and getting the innovation district off the ground. And then we also are tasked with developing housing, I think 20 single-family homes and 150 units. Those are our priorities based on statutory requirements,” McKinney said. “But then, long-term, it’s just continuing to find other things that can be developed and talking to people in the community and trying to see what other projects are out there that we can support and lift up.” **B2B OMAHA**

Visit omahaipa.com for meeting agendas, job listings, and more information.



WE NEEDED A NEW WEBSITE DEVELOPED TO ENGAGE THE PUBLIC AND PROVIDE OUR INFORMATION. OUR SLOGAN IS ‘REAL INVESTMENT. REAL CHANGE. RIGHT NOW. WE WANT TO MAKE SURE PEOPLE KNOW THAT THIS IS NOT OPERATING IN A SILO, BUT IT IS A PUBLIC ENGAGEMENT PROCESS. EVERYTHING THAT WE DO IS SHARED ON OUR WEBSITE, AND KPIS SHOW ON OUR WEBSITE WHERE WE ARE.

—GARRY CLARK





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