

The Intentional Tourist
by Jarrod McCartney
July 22nd, 2026

Last year was an incredible year for the Red Cloud Community Fund. We raised around \$300,000 for various causes and had our most successful September Month of Giving yet, generating more than \$113,000 including \$63,000 for the Hardwick Park project. What started off as a modest attempt to raise \$20,000 during COVID in 2020 has evolved into something special. We've now raised more than \$336,000 and are set to launch our 7th annual campaign. For September 2026, we have set a goal of \$100,000 and will focus on fundraising for the sustainability of the Discover Red Cloud/Heritage Tourism office.

Why do we need to focus on Discover Red Cloud, especially when there are so many other worthy projects happening in the community right now? The short answer is that we do not have enough funding to sustain this office and maintain the high level of excellence we have achieved since launching Heritage Tourism efforts in 2015. Not only do we no longer receive support from the City of Red Cloud, our continued growth also finds us in a position where we would also like to expand and hire up to 3 new positions: a Program & Events Coordinator, a Marketing & Social Media Coordinator, and a Red Cloud Creative District Coordinator. We are also in discussions with Central Community College to hire a part-time Business Coach. Thanks to a generous donation earlier in the year, we're also set to launch the Discover Red Cloud Small Business Loan & Grant Program which will offer grants of up to \$10,000 and loans of up to \$25,000 for businesses in the Red Cloud, Inavale, and Guide Rock zip codes (with preference placed on downtown Red Cloud).

Maintaining all of this will take money. Many of you know that we have a great track record of obtaining public grants and raising money from private foundations. Unfortunately, operational costs for an office like ours is not something most grants cover. It is much easier to find money to build or restore something than it is to find money to actually pay people to make sure that work gets accomplished, that projects get completed, and that Red Cloud continues to get promoted as a tourism destination and a great place to live. Fundamentally what we're hoping to support with this year's September Month of Giving campaign is the ability to keep Red Cloud relevant and thriving for years to come.

A lot of the work an organization like Discover Red Cloud does goes on behind the scenes. A lot of it is having the right conversations with the right people at the right time. Still more of it is putting in the work to do the research, writing, and critical thinking necessary to keep resources flowing into the community. In a rural setting, that often means being a tireless proponent of a community's quality of life and relentlessly pursuing philanthropic dollars since traditional investment will almost always find greener pastures elsewhere. That's the work we do here at Discover Red Cloud and the Red Cloud Community Fund, but we've also achieved a heck of a lot of tangible results too. It may not feel like it right now with all of the construction work going on, but downtown is considerably more active and attractive than it was in 2015. The Hotel Garber and the National Willa Cather Center are two of the biggest reasons for that and we've

been intimately involved with both. They've dramatically improved the look and feel of downtown as has the Central Community College Educational Hub where our office is located and where RCCF treasurer and my supervisor Dennis Hansen and his wife Sally have made a significant investment in the future of Red Cloud by radically reimagining the use of one building and totally reconstructing another. The Hansens would not have made this investment in Red Cloud if it were not for the clear momentum established by our heritage tourism development efforts. We've also seen significant allied growth in the hospitality and services sectors downtown. We feel like we've played a critical role in creating an ecosystem in which restaurants, coffee shops, bars, and personal services can flourish. As our focus begins to shift a little more towards traditional economic development, I'm proud that we will soon be able to help support local businesses more directly with our loan & grant program.

We're also at the heart of amenities improvement programs that are in the process of becoming a reality soon: the Donald G. Stratton Veterans Memorial at Hardwick Park and the Red Cloud Recreation Trails System. We've already raised more than \$800,000 for Hardwick Park and have another \$400,000 in asks pending and will soon pursue more than \$500,000 more. We're launching our efforts to build recreation trails starting with a phased campaign that will begin in earnest in 2027. We're also assisting the Red Cloud Youth FAC with a pickleball court project. Projects like these do not happen without Discover Red Cloud as the City of Red Cloud is rightly focused on infrastructure improvements given its limited resources. Our work supplements that critical maintenance work and improves the quality of life for everyone here and the experiences of visitors who routinely flock here from all 50 states and several foreign nations. Our work helps make Red Cloud a great place to live and helps make it a destination rather than just a place you pass through or flyover.

Since 2015, our office has helped change the narrative of this town from being a place that was experiencing inevitable decline, to being a place that is an emerging tourism hotspot with a vibrant downtown, beautiful buildings, and is somewhere that's regularly mentioned as one of the Top 5-10 small towns in the state. We are a hub for arts and culture in south central Nebraska and north central Kansas and we are well positioned to build on all of the momentum created by our focused investment in downtown and historical sites. Since 2015, our office and projects it's involved in has generated around \$20 million in grants, philanthropic dollars, and other revenue—that does not include Cather Foundation projects or revenue either (with the exception of the Hotel). Doing so would push that figure past \$30 million. Annual lodging tax revenue in Webster County has increased 173% since Heritage Tourism was started. With Hotel Garber on board, 2026 lodging tax revenues are up nearly 200% versus 2024 and 80% versus 2025. The City of Red Cloud established an Occupancy Tax in 2025 at our behest that has already generated nearly \$20K that will likely be invested in park improvements. Since Discover Red Cloud has started steering the efforts of RCCF, year-end contributions have skyrocketed, going from around \$10-\$15K annually to \$136,000 in the last quarter of 2025. If we want to maintain those levels of success, we have to keep Discover Red Cloud around for years to come.

All of this said, as the Chair of RCCF, I would be remiss if I did not also point out that we will definitely still accept donations this September for all of our RCCF accounts, whether there's a

clear connection to Discover Red Cloud/Heritage Tourism or not. This includes our accounts for Red Cloud Area Youth, The Valley Child Development Center, the Recreation Trail, Hardwick Park, our Endowment, and the Nursing Home. But, if you want to keep someone around to coordinate all of those efforts and make sure it all happens or stays on track, I would ask that you please consider making your donation to the Heritage Tourism Development account in 2026. If you're interested in making a September contribution or sponsoring the event, please give me a call at 402-746-0032, email at jmccartney@redcloudnebraska.com or donate online at www.nebcommfound.org/give/red-cloud-community-fund. Sponsors will be recognized in marketing and at our Annual Banquet, November 21st in the Red Cloud Opera House.