Minnesota Region IV 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 made up of Becker, Clay, Douglas, Grant, Otter Tail, Pope, Stevens, Traverse, and Wilkin Counties. The region first was 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 and, at the request of regional partners and governments, initiated an effort to reestablish the area as a designated district. In January 1995, WCI succeeded and received official designation as an EDD from the Economic Development Administration (EDA). An Economic Development District Board, which oversees the district's activities, 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 creating economic development planning activities and overseeing the development, implementation, and reporting of the Comprehensive Economic Development Strategy (CEDS). The CEDS is a five-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, and received additional funds to hire more 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 creating 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**: The ability to attract, develop, and retain talent is critical to sustaining and growing 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 an essential step in 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" in the 19th century. We endeavor to welcome new Americans in the 21st century. Community resources include 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 and strategies to address infrastructure needs in a cost-effective manner. Managing the access to as well as the 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, developed by the United Nations (UN), create a unique and globally relevant framework to measure and address issues woven through the Four Cornerstones of Economic Development. Though the UN provides seventeen separate goals, we acknowledge that our actions may affect multiple goals simultaneously. For example, one cannot make progress toward Sustainable Cities and Communities (Goal 11) without also addressing the issues of Clean Water and Sanitation (Goal 6). Nor can we advocate for Responsible Consumption and Production (Goal 12) without ensuring Decent Work and Economic Growth (Goal 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 (strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, threats) analysis, strategic direction/action plan, and evaluation framework—and the plan must incorporate economic resilience throughout. To craft a document that addresses EDA requirements and WCI's mission, we implemented a five-phase process:

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 began 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 planning team surveyed the Economic Development District Board and county commissioners to determine the current state of the region regarding pandemic recovery and these groups' readiness for the CEDS creation work. WCI planners used the results from the survey to create an initial SWOT analysis and for comparison with the 2016-2021 CEDS. They created a six-month process that began in January 2021 and ended 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 MADO's current priority areas. After establishing the priority areas, planning staff conducted a stakeholder analysis to develop contact lists of regional partners and invited these stakeholders to participate in focus groups. The planners used the groups to encourage collaboration and buy-in from regional partners around the strategies and actions included in the plan. Simultaneously, the staff pushed out an online survey 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 that feedback from outreach is reflected in the document. In addition to using public and stakeholder input, staff integrated topic data from the Minnesota Department of Employment and Economic Development (DEED), the US Census, and the Bureau of Labor Statistics to connect qualitative and quantitative data. After the planning staff completed the initial draft, 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 5, 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 updated and finalized 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 toward economic resiliency that aligns with the goals and strategies in the CEDS.

WORKFORCE DEVELOPMENT

Context

Public outreach suggests that workforce development is a topic of middling concern, as it received 138 responses and ranked 7th out of the 14 options in our priority survey. "Helping residents train for employment opportunities nearby" also ranked 7th, suggesting that, although residents value workforce development, it is 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. Our region has a total labor force of 125,100, as of February 2021, and a ten-year average of 125,600. Although the pandemic caused massive disruption to regional employment patterns, a year into the pandemic, unemployment returned to levels below 5 percent, 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 to 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

- Reestablish monthly workforce meetings
- Invite local and regional representatives to discuss local issues
- Establish needs and align with statewide efforts
- Produce 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

- Produce 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 University of Minnesota Extension on regional impact analysis
- Produce 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 retraining 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 that 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 2nd highest for participants when asked to identify important investments needed 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 2nd 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 and retention

Strategies

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

- Identify top five 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

- Create clearer communication on financing options, programs, and assistance for business owners and start-ups
- Develop technological support networks to reduce communication barriers
- Improve awareness of business support and development programs

Strategies

- Support municipal and local affiliates' 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 toward innovative ideas
- Offer business and entrepreneur training and workshops

- Explore Launch Minnesota 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 ranked 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 toward respondents identifying as white and reflect already high rates of high school graduation and high levels of achievement of professional and tertiary degrees among white residents. Respondents were predominately age 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 care, WCI can improve the expected lifetime economic outcomes of children and alleviate labor market stress by enabling parents, especially women, to enter full-time employment. Regarding older children and young adults, regional professionals spoke of pandemic-related inequities around housing and food stability, access to high-speed internet, and the guidance of 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 widespread 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 of 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

- Provide assistance for 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 and interpreters
- Increase connections between college students and high school students
- Host career and job fairs throughout region
- Create 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

- Provide 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 to communicate the availability of relevant EDA funding opportunities
- Record stories to highlight first-generation immigrants
- Steer people toward Rural Minnesota Concentrated Employment Program training and resources
- Host industry-specific career fairs
- Assist with improving 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 first, with 40 percent of respondents identifying this category as an area they would invest in and 17 percent 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, they 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

- Produce regional systems analysis
- Educate and inform residents and community members
- Assist with navigation of complex policies and requirements

Strategies

- Issue regional broadband report
- Establish broadband advocacy committee

- Establish system report cards for localities

- Lead community conversations around physical systems

- Produce infographics and interviews with system experts explaining processes

- Provide 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 Clean Energy Resource Teams

- 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, such as the low vacancy rates in rural areas versus the high vacancy rates in Morris and the needs of houseless 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 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 versus 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
- Streamline 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 Housing and Redevelopment Authorities 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 nontraditional 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." Physical networks of

transportation ranked in the top four priorities for both survey questions, but respondents ranked public transit in the bottom three for each survey question. Transportation work can be divided into three categories: transportation infrastructure, active transportation, and transit. All three are equally important for creating a vibrant and resilient region that adjusts to changes in the transportation industry as a whole and resident's preferences.. Issues span major funding barriers for large improvements and projects, safety concerns of multimodal corridors, network connectivity, and rapidly changing consumer preferences. The worldwide shortage of bicycles,for example in 2020 and continuing into 2021 is just one example of how demand for alternative transportation networks can shift in a short time period.

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
- Set up recurring committee or meeting for regional transportation professionals
- Steer public works departments toward 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 multimodal 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 to share 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 on single-occupancy vehicles in local communities

- Create more walkable neighborhoods

Goal: Prioritize safety of transportation networks

Objectives

- Elevate safety concerns of local roads and pathways

- Help reduce 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 in regional and local planning

- Ensure Americans with Disabilities Act compliance concerns are met in local communities

- Relay information about traffic injuries and deaths to regional partners

- Update partners on improvement projects of transportation networks

- Improve access to winterized active transportation paths 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 that 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 that 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. Ensuring the long-term resilience of agricultural systems in our region 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 streamline 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 start-up ideas to capitalize on circular agriculture systems
- Attract talent to the region
- Reduce barriers for new or emerging farmers
- Promote 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, the term "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 a 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. A majority of survey participants indicated equity and inclusion to be a top three concern, but fewer individuals picked it as their top priority. While participants valued equity and inclusion and thought investment of it worthwhile, they prioritized other concerns as their top choice.

Goal: Diversify regional leadership

Objectives

- Encourage leadership that reflects the diversity of the community
- Improve cultural competency across the 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
- Collaborate with counties, cities, and business owners to increase recruitment and hiring of bilingual individuals
- Support programs that promote cultural exposure for young people
- Establish local advocacy organizations list

Goal: Encourage cross-cultural relationship building

Objectives

- Encourage welcoming, inclusive 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 nonwhite 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, which all boost local economies through the hospitality and tourism industries. The leisure and hospitality business represents one of four industries that account for 75 percent of the region's workforce. The preservation, celebration, and usage of natural spaces are critical not only for 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 ensures equitable access to water areas, parks, and trails. In examining survey

responses, participants generally undervalued investment in 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
- Help park advocates and professionals to establish priorities
- Encourage creative use of public spaces
- Utilize spatial analysis to connect public spaces 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 Department of Natural Resources on economic impacts of park users
- Increase education around park use, safety, and environmental impact
- Increase awareness about benefits of 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 on journalism initiative to highlight park usage
- Share information from DNR and Explore Minnesota
- Incorporate parks and recreation into planning work
- Promote positive impact of green and public spaces on quality of life

Conclusion

At the beginning of the pandemic, we couldn't have known that it would be the starting point of a complete disruption of our economies, our way of life, and the way that we view work. The threat to our health has provided greater impetus to have tighter knit support systems, in many cases increasing the desire to live closer to home, family, and for some people, rural places. The resulting shift in value systems is not likely to go away anytime soon, which points to the need to go beyond putting out fires and focus instead on the strategies that underlie a more resilient infrastructure for our community health and well-being. We hope that these strategies respond to the need for adaptability, and an approach that points to the future we want to create instead of seeing ourselves as subject to the whims of the market. By focusing on human capital, economic competitiveness, community resources, and foundational assets, we hope that this document serves as a tool for stakeholders in the region to inch closer towards this vision and strengthens the cross-county relationships and networks that COVID-19 created. Indeed, only through the leadership and commitment to this place that we call home can we continue to make rural Minnesota a great place to live.

Evaluation

One intent of this plan is to identify the goals, objectives, and strategies identified in the Strategic Plan Framework for West Central Initiative as a regional community foundation with those that are similar in the DevelopMN plan and work to accomplish them at a regional level.

Those identified parallels have been incorporated into this document, which will, in turn, advance the work and impacts of the Economic Development District in carrying out a continuous economic development process. This document will also serve in aligning partners in working on commonly identified areas of focus and initiatives. A comprehensive listing of existing partners and generalized partnership categories can be found in the Appendix.

The 2022-2026 CEDS will implement the goals and objectives in a manner that:

- Promotes economic development and opportunity.

- Fosters effective access to resources and community assets.

- Enhances and protects the environment.

• Maximizes effective development and use of the workforce consistent with any applicable state or local workforce investment strategy.

- Promotes the use of technology.

- Balances resources through sound management of physical development.

- Obtains and utilizes adequate funds and other resources through public and private partnerships.

- Factors in economic resiliency and diversity and inclusion as key elements/components in all activities associated with economic development.

As we prepare annual performance reports, we'll evaluate the cornerstones. The analysis and review will take into account traditional EDA performance measures, such as jobs and tax base, as well as additional investment for specific projects and other assets leveraged. WCI tracks various performance measures as part of its strategic plan evaluation, and those which are determined to be applicable to both documents will be incorporated into the annual performance reporting. The performance measures will evaluate both the organization's independent and collaborative contributions to the regional economy through the implementation of the CEDS. As part of that evaluation, it will seek input on two questions from stakeholders and the board: How is the organization doing? What could the organization be doing better?

Over the next five years, we'll dedicate resources to projects that align and impact the goals identified in this plan. Time and resources (financial and otherwise) will focus

primarily on initiatives that grow the regional population and workforce, increase wages, improve child care capacity and availability, increase housing affordability and availability, increase access to broadband, and examine the cost of energy.