

# Matt Varilek

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## SUMMARY

Senior leader based in Greater Minnesota. Prior experience as President Obama-appointed Chief Operating Officer at the U.S. Small Business Administration (SBA), a federal agency with a mission similar to that of the Minnesota Department of Employment and Economic Development (DEED). Organized and participated in hundreds of public meetings with diverse community-based stakeholders during prior regional role at the SBA, and as a U.S. Senate staffer and candidate for U.S. House. As President of the Initiative Foundation, demonstrated successful organizational leadership abilities – growing assets, increasing employee satisfaction, and forging new partnerships with sovereign Native Nations, communities of color, leaders from across the political spectrum, and in both rural and urban settings. Committed to strong partnerships between state agencies and grantees, and fully aligned with Walz-Flanagan Administration goals around inclusive economic growth, workforce development, child care, clean energy transition, and more. Since June 2023, provided strong leadership on DEED's progress in implementing existing and new programs and services, and engaged in extensive statewide travel to connect with businesses, workers, nonprofits, communities leaders, tribes and other partners.

## EXPERIENCE

**Commissioner**, *Minnesota Department of Employment and Economic Development*, St. Paul, MN (June 2023-present)

- Directed effective and efficient implementation of new and existing programs from the 2023 legislative session, such as: over \$200 million for key workforce programs like Drive for 5, Targeted Populations, and those focused on youth; business finance and technical support programs like Small Business Partnership, Minnesota Investment Fund and new \$400 million Minnesota Forward Fund; workforce services programs including unemployment insurance, vocational rehabilitation services, state services for the blind, and building toward the January 2026 launch of Paid Leave.
- Led progress toward three agency objectives and key results (OKRs) related to: (1) creating an economy rooted in equity, across every race, identity and ability; (2) driving growth that puts Minnesota at the forefront of innovation; and (3) addressing our historic workforce shortages.

**President**, *Initiative Foundation*, Little Falls, MN (December 2016-May 2023)

- Led rural community foundation and economic development organization focused on strategic priorities of inclusive entrepreneurship, workforce development, child care, nonprofit development, and local generosity.
- Expanded lending and training for social entrepreneurs, lower-income entrepreneurs, and entrepreneurs of color, among others. Served as lone in-region provider of Islamic-acceptable small-business financing.
- Efficiently distributed over \$20 million in COVID-relief grants to small businesses and other recipients, in partnership with DEED, returning a portion of unspent administrative fees.
- Led diverse coalition in collaboration with staff at the Minneapolis Federal Reserve, as the lone 9th District cohort in the national system's Reinventing Our Communities program, which advances entrepreneurship as a tool for wealth-building and reduction of racial inequity.

**Chief Operating Officer**, *U.S. SBA*, Washington, DC (March 2015 – December 2016)

- Promoted from regional role to manage national operations across Cabinet-level agency with 2,000+ employees – supporting programs and services related to small-business lending, venture capital and private equity, entrepreneurial training, government contracting, and disaster recovery.
- Managed staff of approximately 180. Supervised direct reports including heads of offices of Human Resources, Information Technology, Digital Services, Facilities, Grants Management, Diversity and Inclusion, Enterprise Risk Management, and Executive Correspondence.
- Served as chairman of Lender Oversight Committee, monitoring and managing risk across the agency's loan guarantee programs.

**Regional Administrator, U.S. SBA Region VIII, Denver, CO** (May 2013 – February 2015)

- Managed staff of approximately 60 people as senior presidentially-appointed agency official in six-state area including Colorado, South Dakota, North Dakota, Montana, Wyoming, and Utah.
- Promoted SBA programs and Obama Administration small business priorities via numerous public speaking engagements, TV, radio, and print media interviews.
- Designated as first non-D.C. successor to SBA Administrator in case of catastrophic event. Top Secret security clearance.

**Candidate for Congress, At-Large District of South Dakota** (Dec 2011 – Nov 2012)

- Challenged incumbent U.S. House member. Won primary election (72%-28%). Lost general election (43%-57%).
- Raised contributions totaling approximately \$960,000. Recruited and hired team of paid campaign staff, media, mail and polling firms, along with unpaid volunteers.
- Participated in numerous TV, radio and print interviews, as well as live debates, plus numerous other public speaking engagements.

**Economic Development Director and Speechwriter, Offices of U.S. Senators Tom Daschle and Tim Johnson, Washington, DC and Sioux Falls, SD** (April 2004 – Dec 2011, Nov 2012 – May 2013)

- Advised Senate Minority Leader and Senate Banking Committee Chairman on issue areas including small business, community development, disaster recovery, technology research, infrastructure, appropriations.
- Served as liaison to community organizations such as CDFIs and economic development corporations, Small Business Development Centers (SBDCs), local elected officials, and small businesses across the state.
- Wrote and revised Senators' speeches, press releases, memos, and correspondence.

**Director of Policy and Research, Natsource LLC, New York City, London, and Washington, DC** (Nov. 1999 – March 2004)

- Built new advisory services business unit within over-the-counter brokerage of energy-related commodities, including: electricity, natural gas, coal, and emission allowances, and related derivatives.
- Project manager, lead author, and/or editor of energy and environmental market and policy reports, articles, and papers on behalf of the firm and its electric utility brokerage clients, as well as governmental agencies. Delivered presentations in the U.S. and at numerous international events.

## EDUCATION

**MPhil., Environment and Development, University of Cambridge, England** (2001-2002)

- Fully funded by Gates Cambridge Scholarship, established by Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation.
- Degree awarded with distinction for overall performance.
- From 2008-2023, invited annually by Gates Cambridge Trust to serve as panelist selecting new U.S.-based Gates Cambridge Scholarship recipients. Resigned upon appointment to DEED.

**MPhil., Economic Development, University of Glasgow, Scotland** (1998-1999)

- Fully funded by Rotary Ambassadorial Scholarship from Rotary International Foundation.
- Awarded Class Prize for best overall degree performance and Gerry Muller Prize for best dissertation (related to clean energy projects in less developed countries).

**B.A., Philosophy (major), Environment and Technology Studies (concentration), Carleton College, Northfield, Minnesota** (1993-1997)

- Overall GPA 3.7, Major 3.9, Phi Beta Kappa, Magna Cum Laude. Awarded distinction in major and on senior thesis.
- Vice President of Carleton Student Association, Chairperson of Budget Committee.