

MN EDR 4 Comprehensive Economic Development Strategy

2023 Update



Table of Contents

- Introduction 3
- Population & Workforce Updates 4
- Resilient Infrastructure..... 6
- Circular Agriculture & Food Systems 8
- Equity and Inclusion..... 10

To read the full Comprehensive Economic Development Strategy document, visit the Regional Planning page at wcif.org or view at issuu.com/wcinitiative



Introduction

Every five years, West Central Initiative invites the region to participate in the creation of the Comprehensive Economic Development Strategy (CEDS), a lengthy planning document that highlights the economic position of the region and where investments could be made to better that position. It also maps out how residents, the business community, and the public sector might partner to contribute to the lasting vibrancy of the people, places, and shared prosperity of our communities. In 2021, the CEDS was completed and approved by the region’s Economic Development District Advisory Board for the current iteration (2022-2026).

This annual update serves to provide information on the first year of implementation of the strategies outlined in this plan, including updates to demographics and data sets as well as potential work plans for the calendar year 2023.



Hatchery Row groundbreaking, Battle Lake, August 2022

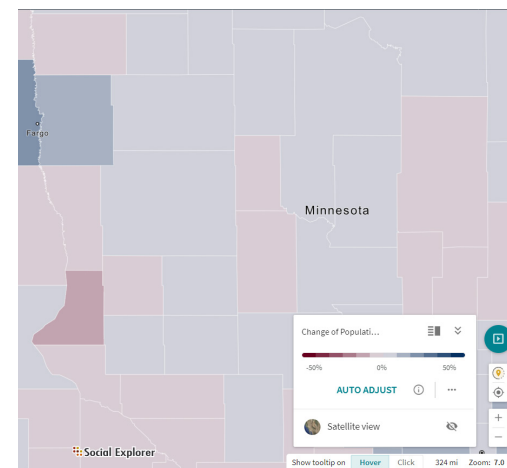
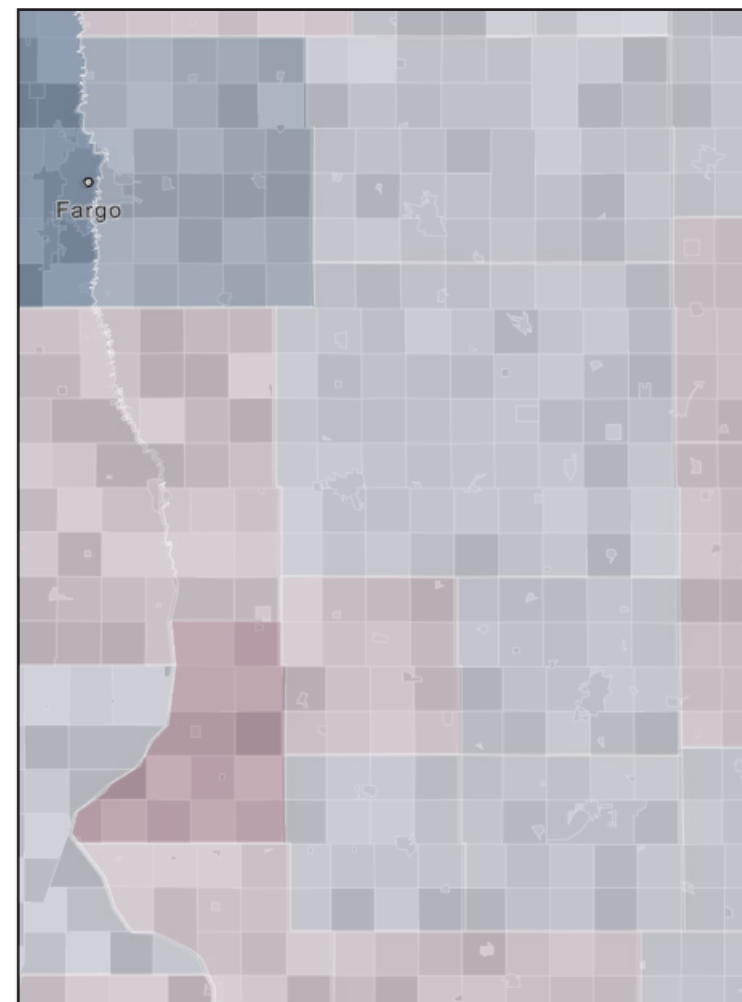
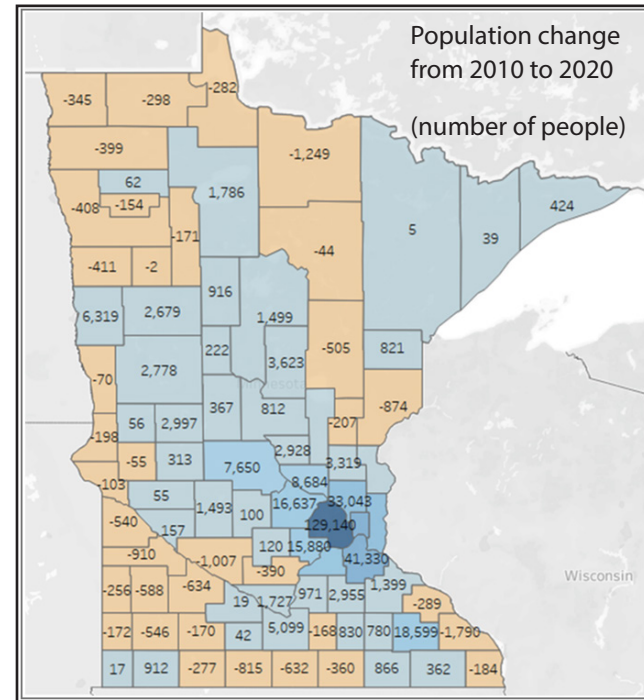


Population & Workforce Updates

The Minnesota Office of Demographics released updated population projections in 2022, after the 2020 Census data had been released and confirmed.

Overall, as indicated by the map at right, population has remained fairly steady across the region, showing limited growth (blue) and decline (orange) as compared to the metro area. The exception of Moorhead, which is Minnesota's fastest growing city by percentage.

However, when looking at township level data, the growth and decline is a much more complex issue. See the map below, which is an overlay of county-level growth and decline with that of townships. Townships in the lightest grey are experiencing the greatest decline in population, where as those in the darkest are experiencing the greatest population increases (by percentage).



Minnesota Region IV 2022-2026 Comprehensive Economic Development Strategy: 2023 Update

Workforce will continue to be a growing issue in the region, as demonstrated by the projects at right from State Demographer, Susan Brower.

In 2022, the unemployment rate dropped to 1.5% for the region. It is vital that the region continue to attract people to the area. In order for our communities to continue to attract the necessary workforce, serious progress must be made in the availability of affordable housing and child care.

Thus, in the 2022 calendar year, implementation of the CEDS focused on three target areas: workforce, housing, and child care. WCI convened focus groups on these areas, as well as business development.

Regional successes in 2022

County initiatives related to workforce are receiving state and federal funding.

- Otter Tail County received funds from the Minnesota Department of Employment and Economic Development to pilot the Youth Workforce Navigation Program. The county's Community Development Agency also hosts a job posting board, career fairs, and a housing development project titled "The Big Build."
- Wilkin County has invested in their housing stock, including new construction and rehabilitation. Housing affordability metrics already show improvement.
- Becker County developed a child care grant program, allowing providers to access funds for start-up or expansion that would increase the number of child care slots in the county.
- The Fargo Moorhead West Fargo Chamber Foundation received \$9.62 million from the Good Jobs Challenge grant from the US Economic Development Administration. These funds will be used to increase the labor force participation rate by providing training opportunities to those currently un- or underemployed.
- WCI's Live Wide Open continues to be a successful platform for resident recruitment, and is also promoting the strategies of Welcoming America to communities, supporting gatherings across the region during Welcoming Week in September of 2022.

Due to the immediate and desperate need for child care as a support for ALL economic sectors, child care will continue to be a strategic priority for the region and WCI for the foreseeable future.

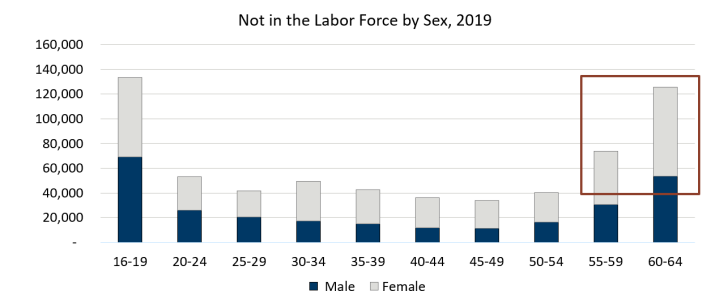
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There were 214,000 job openings in Minnesota in early 2021 & 93,000 people actively looking for work



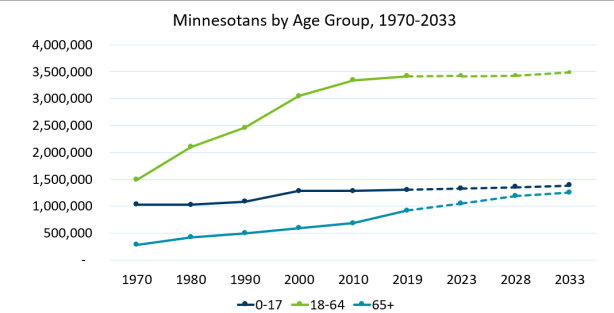
Source: MN DEED, Job Vacancy Survey

~641,000 Minnesotans (16-64) are not in the labor force



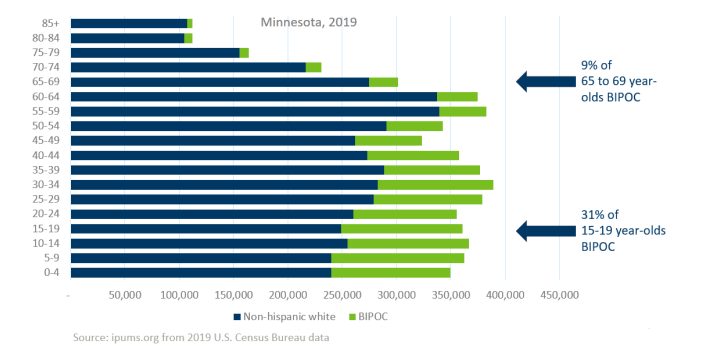
Source: 2015-2019 American Community Survey, ipums.org

Little-to -no growth in working-age population in MN over the next 15 years



Source: U.S. Census Bureau, and Minnesota State Demographic Center Projections

Minnesota's workforce will continue to become more racially and culturally diverse



Source: ipums.org from 2019 U.S. Census Bureau data

2023 Priority: Resilient Infrastructure

Of all categories included in the 2021 CEDS 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 that may not understand these vital systems that underpin a community’s quality of life.



WCI work plan

In keeping with the public’s priority, WCI has updated the twenty-year old infrastructure study to assist communities in applying for funds. Staff continues to monitor the available funding at state, federal, and private levels to ensure communities can access funds and submit competitive proposals.

WCI is partnering with paleBLUeDot to conduct a regionwide Climate Action Plan. This plan will include adaptation strategies to ensure that our communities’ infrastructure can withstand ever-more-frequent severe weather events and projected increases in water levels and average temperatures over the next 50 years.

WCI continues to partner with the Minnesota Department of Transportation on efforts such as the Transportation Alternatives Program, Safe Routes to School, the Regional Active Transportation Plan, and the upcoming Transit Plan to ensure transportation access for and to all community members.



Regional work plan focuses for 2023:

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
- Produce infographics with systems experts explaining infrastructure mechanics
- Provide application support for major projects
- Aggregate need-based data and indicators
- Engage young people in knowledge-building and reconstruction efforts

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



2023 Priority: Circular Agriculture & Food Systems

Circular agriculture refers to closed-loop systems in which the resources used during the process of growing, processing, and selling agricultural products are produced with minimum waste and utilize locally sourced inputs. In other terminology: what is grown here is processed here, sold here, and put back into the soil here cleanly. 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.

Additionally, a focus on sales within the region has the added benefit of strengthening the local food systems. At a time when the world is facing supply chain issues, potential droughts, and inflation, it may be critical to the region's residents to have ready access to affordable and nutritious food.

WCI work plan

Through our work with paleBLUEdot in the Climate Action Plan, WCI hopes to identify "easy wins" for the region's agriculture sector, where the best farming practices can both mitigate climate change, as well as open new markets and profit margins.

Included in this effort is a new loan program, The Good Food Loan Fund, to support new and existing small-scale farmers in WCI's nine-county region and White Earth Nation. WCI is also seeking local and national partnerships to maximize the investments into the local food systems.

Regional work plan focuses for 2023:

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 farm labor practices that keep people healthy and safe
- Integrate livestock into production agriculture
- Advocate for land trusts to protect against development pressure
- Host leadership development program to support increased farmer diversity
- Incorporate process-verified certifications into coursework/ curriculum

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

Objectives

- Support local food initiatives
- Prioritize production processes that utilize locally harvested food and fiber

Strategies

- Leverage advances in technology to streamline online purchasing options
- Improve marketing of regional and statewide resources
- Encourage self-sufficient food production
- Provide financial planning assistance to emerging farmers
- Conduct a study to assess needs for self-sufficient family farms

Equity & 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, including traditionally and historically marginalized populations.

WCI work plan

WCI continues to examine ways that the organization can increase inclusion measures internally, which includes a public-facing and open appointment process for the selection of new members to the WCI Board of Directors, and an examination of hiring practices, including education and experience criteria. Additionally, staff are exploring accessibility of our services, requests for grant proposals, and loan programs.

In 2022, WCI partnered with Welcoming America to assist our communities in hosting Welcoming Week events. We believe that communities that openly practice their beliefs in neighborliness continue to attract and retain community members from a variety of backgrounds.

In 2023, WCI will continue to explore ways to partner and invest in inclusivity, as we believe that a diversity of thought and leadership brings strength and resilience to the region.



from Welcoming Week, September 2022

Regional work plan focuses for 2023:

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
 - Partner with Minnesota’s state ethnic councils and minority-led businesses
 - Support programs that promote the intercultural competency of young people
 - Establish local advocacy organizations list