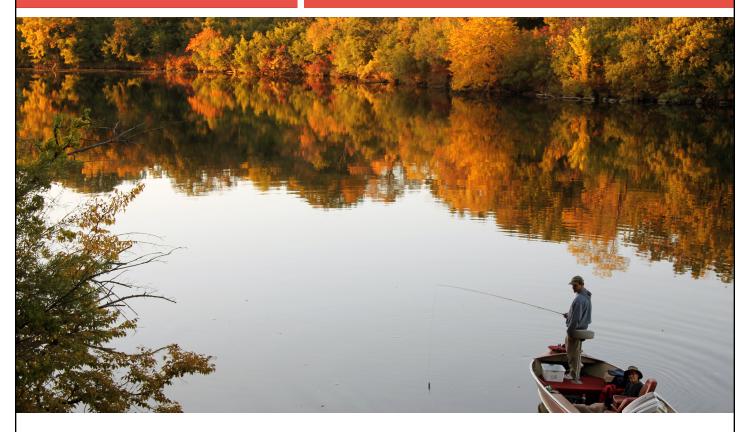
#### THE MCKNIGHT FOUNDATION



# North by Northwest: Rural Resilience in Northwest and North Central Minnesota

*By Jay Walljasper* Commissioned by The McKnight Foundation

### Foreword

We've all heard the following claims about small-town Minnesota:

Rural Minnesota has been devastated by 50 years of "brain drain." Small towns can't keep up with the cultural amenities the next generation needs. Only major employers and multimillion-dollar investments can make the difference

And yet none of these popular narratives holds true.

In fact, since 1970, the population of rural Minnesota has actually grown by 11 percent — a trend poised to continue as more baby boomers move into retirement. New amenities from broadband to brewpubs are attracting a steady "brain gain" of artists and entrepreneurs to Brainerd and Fergus Falls. Reimagined Main Streets and bike trails from Alexandria to Frazee have drawn national attention as simple quality-of-life improvements get a remarkable rate of return.

These are just a few of the small-town trends writer Jay Walljasper explores in "North by Northwest: Rural Resilience in Northwest and North Central Minnesota," the third in our four-part Food for Thought series. Last year, The McKnight Foundation commissioned Walljasper, an authority on urban planning and community development, to take a listening tour of Lake Wobegon country, talking to residents, leaders, and lawmakers in the rural communities across northwest and north central Minnesota.

Along the way, he finds a surge of new immigrants in St. Cloud, and he learns about White Earth's effort to reclaim traditional practices that can restore hope and good health to the Anishinaabeg Nation. Visiting a sunflower oil operation in Pierz, and looking at plans for the new arts center set to transform Park Rapids' historic armory, one refrain he hears in town after town is that the best solutions for rural communities grow from the ground up. As Brainerd native and city planner Charles Marohn advises: "Focus on how to make it a better place for people who live here right now. If you do that year after year, you'll have a great place that attracts people and business."

It's a message we've heard — and heeded — at The McKnight Foundation ever since Virginia McKnight Binger, then board chair, and Russ Ewald, then president, set out on a listening tour of their own in the 1980s, visiting rural communities hard hit by the farm crisis. The lessons learned from those meetings inspired the creation of the Minnesota Initiative Foundations (MIFs), six separate regional entities designed to reflect the values and vision of the communities to be served while making them more resilient. Now celebrating its 30th anniversary, "the MIF model" has enabled the Foundation to invest more than \$285 million in the state's rural areas, a continuing commitment that has helped leverage an additional \$270 million to implement the big ideas brewing in small-town Minnesota.

We hope this look at our state's small towns offers an authentic snapshot and a fresh perspective of Minnesota's northwest and north central region.

Neal Cuthbert, Vice President of Program The McKnight Foundation

### **North by Northwest** *Rural Resilience in Northwest and North Central Minnesota*

There's a sharp difference of opinion about the desirability of northwest and north central Minnesota as a place to live.

In *National Geographic* magazine a few years back, Garrison Keillor described feeling as if he has "come into paradise" when driving into this corner of Minnesota, the setting of his fictional town of Lake Wobegon. "Rolling fields, the valleys of little rivers," he rhapsodized.

But in summer 2015, *Washington Post* blogger Christopher Ingraham painted a starkly different picture on the paper's website, noting that the worst places to live in America, in terms of scenery are "clustered around the Minnesota/North Dakota border region."

"The absolute worst place to live in America," he continued, "is Red Lake County, Minnesota."

Ingraham had never been to Red Lake County, or anywhere near it. He was merely quoting the 1999 Natural Amenities Index created by the U.S. Department of Agriculture, which rated the "natural aspects of attractiveness" of every county in the country based on climate, topography, and access to bodies of water. (Red Lake is not in Red Lake County, but the Red Lake River is.)

Reactions to Ingraham's blog post from the North Star State came fast and furious. "I had never been disagreed with so much," Ingraham <u>reported</u>. "And so politely."

Along with numerous refutations of Ingraham's research came an offer to visit the county from Jason Brumwell, whose family runs Voyageur's View Campground and Tubing on the Red Lake River. Soon Ingraham was on the ground in northwest Minnesota — kayaking, touring farms, visiting a shooting range, eating fried walleye, and talking with friendly folks in Main Street taverns, including a local banker who had come home for a less frantic life after eight years on Wall Street.

"It sure didn't seem like the worst place in America," he confessed "or one lacking in natural amenities, or natural beauty, either."

The civic spirit of Red Lake County particularly impressed him. Residents of Red Lake Falls (pop. 1,427) raised the money themselves to build a municipal swimming pool, he reported. And when folks in nearby Brooks (pop. 141) decided they needed a community center, local businesses bought the materials and local volunteers did the construction. "Over and over, the folks I spoke with told me it was that sense of community that kept them there."

This spring, Ingraham, 34, <u>announced</u> that he and his wife, Briana, and their two-year-old twins were moving to Red Lake County, where he will continue to work for the Post via Internet. "I suspect and hope that a lot of the big issues we talk about at the national level — jobs, the economy, politics — look different when viewed from northwestern Minnesota than from within the Beltway."

Ingraham's dramatic change of heart, which drew headlines around the country, dispels the widespread belief that rural Minnesota holds little appeal as a place to live for anyone not born there. Upon closer inspection, as he found out, small town life offers many qualities, from high civic involvement to affordable housing, that lure newcomers.

Indeed, many communities across the state are building on these kinds of assets to improve quality of life for residents and attract new ones. That's the focus of this report, the third in a series looking at Minnesota beyond the metro area. (See the reports for Southeast Minnesota <u>here</u> and Northeast Minnesota <u>here</u>.) North central and northwest Minnesota are defined here as the corner of the state west of a line from St. Cloud to Warroad, and north of I-94 or Minnesota Highway 27 west of Alexandria.

#### Rural Minnesota's "Brain Gain"

Ingraham expresses wonder that he's moving to rural Minnesota, but University of Minnesota Extension sociologist Ben Winchester is not at all surprised.

For years Winchester has been documenting what he calls rural Minnesota's "<u>brain gain</u>" — a spike in people ages 30 to 50 moving from big cities to small towns.

"A lot of these people coming into our rural communities are arriving with high levels of education, with earning power, with experience, and with children," he explains. At a recent <u>Fergus Falls</u> <u>Business Summit</u>, for instance, a third of the attendees reported they had moved to the area between the ages of 30 and 50.

This partly compensates for the well-publicized "brain drain" of 18- to 25-year-olds who leave small towns for college and to start careers. "We need to write a new narrative about our rural communities, not the story of decline that we've been told since the 1950s," stresses Winchester, who lived in rural Hancock for many years and now lives in St. Cloud (for his wife's job).

Winchester notes that the population of rural Minnesota is not dwindling — it has grown by 11 percent since 1970. Minnesota's urban population has risen by 66 percent over the same period, although some of that growth comes from the recent reclassification of Blue Earth and Nicollet Counties (the Mankato-St. Peter area) from rural to urban, and other rural counties being incorporated into the Twin Cities, Rochester, Duluth, St. Cloud, Fargo, and LaCrosse metro areas.

He points to four leading reasons for this unexpected migration: (1) slower pace of life, (2) greater sense of security and safety, (3) lower cost of living, and (4) better access to outdoor recreation. And for the roughly half of brain gain newcomers who move with children, smaller schools often factor into the decision.

The broad reach of the Internet is fueling this trend as urban professionals like Ingraham can bring their job with them to a small town. The lack of <u>high-speed broadband connections</u> needed by entrepreneurs and telecommuters, however, remains a problem in some parts of rural Minnesota.

Technology has also reduced the lag time for new cultural currents to hit rural communities. "There's much less difference between rural life and city life now," Winchester says. "Small towns are much more socially diverse. Not everyone is going to belong to the Eagles Club anymore. Many are now involved in outdoor recreation groups like canoeing associations."

Winchester spots a couple of demographic shifts on the horizon that may accelerate the brain gain. "One of the biggest opportunities we've had to reinvigorate rural Minnesota in 120 years is the large number of baby boomers that are retiring and looking to sell their homes in the coming years" — opening more housing options in small towns. "And the millennials are just turning 30," Winchester adds. "Let's see what happens with them."

#### **Brainerd: New Plan for a Stronger Town**

Brainerd native Charles Marohn, a planning engineer and influential national authority on creating vital communities, offers another fresh perspective on the future of Minnesota's small towns and cities. "It's simple," he declares. "Communities need to stop thinking they can import prosperity" by attracting a big employer to town or undertaking some massive project. "You can't make instant success like you do instant mashed potatoes."



A more effective strategy is "bottom-up investment," he believes. "Focus on how to make it a better place for people who live here right now. If you do that year after year, you'll have a great place that attracts people and business."

Marohn outlines how this idea could work for his hometown of Brainerd, which is struggling with poverty and unemployment, in the report "<u>Neighborhoods First: A</u> low risk, high return strategy for a

<u>better Brainerd</u>." Published by <u>Strong Towns</u>, the national organization Marohn leads, the report is introduced with the <u>observation</u> that "cities across the country are starting to realize that the 'big project' approach takes up too much staff time, wastes too much political energy, and distracts too much from the basic needs of existing neighborhoods. Risky, low returning projects too often become expensive boondoggles that haunt a community for decades."

He then proposes eight important projects for Brainerd's future, which together cost a modest \$16,800. They include bike lanes, a pedestrian corridor, safer pedestrian crossings, and tree

planting, all in lower-income neighborhoods. While this might sound like a "kids-meal" version of your typical big-city liberal agenda, Marohn, 42, identifies himself as a "conservative" (revealing he has "never voted Democratic for president"), and still lives in the Brainerd area with his wife and two school-age kids.

A key foundation of Strong Towns' philosophy and its plan for Brainerd is fiscal restraint, which is explained as (1) not "taking on onerous long-term liabilities or gambling on speculative future development" and (2) not becoming "dependent on local government aid and other, unstable funding from state and federal sources to provide basic services." Marohn contrasts his proposal with Brainerd's current economic development policies, such as \$9 million for widening a two-mile stretch of road popular as a short cut out of town, or forking over 26 years of tax subsidies to a Taco John's restaurant.

"You have all these people who think of small towns as just a smaller version of what you have in a big city," Marohn says. "But the reality is that small towns are fragile ecosystems, and bringing in a big project can really overwhelm the whole place if it doesn't work out." A better path to success is smaller, sounder investments that improve people's quality of life, "which boosts the livability of the town and gives it a whole different view of itself, which creates the conditions for investment to come in."

Marohn points to Wadena and Fergus Falls as regional examples of strong towns, which he defines as places where "you see the quality of life going up for everyone. Not booming in a gold rush sort of way, but things are getting better gradually."

#### Fergus Falls: The Art of Community

While not a tourism center, college town, or high-income enclave (the usual contenders in rankings of the best small communities), Fergus Falls (pop. 13,000) would strike most people as a nice place to live. Livability.com rated it #62 on its list of the Top 100 Best Small Towns in America



(Alexandria was #22; Bemidji #74), citing its good schools, quality health care, shopping options, natural amenities, and arts offerings.

Lake Alice, with a Lake of the Isles ambience with classic early 20th Century architecture, lies three blocks from Main Street. The falls themselves are just a block away in the other direction, and mark the starting point for a nature trail running alongside the Otter Tail River dotted first with tall trees, then wildflowers and prairie plantings.

Well-kept Lincoln Avenue could stand in as a 1940s Main Street in a movie, with the Viking Cafe, the City Bakery, Lundeen's stationery, Olson Furniture, Biffley's used books, a Sears appliance store, a drugstore, dance studios, jewelry stores and law offices. But Fergus Falls is not frozen in time. Around the corner from Lincoln Avenue is a foothold of 2010s hipster culture. It's home to the Union Avenue Pizza & Brewing Company, which serves its own house-made beer, brick-oven pizzas, and salads featuring local produce, as well as Café 116, serving coffee amid a retro dinette décor, and Riverfront Square, a well-curated vintage and gift shop also offering massage therapy. Even Main Street has been updated with boutiques, a health club, the Body Mind Center for wellness, Bello Cucina Italian restaurant, Don Pablo's Mexican restaurant, and the Kaddatz Galleries. The movie theater is now home to the Center for the Arts, which showcases touring musicians, community theater, choir concerts, and other performing arts. The historic River Inn has been converted to apartments, with the Lake Region Arts Council and Springboard for the Arts occupying the first floor.

Fergus Falls is turning to the arts to fortify its quality of life and attract new residents and businesses. That's why St. Paul-based Springboard for the Arts, whose mission is to strengthen communities and artists by tapping their creative potential, said yes when the Lake Region Arts Council invited them to open a rural field office in Fergus Falls. "There's an elegance to life in Fergus Falls that people here take for granted," explains Springboard rural program director Michele Anderson. "That's part of our mission: to help communities to think about their narratives and their possibilities in new ways. Just like in urban neighborhoods, artists are gatherers and story tellers of the things that set our communities apart, and they can also be the first wave of things to change."

A number of younger artists have moved here seeking lower rents for housing and studio space, observed Anderson, 33, a classical pianist and composer who moved from Portland, Oregon. "But it's more than money. Young people today want to help shape the places we live, whether we are artists or not. In a small town you can step up and do that. I liked Portland, but didn't feel I could make a difference there," she says. "Here I feel like I am involved every day in helping make things happen."

Among other towns in the area embracing arts and culture to ensure their vitality are Vining, featuring mammoth depictions of everyday objects such as a clothespin in the Nyberg Sculpture Park; and New York Mills, where the Regional Cultural Center sponsors a jam-packed calendar of music, film, yoga classes, a puppet pageant, a kite festival, and The Great American Think-Off, a philosophy debate that put the town on the map for folks outside Minnesota.

## Park Rapids: Seeking Small-Town Comforts with Big-City Options

Big ambitions to cultivate the arts are afoot in Park Rapids (pop. 3,700), too, where the Upper Mississippi Center for the Arts will occupy the historic National Guard Armory thanks to \$2.5 million in bonding from the state legislature.

The plans call for the armory to become a gathering spot with art classes, music lessons, lifelong-

learning programs, meetings, events, receptions, concerts, and summer productions of the Northern Light Opera, whose staging of West Side Story sold out all eight performances in 2015.

Arts proponents like Cynthia Jones, president of the Downtown Business Association, say public events can bring the whole community together — year-round residents and summer people, low-income families who live in town and wealthier ones who live on lakes, kids and parents and grandparents. "Everyone comes out for the outdoor music concerts we do downtown Thursday evenings in the summer," she notes. "They all bring their lawn chairs."

Despite the presence of a Walmart Supercenter on the outskirts, Park Rapids' Main Avenue — with businesses which ranging from a Ben Franklin store to Al's Paint and Glass to the Bella Caffé — is a lively social hub stretching four blocks. This is the middle of Minnesota Lake Country with famous Lake Itasca 18 miles away, so tourists exert considerable influence on the local economy.

One of Main Avenue's anchors is The Good Life Café, a homey spot that splits the difference between a small-town diner and a gastropub. Co-owner Molly Luther, 34, grew up in town and

moved back home after seven years in Boston at a software firm. "They let me telecommute from Park Rapids," she explains. "I knew that if I wanted to live here I'd have to bring my own job — or create one myself," which she eventually did in starting the café with her sister and husband.

"When you leave, you really appreciate what a small town offers," Luther adds. "Yet I feel small towns should also have the same kind of



options as living in Boston or Minneapolis." That's part of her mission with the café, which features local craft beers, inventive cocktails, walleye tacos, and gouda-bacon mac-and-cheese.

Street life and destinations to walk are other urbane pleasures that millennials and many others find lacking in rural communities. Park Rapids strengthened its appeal in this department by making Main Avenue more pedestrian-friendly, adding trees, and widening sidewalks at intersections to shorten the crossing distance.

"It started out controversial about the cost," Jones recalls. "But everyone loves it now." The Heartland State Trail, where one can bike or hike 40 miles to Cass Lake (or even farther to Bemidji or Brainerd on the connecting Paul Bunyan Trail), begins just three blocks from Main Avenue at Heartland Park.

In vacation destinations like Park Rapids, the brain gain extends beyond the 30- to 50-year-old set. "Seasonal, occasional, and recreational residents have traditionally provided a strong customer base for local businesses and organizations, and may become increasingly important to communities as these part-time residents transition to become permanent residents," notes a 2015 report from the University of Minnesota Extension. This is already true in Park Rapids.

Cynthia Jones, who owns RiverBend Home Expressions, a furnishings and accessories store, moved from Kansas City with her husband Ellis after many years of summering in Park Rapids. Paul Dove, founder of the Northern Light Opera Company, moved from Evansville, Indiana, with his wife Pat. John Rasmussen, current president of the Park Rapids Rotary Club, moved from Omaha with his wife Christie.

People who vacation in Park Rapids feel very invested in the community, even when they're back home. "We've got a webcam looking out on Main Avenue," Jones says, "and if it goes down, we soon hear about it from people across the country."

#### **Alexandria: Keeping Downtown Lively**

Ranked #22 of America's best 100 small towns by Livability.com, Alexandria (pop. 11,000) has taken steps to ensure its appeal as a place to live by making downtown more inviting. The main street, Broadway, is also Minnesota Highway 29, which meant that heavy traffic hurrying through the five-block shopping district tarnished the town's quality of life. That's why Alexandria undertook a project in 2014 to widen sidewalks, narrow traffic lanes, and encourage motorists not to speed through town.

Traffic accidents were down 49 percent in 2015, compared with the average from 2009 to 2013, on the five-block stretch of Broadway, according to city engineer Tim Schoonhoven. "Wider lanes tell people to sail through here as fast as you can," says Alexandria city planner Mike Weber. That's bad for business as well as for people on foot. "People can't shop from their cars. Shoppers are pedestrians."

Alexandria's downtown improvements are part of its Complete Streets policy — an innovative approach to planning adopted by a number of Minnesota cities, counties, and the state itself that looks out for the needs of all users on public roads, not just motorists. Another project in Alexandria is the Safe Routes to School program to promote biking and walking for kids, which led to building sidewalks on streets near an elementary school that had none.

"Public health is part of the driver for Complete Streets projects," Weber notes. "We can get more people to bike and walk here."

#### Battle Lake: It Takes a Whole Town to Stay Vital

Battle Lake (pop. 875) is also embracing Complete Streets in its aspiration to attract young families and new businesses. "We didn't want to be another small town on the prairie that loses people, loses our school, and becomes a ghost town," explains Dan Malmstrom, a local resident who started

Douglas Scientific in Alexandria and other high-tech companies. "More than 80 people showed up at our planning meeting to help envision the future we want to have."

Better conditions for biking and walking are a key part of this strategy. When local folks heard that Minnesota Highway 78 running through downtown would be resurfaced, they persuaded the Minnesota Department of Transportation to narrow it from four lanes to three and substantially widen the sidewalks. The middle lane accommodates turns in either direction — a new design known as a "road diet" that curbs speeding and reduces crashes by 29 percent, according to Federal Highway Administration research.

Reba Gilliand — who works at a nonprofit art gallery and is part of an ad hoc group of more than 100 people pushing to invigorate Battle Lake — stresses that calming traffic is only the tip of the iceberg. Over the past three years, citizens have approved a school levy to improve education, worked to bring natural gas to Battle Lake, beautified downtown with striking mosaics, sponsored numerous social events like the now-annual Pumpkin Fest and are busy planning Battle Lake's 125th birthday celebration this year. Other initiatives undertaken include a 12-mile biking/walking path that forms a loop connecting to Glendalough State Park, and a fundraising drive to renovate a building for early childhood education, before- and after-school childcare and a youth center.

The group spans all age groups, Gilliand says. "There's a lot of energy from retired people who bring their talents."

The most noticeable change in Battle Lake is a more lively downtown. "In the summer you can hardly walk down the street," Gilliand enthusiastically reports. A popular Fergus Falls bakery opened a branch here, joining a pharmacy, lumberyard, tavern, vintage store, and other eateries. Meanwhile the "world's biggest coloring book" awaits kids in a refurbished, car-free alley, with chalk available in an old post box. "Widening the sidewalk makes it possible to add amenities like benches, planter boxes, and for the ice cream shop, restaurants, and maybe even the bar to put outside tables for people to sit," says Patrick Hollister of PartnerSHIP 4 Health, a collaboration of regional health and community organizations that supported the effort.

"There was some resistance to narrowing Highway 78, and you still hear some grumbling about we don't want to be an art town, we want to stay the way we are," admits Gilliand, who then quickly notes that 30 more kids were enrolled in the school last year than the year before. "The drive with all this is to get more families with kids to come here."

#### Frazee: Where the Trails Lead

Besides Portland, Boulder, Austin, San Francisco, Madison, and Minneapolis, the list of <u>Bicycle</u> <u>Friendly Communities</u> from the League of American Bicyclists includes Moorhead, Bemidji, and Frazee, all in northwest Minnesota. Moorhead and Bemidji are college towns, but Frazee? Yes, indeed. And Mayor Hank Ludtke, a retired truck driver, envisions making Frazee into Minnesota's premier trail town — a center for all kinds of outdoor recreation.

Indeed, three distinctly different kinds of trails connect here. The popular Heartland State Trail, used primarily by bicyclists and snowmobilers, is slated to come to town on its eventual route

from Park Rapids to Moorhead. The North Country Trail, a 4,600-mile hiking path (about halfdeveloped) from North Dakota to New York State akin to the Appalachian Trail winds through Frazee along the Otter Tail River. The river itself is a designated state water trail for paddlers, who can cover 175 miles between Rochert and the Otter Tail's convergence with the Bois de Sioux River at Breckenridge, which marks the origin of the Red River of the North.



"I see building a camping facility for all three, and providing a place where people can take a slower and resupply," says Ludtke. Tourism plays a role in the mayor's plans, but his major aim is attracting new residents. The city's unique geography as a peninsula virtually surrounded by lakes and the river makes it unattractive as an industrial site, he explains. "So if we are going to be a bedroom community to Perham and Detroit Lakes, let's be a really good one."

Ludtke won office on a platform of increasing the town's appeal to older

people and young families with kids, both of which prize outdoor recreation. In addition to plans for capitalizing on the trails, he has overseen the creation or planning of new on-street bike lanes, a bike/ped path leading to the elementary school, a bike safety course for kids, a Safe Routes to School program, a police-on-bikes program, and public kayak and canoe facilities.

"Being outdoors is good for kids' and everybody's health. You see nature, have fun," exalts Ludtke.

#### White Earth: Recovering Land, Culture, and Hope

Traveling through Becker County in early autumn — blue prairie skies with splotches of red and orange appearing in the trees — Robert Shimek, executive director of the <u>White Earth Land</u> <u>Recovery Project</u> (WELRP), looks out at a pasture golden-lit by afternoon sun and says, "This land is lonesome for buffalo."

"That's where I want to put in a buffalo herd," he adds. "I wouldn't have thought that 20 years ago. Well, yes I did, but I wouldn't have talked about it."

His organization seeks to get back some of the land that belongs to the Anishinaabeg (Ojibwe) Nation according to the 1867 treaty with the United States. "We've bought 1,400 acres," says Shimek, which WELRP uses to help White Earth Reservation residents sustain livelihoods by hunting, fishing, trapping, logging, wild rice gathering, maple sugar harvesting, berry picking, and other traditional practices.

"We want to get at the 45 percent unemployment around here by adding a little more certainty, cash income, and opportunity to people's lives," he emphasizes. "Poverty is our overriding challenge."

"We also have a lot of diabetes, obesity, hypertension, plus heroin and meth addiction. We want to create an indigenous culture of health by strengthening our connections with the land, which the white man tried to erase."

The group operates out of an old elementary school in Callaway, just north of Detroit Lakes, on the White Earth Reservation. The school also houses NiijiiRadio (KKWE 88.9 FM, whose motto is "Independent Radio for an Independent Nation") and Native Harvest, the business arm of WELRP that sells native foods and crafts such as wild rice, maple syrup, buffalo sausage, birch-bark baskets. It has customers all over the country.

"The purpose of the White Earth Land Recovery project is to re-instill a sense of our history and culture," explains Shimek, who succeeded founder Winona LaDuke as executive director in 2014. "We want to create institutions on the reservation where people can feel safe as Anishinaabeg and Native people."

They run a multitude of projects from community gardens that feed schoolchildren and families, to seed libraries preserving indigenous crops and medicines, to wild rice and maple sugar harvest events in which centuries-old skills are handed down to the next generation. Anishinaabeg children are taught traditional cooking, arts, games, and ceremonies.

WELRP also sponsors an annual Indigenous Farming Conference and speaks out to protect wild rice from genetic modification and the proposed Enbridge Sandpiper crude oil pipeline, which Shimek notes "goes through the heart of wild rice country in Minnesota."

#### Pierz: Striking Oil in Central Minnesota



Farming will remain a foundation of this region's economy, but the crops grown may shift in response to changing tastes. Tom and Jenni Smude, who farm near Pierz, are betting that people will soon want more sunflower oil in their kitchens, bathrooms, and cosmetics. Higher in vitamin E than any other plant-based oil and rich in beneficial monounsaturated fat while low in saturated fat, sunflower oil is increasingly being used for cooking and skin protection.

The Smudes process their crop directly

into three types of oil — for cooking, eating and, massage — which are sold at grocery stores throughout Minnesota as well as farmers' markets and online. "We get a lot of orders from eastern

states," says Bryan Smude, Tom's brother and business associate, as he guides me through their onfarm bottling facility filled with 250-gallonplastic vats of oil. More than 20 other firms incorporate the Smudes' oil into soap, deodorant, lip balm, goat's milk cosmetics, baked goods, and potato chips. Celebrated Twin Cities restaurants specializing in local food like Heartland, Spoon River, and Birchwood use it, says Tom Smude.

The Smudes planted 500 acres of sunflowers in 2015, up from 250 the year before, and are looking at 700 to 800 acres this year to meet the growing demand. "Coborn's [a St. Cloud-based grocery chain] orders a pallet every few weeks. It used to be every few months," Tom notes.

#### St. Cloud: Take Another Look

It's commonly assumed that Minnesota's population growth all occurs in the Minneapolis-St. Paul region. In reality, the rest of the state continues to experience modest growth, with some places on par with the metro area, including St. Cloud. The City of St. Cloud saw 11.3 percent growth between 2000 and 2012, and the St. Cloud metropolitan region (encompassing Stearns and Benton counties) grew even faster than the Twin Cities at 20.7 percent.

Another misconception is that St. Cloud is overwhelmingly white and, according to some, not welcoming to those who aren't. "There are 44 languages spoken in the school district," answers Don Hickman, vice president for community and economic development at the Initiative Foundation, which serves central Minnesota. Approximately 10,000 Somalis, along with immigrants from other African countries, and 5,000 Latinos live in and around St. Cloud, he notes. While several unfortunate incidents have been widely publicized, he says that the community as a whole sees immigrants as a great asset in a global society and economy.

"Cultural and language barriers — and even some fears — can break down as new immigrants get to know fellow employees who may be second- or third-generation central Minnesotans," Hickman says. "With so many aging baby boomers, our region's workforce needs newcomers."

A robust economy, along with the presence of 35,000 students at St. Cloud State University, Saint John's University, College of Saint Benedict, and St. Cloud Technical and Community College, explains the rise in both population and diversity. "Greater St. Cloud has all the resources to continue to build a great community," says Kathy Gaalswyk, president of the Initiative Foundation. "A lot of good things are going on."

The Greater St. Cloud Development Corporation, a collaborative of more than 100 regional business and community leaders founded in 2011, is amplifying this story, and focusing on six key goals: business development, talent attraction and retention, workplace well-being, innovation, transportation, and downtown vitality.

Another surprise in St. Cloud for folks who haven't visited recently is downtown, which has welcomed 24 new businesses since mid-2014, accounting for \$9 million in investment, according to Pegg Gustafson of the St. Cloud Downtown Council. Nearly every storefront in the heart of town on St. Germain Street is open for business: boutiques, a halal butcher shop, Herberger's department

store, a children's theater, coffee shop, art gallery, used book store, the Paramount Center for the Arts, gift and housewares stores, a game shop, plus bars and restaurants to meet virtually anyone's taste. An abundance of surface parking lots and highway-scaled streets mars the area's urban atmosphere, but St. Germain is largely intact through downtown, providing a pleasant spot to stroll.

Just across one of these supersized roads (First Street South) from downtown is Lake George and Eastman Park, featuring an outdoor café, fountain, walking paths, canoes, boathouse, splash pad,



native landscaping, and concert stage. Crowds averaging 10,000 gather here for the weekly Summertime by George! concerts sponsored by the Rotary Club.

To the east of the park toward the St. Cloud State campus and Mississippi River are the South Side and Barden Park neighborhoods, preferred by students and others of all ages who seek historical character. Across the river lie the 14-acre Munsinger Gardens (walking paths winding through lush shade-favoring flora along the riverbank)

and the 7-acre Clemens Gardens (formal flower displays soaking up sunshine at the top of the hill), either of which could qualify as the botanical pride of a larger city.

Like Minneapolis, St. Paul, and other cities across the country, St. Cloud is rediscovering its riverfront as a strategic recreational and cultural asset. Bike and walking trails parallel the Mississippi on both sides, parks line much of the east bank, and a new boardwalk and walk bridge following the west bank near downtown is set to open in summer 2016.

#### **Looking Ahead**

Northwest and north central Minnesota face challenges the same as rural regions all over the country: an aging population, the exodus of college-age kids, regular slumps in agriculture and industry, a shortage of jobs paying middle-class wages and marginal Internet service in some locales. Yet their biggest problem is a stubbornly pervasive sense that small town Minnesota is played out, depleted of talent and resources after 100 years of decline. Many people both inside and outside the region believe that young people's only hope is getting out, and everyone who stays should not expect much in terms of opportunity, services or community quality-of-life.

Thankfully, this part of the state is full of folks who don't buy that story. A resort owner who invited a dismissive *Washington Post* writer to town. A planning engineer who makes Brainerd his base for a national movement to create strong towns. Ojibwa leaders creating sustainable livelihoods for their people. And all the committed citizens who pull together to enliven Main Streets, attract businesses and young families, nurture the arts, improve education, and instill confidence that their towns will thrive in the years to come.

#### **ABOUT FOOD FOR THOUGHT**

This publication was commissioned by The McKnight Foundation as part of the "Food for Thought" series — a collection of third-party reports that inform our program strategies and are shared with the fields we support.

This publication is available for download at <u>www.mcknight.org</u>.

#### **ABOUT THE McKNIGHT FOUNDATION**

The McKnight Foundation seeks to improve the quality of life for present and future generations. We use all our resources to attend, unite, and empower those we serve. Founded in 1953 and independently endowed by William and Maude McKnight, the Minnesota-based Foundation had assets of approximately \$2.2 billion and granted about \$88 million in 2015. Learn more at mcknight.org, and follow us on Facebook and Twitter.

#### **ABOUT THE AUTHOR**

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#### PHOTO CREDITS

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