Writing A New Story

A vibrant, inclusive, & sustainable world starts here in west central Minnesota
A LETTER FROM
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Our planet is a round, blue dot surrounded by an immense universe. We don’t think much about how that affects our everyday lives, but that reality is all around us all the time. Gravity holds us to the earth’s surface and our days and nights are the result of rotating on an axis as we orbit around the sun.

When we started work on our new strategic plan in early 2019, it gave us time to take stock of things about ourselves that we normally take for granted. For example, we have been a community foundation for 34 years, and, for 25 of those years, we have also been a regional development organization.

Philanthropy & planning are our twin centers of gravity & have been for over a quarter of a century.

There is a unique symbiosis that occurs when philanthropy and planning come together that helps us make decisions about awarding grants, lending capital, and helping communities to plan, organize and take collective action. It also gives us an unusually broad perspective when we are called upon to be the voice for our region, which happens frequently. There is no other organization in Minnesota, in this respect, like West Central Initiative.

Our new plan places our nine counties in the context of the four cornerstones of economic development that we and our sister development organizations in Greater Minnesota chose to measure community vitality. And it goes a step further — surrounding those cornerstones with the seventeen Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) that all the members of the United Nations ratified in 2015. Highly aspirational, and arguably the most critical issues of our time, the SDGs are a blueprint for a more sustainable future.

We see West Central Initiative as a catalyst for positive social change, helping our communities move toward that future.

Our goal is to make sure that the world we inhabit is one where everyone — here in west central Minnesota and across the globe — can rise to their highest potential. I am proud and grateful to be leading an organization that embraces global goals while, at the same time, believing in the power of people at the grassroots level.
What stands out about our region is our geography &
as is often noted, that is our destiny.

Our corner of Minnesota has undulating prairies in every
direction, miles of fertile farmland, some flat & some on rolling hills
that rise to the horizon from valleys below, and more lakes
than one can imagine.

We are both stowaways and benefactors of this stunning natural
beauty and bounty. Century farms stand alongside newer, larger
industrial farms. Vibrant cities grow upward and expand outward
around the edges. Quaint essential small towns embrace their
history and heritage while determined to be open and welcoming
to newcomers. Such places dot the landscape like rare jewels
on a necklace, and we proach each of them as signs and symbols
of progress.

Yes, we have challenges and to evoke Bob Dylan in a phrase half-
fullway, that keeps us forever young. While these challenges
can be unsettling, they have created scores of smart problem
solvers, all drawing energy from the puzzles. The majority of our
regions’ 82 incorporated cities have populations under 1,000.

Some towns fight to keep or have lost their grocery stores, cafes,
or schools while others are passing school bonds or opening child
care centers and welcoming new entrepreneurs. Competition
for workers is fierce, especially in manufacturing and healthcare.
The forces accelerating change globally present new and exciting
opportunities in our region.

Our reserve of human ingenuity is deepened by diversity in culture,
language, & perspective.

These are the advantages newcomers bring when they come to
live in our communities. Broadband access keeps newcomers
connected with their old networks and connects all of us to the
rest of the world economically, politically, culturally, and socially.
In West Central Minnesota, the world wide web may be what ties
this balance and propels this region forward.

In 2020 and beyond, West Central Initiative’s priorities are the same
priorities we have held for more than thirty years, updated. We
will invest in local, remagine regional, and educate, activate, and
celebrate. These active verbs capture our philanthropic tradition
within our nine counties.

These verbs are made bolder and take on more urgency when
we anchor them in the methodology and data we rely upon in
our regional planning and economic development work. Even
more bold, and more urgent, is our recognition that the local, the
regional, the Minnesota reality is inextricably interdependent with
the rest of the globe. This interdependence is why we have chosen
the United Nations’ 17 Sustainable Development Goals as the
framework for our work in the years ahead. The future we want is
one where everyone belongs and where all our communities thrive.
This is our commitment to our region and to the world.
INVEST IN LOCAL

West Central Initiative is passionately committed to unleashing the full, dynamic potential of west central Minnesota, in large part by investing in its economic development.

Unlike many traditional lenders, when making a loan WCI considers not just ability to repay, but also how the business will meet essential community needs. When traditional financing isn’t available or sufficient, WCI can be a source of possibility for small businesses. “Sometimes regulations prevent banks from making loans for projects that a community needs,” says Greg Wagner, WCI’s Director of Business and Economic Development. “We have more flexibility in how we evaluate a loan request. I think there would be a lot missing from our communities if not for our loan program.”

When Gilda White moved to Morris in 2014, she immediately saw a need for a bridge between the area’s English- and Spanish-speaking residents. Approximately five percent of the population of Stevens County is Latino, as is 13 percent of the Morris Area School District. Gilda, who is originally from Mexico, loves helping people and recognized a huge opportunity to do so while putting her communication and business skills to work.

“I also did not like seeing people get taken advantage of, being overcharged, or not having things explained,” Gilda said. So she decided to put her expertise into practice by starting her own business, offering tax preparation and translation services, as well as selling insurance.

There was just one problem. Gilda had recently gone through a financially devastating divorce and wasn’t in a position to qualify for a traditional small business loan. The Stevens County Economic Improvement Commission connected her with Greg at West Central Initiative, who was able to facilitate a startup loan. “They
"I couldn’t imagine living in a country where I could not speak the language. Communicating with people about taxes and legal issues would be terribly difficult,” says Gilda.

"In addition to the loan, they connected me with a consultant who explained the basics of administration and operations."

Greg saw the potential of Gilda’s vision and knew it was a good fit for WCI’s commitment to local investment. “We are being more intentional with engagement to build those relationships that will help us be recognized as a resource to all members of the Morris community and the region,” he notes.

Gilda launched her business in late 2017. In her first two years, she’s already hit her five-year projected goal for number of customers served and has contracts with the county and several local schools.

It’s the personal stories and successes she prizes most, such as the man she helped with his taxes who was sure he wouldn’t qualify for a refund. Gilda knew better.

When the refund came through he was able to buy a car, which he drove to her office to show her, bursting with excitement and gratitude.

For his part, Greg couldn’t be more proud of Gilda and her success. “What she wanted to accomplish for her community is exactly the reason why WCI and our loan program exist.”

Learn more about WCI’s Invest in Local strategic priority at wci.org

(Gilda White, pictured bottom right)
REIMAGINE REGIONAL

Connecting new neighbors to new opportunities

By prioritizing outreach to New Americans, emphasizing diversity and equity, and fostering beneficial relationships between people and organizations, West Central Initiative is helping to develop inclusive communities in an increasingly interdependent world.

“Reimagine Regional” strategic priority emphasizes that investing in our unique geographical area can resonate globally,” notes Director of Programs Wendy Merrick. “From eliminating hunger to sustaining our natural resources, investing regionally in areas such as food and agriculture not only creates stronger communities. It also moves us toward a world that leaves no one behind.”

Simeon Bakunda arrived in Moorhead from the Congo in the middle of a snowy November. Back home, he grew his own food. Looking around at his new, snow-covered home, he wondered how he was going to feed himself. He went to a local market and found a vegetable with a familiar shape. He bought it, carefully preserved its seeds until spring, and planted them in a community garden.

Eight years later, the seeds from that original vegetable have grown into what is now known locally as Simeon’s Eggplant. Now, Simeon’s Eggplant is grown in community gardens all over the Fargo-Moorhead area.

“There are a number of ethnic grocery stores in this area; the sellers drive down to the Twin Cities and fill vans with the kinds of veggies like Simeon’s Eggplant they can’t find in large enough quantities locally to meet demand,” says Verna Kragnes, founder of New Roots Farm Incubator. “That represents a real opportunity for local farmers like Simeon.”

Verna also saw an opportunity—to invest in community farmers’ economic development and give them the tools they needed to start building wealth while supplying local demand.
New Roots Farm Incubator provides land and equipment to emerging farmers — those with less than 10 years of experience, or those who are New Americans, people of color, Native Americans, veterans, or women — giving them the chance to establish a financial track record that will eventually enable them to secure loans for their own farms.

The New Roots Farm Incubator launched in the spring of 2010 with help from West Central Initiative, which has supported the endeavor with scholarships for members and a Changemakers grant. WCI recognized how the incubator connects regional investment, global impact, and a commitment to diversity and inclusion.

“We have immigrants coming now with a wish to meet their own basic needs and share with the broader community, but the situation is so different with industrial agriculture occupying the landscape so strongly.”

Verna says a new approach is needed to reestablish local and regional food production and move back toward a more sane and stable regional economy. She hopes for a safer world in terms of significantly lowering carbon emissions in all ways including reducing the miles that food travels from farm to plate.

“We’ve got multiple motivating factors to support the local food and agriculture economy, and I’m delighted with the position West Central Initiative has taken as a leader in this region in supporting that goal.”

Verna cites a proverb that sums up the multiple layers of benefit the project represents: “If you wash the left hand, the right gets clean too. That’s where we are now. And when the region gets stronger — economically, environmentally, and socially — so does the world.”

Learn more about WCI’s Reimagine Regional strategic priority at wcif.org

[Verna Kregen, Vivian Bakundu, pictured bottom right]
When we educate, we give people and organizations the tools they need to serve the region. When we activate, we encourage them to embrace their potential and maximize their impact, whether by sharing ideas and successes with each other, or engaging with their city council representatives and legislators. When we celebrate, we foster a sense of joyful community in which successes are lauded and honored. These three ideas work together to help young learners and their communities thrive.

Traverse County hugs the border between Minnesota and both Dakotas, the Red River flowing northward along its western edge.

With less than 5,500 people living in its 586 square miles, it’s the least populous county in the state. It also has the oldest average age of any county in Minnesota. The county’s sparse population and older demographics present unique challenges to families needing early childhood services, from accessible childcare to pediatric health and dental care.

This made Traverse County a natural fit to be one of West Central Initiative’s 10 Early Childhood Initiative sites throughout west central Minnesota. Julia Smith, coordinator of the Traverse County Early Childhood Initiative coalition, works closely with Nancy, along with the eight other county coordinators, and the White Earth Nation. Together they make sure all the region’s children have the resources they need to thrive and grow.

“When we cultivate a sense of possibility and confidence throughout the region and encourage engagement, sharing, and connection among our partners, we get results worth celebrating,” says West Central Initiative Early Childhood Director Nancy Jost.
“You can be working hard and hitting a stone wall on something, and Nancy will say, ‘Have you tried this angle?’ It’s so good to get new ideas and reconnect to the bigger picture.”

For Julie, this includes providing free and low-cost local training for childcare providers, sponsoring family events, connecting and mentoring childcare providers, facilitating access to pediatric dental and medical services, and connecting families with resources such as Dolly Parton’s Imagination Library (which mails a free monthly book to children from birth to age five).

All of the early childhood coalition coordinators meet at West Central Initiative every other month to share challenges, ideas, and successes. “When we get together, we have business to discuss and projects we know we want to work on, but the longest part of the meeting is us sharing and celebrating what we’re doing and what’s happening with each other’s groups,” says Julie. “It’s so good to connect and reaffirm what we’re doing and celebrate those victories with each other.”

For both Julie and Nancy, it’s all about creating a supportive ecosystem that fosters a sense of possibility and collaboration. “We try to make things better for families and providers all around us, which in turn makes things better for the children,” says Julie.

Learn more about WCI’s Educate, Activate, Celebrate at wci.org

[Julie Smith, pictured bottom right]
THE WORLD IS CHANGING & WEST CENTRAL MINNESOTA IS CHANGING WITH IT.

You’ve just read three stories that embody some of our work at West Central Initiative. There are hundreds of stories like these that span our 34 years and elevate the values we hold: Empowerment, Generosity, Neighborliness and Trend-testing.

This, then, is the year of the story. We invite you to share yours to show your passion for this region we all call home.

If our values and our work spark your curiosity in some way, whether it’s our partnerships with people in your community, our work in early childhood, our grants and loans, or community development, then let’s talk. Make an appointment, explore our website, or stop by for coffee.

With your help, we can take on the challenges and unmet needs now and into the future.

PLEASE JOIN US IN THIS IMPORTANT WORK.

Our work at West Central Initiative is understood through the lens of four core values that embody all that we do.

NEIGHBORLINESS

A arises out of a strong belief that our interconnectedness is crucial to our long-term viability. Town to town, county to county, organization to organization, and certainly person to person, the fabric of our region depends on cooperation, appreciation, openness, and generosity.

GENEROSITY

A dimension of neighborliness that flies higher over the region. It speaks to a willingness to embrace a common good that can only be achieved through collective action, through everyone giving of their time, talent, and treasure.

EMPOWERMENT

Our current context is directed both internally and externally. We encourage both our staff and our fellow citizens to be a part of bold action in our region, and to develop and use power to a good end.

TREND-TESTING

A dimension of bold action. We learn from one another while we work together to solve problems. We will embrace risk and learn from our mistakes, always.
**Invest in the Future of Our Region.**

**Here's how we can work together.**

We have a wide range of giving opportunities that will continue to strengthen the region for years to come.

**Support By Giving To Us**

**WCJ's Annual Operations Support Fund**

Funds support our ongoing programming that includes loans and grants to communities in the region, our early childhood initiative programs, and our Live Wide Open Initiative. Our goal is $250,000 this year, growing to $500,000 by 2022.

**WCJ's Unrestricted Endowment Fund**

Your gift to the Endowment Fund will be invested to provide a stable source of funding to support the needs of WCJ and those newly added to the list. Earnings from this fund fuel operations. With your support, our goal is to double the endowment by 2026, when we celebrate our 50th anniversary.

**Giving Both To Us & Through Us!**

**Legacy Giving**

By planning a gift from your estate, you can have a bigger impact on your favorite community charity than you may have thought possible. We can help you work with your estate and financial advisors to make a legacy gift to WCJ's endowment or any of the funds we manage.

**How Can You Support?**

- [ ] WCJ's Annual Operations Support Fund
- [ ] WCJ's Unrestricted Endowment Fund
- [ ] Donor Advised Funds
- [ ] Field of Interest Funds
- [ ] Education Funds
- [ ] Heartland Giving Fund
- [ ] Giving Circles
- [ ] Component Funds
- [ ] Legacy Giving
- [ ] Tribute Funds
- [ ] President's Circle of Giving
- [ ] I'm interested, let's have coffee!

Name:  

E-mail:  

Phone:  

Street Address:  

City:  

State:  

Zip:  

We promise to follow up as soon as possible.
WE CONNECT THE LOCAL TO THE GLOBAL. THAT IS OUR COMMITMENT TO YOU, TO OUR REGION, AND TO THE WORLD.