

Minnesota Region 4 Comprehensive Economic Development Strategy – 2022-2026

CEDS BACKGROUND – INTRODUCTION

West Central Initiative's (WCI) region is designated by the State of Minnesota as Economic Development Region IV and is comprised of Becker, Clay, Douglas, Grant, Otter Tail, Pope, Stevens, Traverse, and Wilkin County. The region was first designated as an Economic Development District (EDD) in 1973 under the auspices of the West Central Regional Development Commission. The commission disbanded in 1982 and thus suspended the EDD designation.

In 1991, WCI began preparations for a regional Overall Economic Development Plan (OEDP) and, at the request of regional partners and governments, initiated an effort to re-establish the area as a designated district. In January of 1995, WCI succeeded and received official designation as an EDD from the Economic Development Administration (EDA). The district's activities are overseen by an Economic Development District Board which reports and advises the WCI board on matters related to the district. The advisory board is composed of regionally elected officials, WCI board members and other interest groups required to meet EDA requirements for regional representation.

WCI first received a planning grant in 1996 from the EDA to provide planning assistance and advisory services to regional partners and communities. This allowed WCI to hire staff focused on economic development planning activities and overseeing the development, implementation, and reporting of the Comprehensive Economic Development Strategy (CEDS). The CEDS is a 5-year planning document that outlines the needs, goals, strategies, and implementation process for the region's economic development work. Recently, WCI received matching funds for additional planning work, established and expanded two federally funded Revolving Loan Funds (RLFs), and received additional funds to hire additional planning staff to assist communities with economic recovery and resiliency building related to the pandemic.

FRAMEWORK

Creating economic prosperity is a multifaceted process. In Greater Minnesota, economic advantages historically included agriculture, natural resource extraction and low costs (inexpensive labor, low taxes, available land, etc.). Today, in a global economy, Greater Minnesota needs to place emphasis on sustainable industries, improving the quality of inputs and facilitating innovation as the driver of long-term competitiveness, growth, and employment.

Along the way, we will understand our progress through two lenses: The Four Cornerstones of Economic Development and the Sustainable Development Goals. Both lenses focus in on what a region or community needs to be strong and resilient for generations to come.

CORNERSTONES OF REGIONAL DEVELOPMENT

Along with our partners in the Minnesota Association of Development Organizations (MADO), WCI has identified the following cornerstones as key components of strong regions and communities. When approached in a coordinated way, these cornerstones will help create prosperity:

- I. **HUMAN CAPITAL:** Developing, retaining, and attracting talent are critical to sustain and grow rural businesses and communities in the region. Tracking the characteristics of the labor force and the needs of employers, and creating strategies for alignment between the two, is one aspect of this cornerstone. Another is forecasting the economy of the future and working with communities to ready a workforce that can thrive in a rapidly changing environment, particularly with respect to advances in technology.
- II. **ECONOMIC COMPETITIVENESS:** Making west central Minnesota an attractive environment for smart, sustainable growth is critical to creating jobs, improving living standards and financing necessary public services. Economic Competitiveness requires communities to develop and link all available assets to support innovation and encourage business investment.
- III. **COMMUNITY RESOURCES:** West central Minnesota communities seek to maintain rural values, their heritage and the assets that support them. At the same time, we respectfully acknowledge that Greater Minnesota was home to Native Americans long before it was “settled” it in the 19th Century. We endeavor to welcome new Americans in the 21st century. Community Resources includes topics that balance the preservation and

improvement of social, cultural, and natural assets that are critical for the health and well-being of everyone, now and in the future.

- IV. **FOUNDATIONAL ASSETS:** Greater Minnesota communities require proactive and collaborative approaches/strategies to address infrastructure needs in a cost-effective manner. Managing the access to, maintenance, replacement and growth of these assets is key to preserving and maintaining communities and providing for growth opportunities. Foundational assets include above-ground and below-ground infrastructure such as transportation, utilities, and water.

UNITED NATIONS SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT GOALS

The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), developed by the United Nations, create a unique and globally relevant framework to measure and address issues woven through the Four Cornerstones of Economic Development. Though listed as seventeen separate goals, we acknowledge that our actions may affect multiple goals simultaneously. For example, one cannot make progress towards Sustainable Cities and Communities (#11) without also addressing the issues of Clean Water and Sanitation (#6). Nor can we advocate for Responsible Consumption and Production (#12) without ensuring Decent Work and Economic Growth (#8).

Similarly, we would like to acknowledge that our work in Economic Development must address systemic inequities, including those based on race, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, physical ability, English fluency, or culture. To be sustainable in the long-term, we must identify and close gaps in economic opportunity for all current and future residents.

METHODOLOGY

The methods used to create our region's CEDS include requirements of the EDA and a WCI toolkit for the creation of a regional guiding document. The EDA requires four components: Summary Background, SWOT Analysis, Strategic Direction/Action Plan, Evaluation Framework, and must incorporate economic resilience throughout. To craft a document that addresses EDA requirements and WCI's mission, a five-phase process was implemented:

Phase 1: Initial Planning and Launch

Phase 2: Data Collection and Public Outreach

Phase 3: Draft Writing

Phase 4: Public Review and Approval

Phase 5: Implementation

PHASE 1 – Initial Planning and Launch

The first phase started with the planning team who organized a timeline and assessed current EDA requirements for the submission of the CEDS. Through the summer of 2020 and concluding in October, the Economic Development District Board and county commissioners were surveyed to determine the current state of the region regarding pandemic recovery, and their readiness for the CEDS creation work. Results from the survey were used to create an initial SWOT analysis and compared to the 2016-2021 CEDS. WCI planners created a six-month process that began January 2021 and ends with approval of the plan by the EDD and WCI board by July 2021.

PHASE 2 – Data Collection and Public Outreach

In Phase 2, the planning team established nine broad areas of economic development: Workforce Development, Business Development, Resilient Infrastructure, Access to Education, Circular Agriculture, Parks and Recreation, Transportation, Equity and Inclusion, and Housing. These nine areas are vital to ensuring resilient economic structures, align with regional economic trends, and follow previous CEDS work and MADDO's current priority areas. After the establishment of the priority areas, staff conducted a stakeholder analysis to develop contact lists of regional partners and invited these stakeholders to participate in focus groups. The groups were used to encourage collaboration and buy-in from regional partners around the strategies and actions included in the plan. Simultaneously, an online survey was pushed out to

regional residents to increase public participation and receive additional input into the priorities and needs of our local population.

PHASE 3 – Draft Writing

After initial participation efforts, the planning staff began the process of synthesizing results and ensuring feedback from outreach is reflected in the document. In addition to public and stakeholder input, staff integrated topic data from the MN Department of Employment and Economic Development (DEED), US Census, and the Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS) to connect qualitative and quantitative data. After the initial draft by the planning staff was completed, it was sent for review by our communications team and the CEDS Strategy Committee.

PHASE 4 – Public Review and Approval

The finalized first draft was published alongside videos for each of the nine priority areas on May 5th, 2021. This began a three-week public comment period for residents and professionals to edit and suggest changes. After the three weeks, the planning team finalized and updated the draft before sending the document to EDD and WCI Board members for a one-month review period that ended in July 2021.

Phase 5 – Implementation

Although approved, the goals and strategies contained within the document require action to achieve lasting change. WCI intends to utilize and expand the stakeholders involved in the initial focus groups and create implementation teams. The teams will seek to ensure regional action towards economic resiliency that align with goals and strategies written into the CEDS.

WORKFORCE DEVELOPMENT

Context:

Public outreach suggests this topic area to be of middling concern as it received 138 responses and ranked 7th out of 14 options in our priority survey. “Helping residents train for employment opportunities nearby” also ranked 7th suggesting that residents value workforce development work but not necessarily the most critical area of need. Pairing these results with regional employment trends suggests growing workforce and employment concerns as the population ages, population growth slows, and the number of available jobs grows. In total our region has a total labor-force of 125,100 in February 2021 and a 10-year average of 125,600. Although the pandemic caused massive disruption to regional employment patterns, a year into the pandemic has seen unemployment return to levels below 5% suggesting that the labor market is already working at near full capacity. A labor force contraction from a peak in 2019 is expected to continue at the same time as the number of jobs is expected to expand and need replacements for vacancies due to retirements and workforce migration. Despite some evidence of a tight labor market wages remain lower than state averages and do not appear to be experiencing any significant upward pressure across all industries.

Goal: Promote regional collaboration to improve coordinated efforts

Objectives:

- *Organize regional advocacy to create a unified message of local needs*
- *Align and amplify industry needs to and with the future workforce*
- *Promote unorthodox career pathways to students and parents*

Strategies:

- *Re-establish monthly workforce meetings*
- *Invite local and regional representatives to discuss local issues*
- *Establish needs and align with state-wide efforts*
- *Quarterly workforce and industry newsletter*
- *Engage industry representatives*
- *Utilize marketing and social media channels to amplify outreach of unified messages*

- *Record videos about resources and labor force support*
- *Promote existing career fairs at high schools and colleges and develop fairs in gap geographies*
- *Engage students in community work around alternate career pathways*

Goal: Improve local data collection and use

Objectives:

- *Pandemic impact analysis on industries and workforce*
- *Coordinate real-time responses to market shifts and issues*
- *Analyze labor force participation and barriers*

Strategies:

- *Work with UMN Extension on regional impact analysis*
- *Public campaign to address impact of COVID-19*
- *Provide economic base analysis to local EDAs*
- *Assist with local economic development work through facilitation*
- *Aggregate existing local community survey results and make widely available to the public and key stakeholders*
- *Establish standard survey template for communities to utilize, creating uniform data for comparisons*
- *Utilize quarterly employment data in regional planning to inform workforce development recruitment strategies*

Goal: Alleviate labor market stress

Objectives:

- *Grow workforce to address labor shortages*
- *Strengthen existing worker re-training and training efforts*
- *Close wage gap between local and state rates*

Strategies:

- *Expand Live Wide Open stories and partnerships to highlight immigrant experiences across the region*

- *Engage more communities in the Welcoming Communities Initiative led by Welcoming America*
- *Highlight best practices and skill sharing sessions*
- *Partner with local industries who lack workforce with relevant skills*
- *Publish industry wage data*
- *Establish regional livable wage rate*

BUSINESS DEVELOPMENT

Context:

Small and medium sized businesses are a vital part of rural and small city life in our region. “Mom and Pop” shops and local business owners play an important and visible role in creating vibrant and resilient communities by supplying essential services and amenities for local residents. Survey results indicate that “helping entrepreneurs open new businesses” ranks second highest for participants when asked to identify important investments to improve the region’s communities. Write-in responses categorized under “business development” also received the most mentions when compared with other categories. The second survey question yields similar results as respondents again ranked “helping entrepreneurs” as the second most important category of investment.

Goal: Preserve local services and businesses

Objectives:

- Increase access to high-speed internet
- Reduce barriers to business succession planning
- Develop local market workforce consistency/retention

Strategies:

- Create public database of local and small business database
- Strengthen collaboration between existing regional broadband and business development task forces
- Utilize local businesses as places for public broadband access

- Identify top 5 regional resources to improve the marketing and communications of businesses in need of successor
- Implement a regionally-focused “Buy Local” Campaign
- Utilize data on pandemic impacts on hospitality and tourism industry to identify greatest opportunities for innovation

Goal: Improve communication of assistance and support programs

Objectives:

- Clearer communication of financing options, programs, and assistance for business owners and startups
- Develop technological support networks to reduce communication barriers
- Improve awareness of business support and development programs

Strategies:

- Support municipal and local affiliate’s website development
- Guide local businesses through online and e-commerce expansions
- Share public calendar for local chamber and business association meetings
- Implement regional Young Entrepreneur programs
- Target outreach to young adults for engagement with local businesses
- Clarify loan and investment guidelines of existing regional services

Goal: Encourage risk taking in entrepreneurship

Objectives:

- Improve business retention rates
- Expand gap financing for growing businesses
- Pursue capital investment strategies for start-ups

Strategies:

- Explore culturally responsive micro-lending program
- Establish business success evaluation metrics
- Shift additional funds towards innovative ideas

- Offer business and entrepreneur training and workshops
- Explore Launch MN through DEED
- Expand pathways for owners with shorter credit histories
- Improve connection and outreach to business owners
- Clarify loan and investment guidelines of WCI options
- Develop creative metrics to evaluate business success

ACCESS TO EDUCATION

Overall participants in the regional survey see education investment as a low priority as “increasing access to educational opportunities” ranked 12th of 14 and 14th when asked to determine the area with the greatest impact. However, throughout all focus groups participants mentioned access to students and young adults as an issue and many conversations led to discussions about early childcare access. Survey results skew towards respondents identifying as white and reflects already high levels of high school graduation and achievement of professional and tertiary degrees among white residents. Respondents were predominately 65 or older which again may reflect a low prioritization for residents who are less likely to have children or college age adults living in their household. WCI prioritizes resources for early childhood care which was a frequent part of conversations with several focus groups. By focusing on capacity building and service expansion related to early childhood, WCI can improve the expected life-time economic outcomes of children and alleviate labor market stress by enabling parents, especially women, to enter full-time employment. For older children and young adults, regional professionals spoke of pandemic related inequities related to housing and food stability, access to high-speed internet, and steering young adults into professional fields that lack an adequate workforce.

Goal: Grow early childhood advocacy and support systems

Objectives:

- Advocate for state funding to address local early care and education issues

- Expand local access for grants to address early care and education
- Ensure wide-spread affordable and accessible high quality childcare

Strategies:

- Participate in public policy and advocacy work including testifying
- Improve the oral and mental health of children and their caregivers
- Advocate for new federal and state support for early care and education programs
- Build awareness of grants and funds to address childcare needs
- Partner with First Children’s Finance and Child Care Aware to evaluate local costs and needs
- Build understanding in local communities on the role of high-quality early care and education
- Elevate local success stories and capacity building efforts

Goal: Provide resources to improve learning environments

Objectives:

- Assistance navigating higher education opportunities
- Promote regional partners and efforts
- Reduce barriers for education access

Strategies:

- Encourage regional higher education guidance counseling
- Coordinate education summit to highlight local successes
- Promote regional efforts to increase number of trained translators
- Increase connections between college students and high school students
- Host career and job fairs throughout region
- Scholarship and education grant database
- Strengthen connection with Lake Country Service Cooperative
- Raise awareness of basic familial need as basis for educational achievement

- Expand mental health related capacity and understanding
- Ensure high-speed internet access for children

Goal: Create pathways for vulnerable and underserved populations

Objectives:

- Outreach to first generation college students
- Partner with regional educational institutions
- Elevate regional training programs and resources

Strategies:

- Connect workforce development and education professionals
- Meet with university and college representatives on EDA funding
- Record stories to highlight first generation immigrants
- Steer people towards Rural Minnesota Concentrated Employment Program training and resources
- Host industry-specific career fairs
- Assist with improvement of school STEM resources
- Align young adult and employer expectations

RESILIENT INFRASTRUCTURE

Of all categories included in the survey, “improving roads, water treatment, broadband, and other infrastructure” ranked number one with 40% of respondents indicating this category as an area they would invest, and 17% ranking it as the investment with the greatest impact.

Resilient infrastructure is a category intended to capture physical support systems that ensure a community thrives, but the term is wide-open and encompasses many aspects of rural life.

Physical infrastructure systems continue to age and approach a critical point where, if not replaced or updated, systems may fail and leave communities struggling to pick up the pieces.

Resilient infrastructure includes systems like roads, stormwater, broadband, solid-waste, and many other major systems that prop up residents’ quality of life. Regional partners highlighted

exorbitant costs of major projects, outdated systems, and a local populace uninterested in vital systems that underpin a community's quality of life.

Goal: Reduce financial burden of major improvements

Objectives

- Establish base evaluation of essential and emergency needs
- Work with local partners in accessing state and federal funding for improvements
- Coordinate cross-system efforts to reduce duplication and costs

Strategies

- Update 2003 Infrastructure Study
- Publish regional information from state agency reports
- Advertise funding and grant opportunities
- Facilitate regional partner and agency goals into unified vision
- Market project details and ensure accessible information
- Utilize local creativity and ingenuity to solve localized problems
- Issue community challenges to solve problems at local levels
- Elevate energized and passionate advocates to drive local improvement projects

Goal: Expand community understanding of vital support systems

Objectives:

- Regional Systems Analysis
- Educate and Inform residents and community members
- Assist with navigation of complex policies and requirements

Strategies:

- Issue regional broad-band report
- Establish broadband advocacy committee
- Establish system report-cards for localities

- Lead community conversations around physical systems
- Infographics and interviews with system experts explaining processes
- Application support for major projects
- Aggregate need-based data and indicators
- Engage young people in knowledge building and reconstruction efforts

Goal: Address regional climate emergency

Objectives:

- Expand renewable energy resources
- Support local system development
- Analyze environmental impacts

Strategies:

- Highlight renewable energy installations and projects
- Promote and highlight existing resources like CERTs
- Establish energy goals for region and organization
- Spread information on programs focused on implementing renewable energy
- Encourage utilization of local wholesalers and suppliers
- Supply environmental impact analysis for local communities
- Evaluate WCI’s environmental impact

HOUSING

Of all categories “increasing housing availability” ranked 3rd and 4th across both questions indicating that participants place housing relatively high on their priority list for investment. Housing spans issues related to economic growth and essential need issues like affordability, availability, and accessibility. The region has a great degree of variability in housing needs from low vacancy rates in rural areas and high vacancy rates in Morris or the needs of house-less individuals in communities like Moorhead versus the needs of more rural houseless families

and individuals. Key areas of housing concern include affordable housing, housing support, rising home values, and a lack of new construction.

Goal: Analyze local housing data

Objectives:

- Provide technical reports on local housing and market conditions
- Determine housing affordability

Strategies:

- Coordinate housing study efforts for consistency and more efficient processes
- Use studies to establish community baselines and essential needs
- Partner with and support housing shelter efforts and organizations
- Promote materials on rural vs urban poverty and homelessness
- Utilize community surveys to establish real-time housing preferences
- Coordinate efforts across communities to avoid redundancy
- Establish cost and affordability concerns
- Report local housing market conditions to plan future growth

Goal: Expand access to funding resources

Objectives:

- Seek out and advertise grants and funding resources
- Stream-line grant writing support for time-constrained partners
- Suggest and advise housing policy and regional strategies

Strategies:

- Establish news board with up-to-date information on state and national funding
- Integrate county or municipal HRA's into local housing efforts
- Support local grant efforts with letters of support, data, and technical edits

- Organize skill-share opportunities for grant writing
- Write and publish reports on rural housing issues and trends
- Spread knowledge of innovative and creative approaches

Goal: Expand housing availability and mix

Objectives:

- Expand new home construction
- Grow housing mix beyond single-family homes
- Stabilize local tax base

Strategies:

- Utilize local data collection efforts to market region to developers
- Connect regional partners with speakers, researchers and advocates
- Advise community use of financial incentive programs
- Invite state partners to regional meetings
- Spread awareness about local housing issues to federal representatives
- Explore non-traditional housing options like Accessory Dwelling Units, Multigenerational home layouts, Tiny Homes, and “Shouses”
- Evaluate county and local zoning ordinances
- Advocate for equitable zoning and planning efforts that reduce disparities
- Examine strategies for transitional housing for aging adults
- Engage older residents on housing succession planning

TRANSPORTATION

More than other topics, transportation spans across a few survey questions showing up in resilient infrastructure as a physical support system and again within “improving access to libraries, parks, public transit, and other public amenities”. Included in the resilient infrastructure results physical networks of transportation are ranked in the top four for both questions but included as public transit respondents ranked it in the bottom three for each

question. WCI's transportation work includes three buckets: Transportation Infrastructure, Active Transportation, and Transit. All three are equally important to creating a vibrant and resilient region that adjusts to transportation changes and preferences of regional residents. Issues span major funding barriers for large improvements and projects, safety concerns of multimodal corridors, connectivity of networks, and addressing rapidly changing market preferences.

Goal: Coordinate Regional Plans and Local Efforts

Objectives:

- Support and inform policies that promote active and clean transportation
- Collaborate with regional partners to improve state advocacy
- Create connections and networks of support for transportation efforts, including available funding

Strategies:

- Connect with local organizations and efforts around active and clean transportation
- Host a regional transportation summit
- Recurring committee or meeting for regional transportation professionals
- Steer public work departments towards need-based aid
- Continue Safe Route to School work
- Facilitate regional planning efforts
- Support and inform county and local transportation plans

Goal: Increase access to multi-modal forms of transportation

Objectives:

- Inform about future and current market trends
- Implement effective transit and alternative transportation modes
- Advocate for shared transportation space

Strategies:

- Host transportation policy and state agency professionals about programs and trends
- Elevate transit related services in rural areas
- Assist in problem solving with rural transit service providers
- Connect trails and pathways to business corridors
- Increase prevalence of bike lanes throughout region
- Reduce reliance of single occupancy vehicles in local communities
- Create more walkable neighborhoods

Goal: Prioritize safety of transportation networks

Objectives:

- Elevate safety concerns of local road and pathways
- Overall reduction in traffic related injuries and deaths
- Address winterization concerns

Strategies:

- Continue Safe Routes to School planning work at the local and regional level
- Include safety concerns into regional and local planning
- Ensure ADA compliance concerns are met in local communities
- Relay information about traffic injuries and deaths regional partners
- Update partners on improvement projects of transportation networks
- Improve access to winterized active transportation path and roadways
- Address rural concerns related to isolation and emergency winter travel

CIRCULAR AGRICULTURE

Circular agriculture refers to closed-loop systems in which the resources used all along the process of growing, processing, and selling agricultural products are produced with minimum waste and utilize locally sourced inputs. Focus groups highlighted profitability and market share as important components of a successful circular agricultural strategy and suggested a circular model can lead to greater productivity and profit margins. Effectively utilizing available technology to improve productivity and create regional self-sustaining marketing systems is essential to ensuring profit margins are self-sustaining. Expanding agriculture products into global markets and viewing processes through a “world-class” lens can help growers and producers expand their impact beyond their local markets. To ensure the long-term resilience of agricultural systems in our regions requires efforts that identify new workers and new markets locally and globally. Survey results included responses to two different questions with increasing circular economy activities and improving access to healthy foods both ranked in the top eight for areas of investment but ranked 5th and 12th for top priority investments into areas with the greatest impact.

Goal: Grow number of small and mid-scale farmers and producers

Objectives:

- Support local food initiatives
- Encourage self-sufficient food production
- Provide financial planning assistance to emerging farmers
- Prioritize production processes that utilize locally produced inputs

Strategies:

- Leverage advances in technology to stream-line online purchasing options
- Conduct a regional audit on import and export-substitution opportunities
- Improve marketing of regional and statewide resources
- Conduct study to assess needs for self-sufficient family farms

Goal: Implement supportive systems to encourage career pathways into agriculture

Objectives:

- Implement new grower financial assistance programs and institutions
- Expand local producer market reach
- Encourage small-scale supply chain usage

Strategies:

- Incentivize farmers to implement best soil health practices
- Recognize healthy farm labor practices
- Integrate livestock into production agriculture
- Advocate for land trusts to protect against development pressure
- Benchmark current procurement practices
- Host leadership development program to support increased farmer diversity
- Incorporate process-verified certifications into coursework/curriculum

Goal: Support creative and innovate ideas

Objectives:

- Inspire transformative startup ideas to capitalize on circular agriculture systems
- Attract talent to the region through
- Reduce barriers for new or emerging farmers
- Cross-sector partnerships between agriculture and other industries

Strategies:

- Expand media strategy to boost knowledge of the region
- Expand variety of workshops offered throughout the region
- Conduct feasibility study for farmer equipment program
- Train partners in participatory grant making
- Host a recreational food tour
- Contribute to research on different models to meet rural grocery needs

EQUITY AND INCLUSION

As described by our focus group participants, equity and inclusion encompasses a broad spectrum of definitions, not just cultural differences, but physical and cognitive abilities and how these impact someone's ability to thrive as a person and community member. The ability

of our region's residents to understand and address barriers is directly correlated to ensuring resilient communities for all communities including traditionally and historically marginalized populations. Survey participants indicated equity and inclusion to be a top three concern but fewer individuals picked it as their number one priority. While participants valued and thought investment worthwhile, they prioritized other topics as their top choice.

Goal: Diversify regional leadership

Objectives:

- Leadership that reflects the diversity of the community
- Improve cultural competency across region
- Share power through collaborative efforts

Strategies:

- Expand use of participatory grant making
- Support participation in TRIO projects
- Partner with Minnesota's state ethnic councils and minority-led businesses
- Support programs that promote cultural exposure of young people
- Establish local advocacy organization list

Goal: Encourage cross-cultural relationship building

Objectives:

- Encourage welcoming communities
- Provide cross-cultural experiences for people
- Connect older adults with younger adults and children

Strategies:

- Encourage local participation in welcoming community initiatives
- Market cultural events to wider audience through multiple channels
- Diversify speakers and presentations
- Support intergenerational projects and initiatives
- Implement land acknowledgement policy for WCI events

Goal: Address historical and current barriers for underserved populations

Objectives:

- Expand regional and local equity and inclusion data
- Reduce barriers inhibiting growth of marginalized communities
- Connect historical decisions with present day results

Strategies:

- Develop equity and inclusion metrics
- Partner with stakeholders to identify data lapses
- Train partners to adequately use equity and inclusion data
- Establish equitable data collection and evaluation toolkit
- Evaluate disparities between White and non-white populations
- Include a range of social identities in planning work
- Analyze current local zoning ordinances to ensure equitable outcomes
- Examine past actions that excluded populations from achieving full potential

PARKS AND RECREATION

WCI's region is frequently praised for its wide-open spaces, physical landscape, and quality natural resources that all boost local economies through the hospitality and tourism industries. "Leisure and Hospitality" represent one of four industries that account for 75% of the region's workforce. Not only is the preservation, celebration, and usage of natural spaces critical to economic and climate resiliency but also for the well-being and quality of life of residents. Maintaining a balance between private land and public land ensure accessible water areas, parks, and trails is essential to balancing the use of natural resources. Examining survey responses and participants generally undervalued investment into parks, recreation, and natural resources as parks and recreation ranked in the bottom three for both questions.

Goal: Connect park space with park users

Objectives:

- Emphasize physical connections between trails, parks, and waterways

- Improve accessibility for wider variety of users
- Unify strategies between local, state, and national parks

Strategies:

- Support funding needs of regional spaces
- Market public spaces to schools
- Facilitate park advocates and professionals to establish priorities
- Encourage creative use of public spaces
- Utilize spatial analysis to connect public space to specific populations
- Inquire about potential uses and desires of local residents
- Expand local connections to regional tourism and recreational activities

Goal: Generate increased local support

Objectives:

- Coordinate local government support
- Keep stakeholders engaged and energized over long periods of time
- Integrate art into public and natural spaces

Strategies:

- Incorporate parks and recreation into local planning efforts
- Host events at park spaces around region
- Partner with local artists to create appealing spaces
- Find local interest groups to coordinate volunteer work at parks
- Preserve historic spaces

Goal: Preserve natural and public spaces

Objectives:

- Partner with DEED and the DNR on economic impacts of park users
- Increase education around park use, safety, and environmental impact
- Increased awareness about benefits shared use of parks

Strategies:

- Provide case studies and basic data on park usage and community impacts

- Update regional trail and park plans
- Work with local writers to on journalism initiative to highlight park usage
- Share information from DNR and Explore MN
- Incorporate parks and recreation into planning work
- Promote positive impact of green and public space on quality of life