



## **SOUTHWEST REGIONAL DEVELOPMENT COMMISSION**

### **FIVE-YEAR PERFORMANCE ASSESSMENT 2016-2021**



#### **INTRODUCTION**

The Southwest Regional Development Commission (SRDC) is a nine county regional development commission made up of representatives from local units of government and public interest groups in Cottonwood, Jackson, Lincoln, Lyon, Murray, Nobles, Pipestone, Redwood and Rock Counties. There are currently 80 cities, 163 townships and 32 school districts located within the region. The purpose of the SRDC, according to the Regional Development Act is to “work with and on behalf of local units of government to develop plans or implement programs to address economic, social, physical, and governmental concerns”.

The Minnesota Regional Development Act (Minn. Stat.462.393) requires the SRDC every five years to “review its activities and issue a report assessing its performance in fulfilling the purposes of the Regional Development Act. The Report shall address whether the existence of the commission is in the public welfare and interest.”

In accordance with this requirement, the SRDC developed an assessment tool based on a tool used by the Upper Minnesota River Valley Regional Development Commission, located in Appleton, Minnesota.

The assessment tool was given to the Commission’s local elected officials, consisting of County Board members, City Council members, Township officials and staff. This report will begin with a review of the assessment results and conclude with a narrative discussion of the last five year’s accomplishments.

### **SRDC 2021 Self-Assessment**

**1. How Knowledgeable are you of the SRDC and its programs and services?**

Very Knowledgeable	9%
Knowledgeable	57%
Somewhat Knowledgeable	34%

**2. Have you or your organization had an opportunity to work with the SRDC staff over the past five years?**

Yes	67%
No	29%
I don’t know	4%

**3. Which of the following best describes the sector you represent?**

County Commissioner	33%
Mayor/Councilmember	19%
Local Government Staff	10%
Township Official	29%
School District Official	9%

**4. In what areas have you interacted with the SRDC staff?**

Zoning or other Ordinance Work	9%
Comprehensive Planning	33%
Trails and Parks	33%
Infrastructure Projects	14%
Energy Efficiency or Renewable Energy	24%
Broadband	33%

Revolving Loan Fund	19%
PACE Loan Fund	19%
Grants Management	5%
Technical or Planning Assistance	0%
Hazard Mitigation Planning	10%
Transportation	38%
Safe Routes to School	43%
Active Living	19%
Solid Waste	14%
Meeting Facilitation or Strategic Planning	19%
No Experiences with any of these areas	19%

**5. How responsive was the SRDC to your questions, needs or calls?**

Very responsive	57%
Responsive	43%
Unresponsive	0%
Very Unresponsive	0%

**6. How do you judge the overall quality of service that the SRDC provides?**

Excellent	71%
Good	29%

**7. How satisfied were you with the services you received?**

Completely satisfied	67%
Somewhat satisfied	9%
Not satisfied	0%
Have not received service	24%

**8. How would you describe the value for the service you were provided?**

Too Expensive	0%
About Right	82%
Inexpensive	18%

**9. How would you rate the effectiveness and professional capabilities of the SRDC staff?**

Excellent	71%
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Good	29%
Fair	0%
Poor	0%

**10. From the below list, what are the top priority issues in your jurisdiction?**

	Critical	Important	Unimportant
Changing Demographics	19%	24%	5%
Zoning or other Ordinance Work	0%	33%	24%
Trails and Parks	9%	33%	5%
Infrastructure Projects	29%	43%	0%
Energy Efficiency or Renewable Energy	14%	33%	14%
Broadband	29%	38%	9%
Revolving Loan Fund	5%	33%	19%
PACE Loan Fund	5%	33%	9%
Grants Management	9%	43%	14%
Technical or Planning Assistance	5%	29%	19%
Hazard Mitigation Planning	9%	24%	24%
Transportation	14%	29%	14%
Safe Routes to School	14%	43%	14%
Active Living	14%	38%	9%
Solid Waste	5%	48%	19%
Meeting Facilitation or Strategic Planning	5%	29%	24%
Housing	43%	38%	0%
Workforce	38%	29%	9%
Transition Planning	9%	33%	9%

**Has your jurisdiction chosen to hire a consultant, engineer, or outside contractor to assist you with any of the issues in the previous question rather than the SRDC during the past five years? If so, can you please share why?**

- The SRDC is too expensive
- The SRDC does not provide the services we are looking for 63%
- The SRDC has provided poor service in the past
- I did not think to call the SRDC/Other 37%

## **SRDC PERFORMANCE HIGHLIGHTS - 2016**

### **Active Living in Edgerton**

The SRDC worked with the City of Edgerton to create an Active Living Plan. Through a planning process of two community meetings, a community survey, and Wiki-mapping, the team was able to identify community assets, walking and biking routes, and barriers to active living. In addition to its focus on physical activity, active living planning is also a route for economic development – investment occurs where people are and active living encourages residents to walk and bike on the roads near them, leading to an increase in foot traffic and the utilization of the business spaces in those locales.

### **SRDC and MnDOT Win National Award**

The SRDC and MnDOT were presented with an Excellence in Transportation Award at the 2016 National Regional Transportation Conference in Chattanooga, Tennessee. SRDC staff, in collaboration with MnDOT District 7 / ATP 7 staff, developed an Enhancement Letter of Intent Review Process to enable potential enhancement project applicants to determine if they were ready to submit a full application for funding. The project partners meet with an RDC planner to help determine readiness of their Enhancement project. We address areas of concern - potential project delays in advance; identify areas to strengthen their application; and help outline the federal requirements, funding and timelines a successful project would need.

### **60/90 Corridor Initiative Work**

With support from the Blandin Foundation, the SRDC continued its work to develop Livability Plans for the 60/90 Corridor Livability Initiative in Cottonwood, Jackson, and Nobles Counties. The principle behind the initiative is to attract residents to the area to live, work, and study using a holistic approach to development. Community surveys were dispersed to county residents via an online survey tool and their responses were compiled and presented at the first community meeting where attendees discussed the results and came up with a SWOT Analysis (Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, and Threats). This document along with the survey results was integral in creating the final Livability Plan which details goals and strategies for community and economic development in the three target counties. This initiative will continue to inform policy decisions, community growth, and economic development in the 60/90 Corridor throughout the implementation process.

### **Safe Routes to School**

The SRDC completed Safe Routes to School Plans for the Worthington and Heron Lake-Okabena School Districts. Safe Routes to School is an intensive planning process where a group of school and city officials along with community members team up with a planner to identify barriers to safe walking and biking to school. Through surveying

parents and students and conducting a public mapping process, input was gathered about the safety of the areas around the schools. The team also gathered information through walking audits and worked with the community to come up with pedestrian infrastructure and programming recommendations for the schools. The schools and cities will use these plans as they implement changes to encourage students to walk and bike to school.

### **Wind on the Wires Recognizes SRDC and RMEB's Renewable Energy Efforts**

In November, Chris Kunkle, Regional Policy Manager-West for Wind on the Wires, traveled to Slayton to recognize the impact that sound policy decisions regarding local renewable energy can have for a region. In the nine-county area covered by the SRDC, wind turbines generated more than \$7.2 million in wind energy production tax revenue in 2014. These funds are used by townships and counties to fund a variety of needs. The SRDC and Rural Minnesota Energy Board members, along with wind developers collaborated on the political effort to put the production tax in place in the early 2000s. The production tax provides a steady stream of revenue for the counties and the townships. "The wind industry paid about \$10.5 million (in production tax) to counties throughout Minnesota (in 2014)," said Kunkle. About 3,000 megawatts of wind energy are currently generating 16 percent of the state's electricity. So far, the wind industry has invested \$5.6 billion into Minnesota's economy and created approximately 2,000 jobs.

### **Revolving Loan Funds, (RLF)**

During FY 2016, three RLF loans closed, one in Cottonwood County and two in Nobles County, totaling \$174,200. In the last five years, the RLF has closed 33 loans for over \$1.7 million, leveraged an additional \$13.3 million and helped to create or retain 200 jobs.

In FY 2016, seven loans were closed in the PACE program totaling \$238,302, three in Nobles County, and one each in Renville, Blue Earth, Jackson and Redwood Counties.

### **SRDC PERFORMANCE HIGHLIGHTS - 2017**

#### **New Member/Newly Elected Official Orientation**

On February 4, 2017, the Southwest Regional Development Commission held a new member/newly elected official orientation at the Pizza Ranch in Slayton. The SRDC conducts an orientation after every general election to familiarize elected officials from the region with the staff and programs of the SRDC. While many of the attendees are first time elected officials, many Commission Members also attend, to meet the newly elected, and to solidify their knowledge of the SRDC. Given the broad range of issues that the SRDC is involved in, many Commissioners feel that attending the orientation a

second time after being on the Commission for a couple of years is very valuable as all the pieces of the various programs and projects fall into place.

### **Safe Routes to School**

In 2017 the SRDC worked with six school districts encompassing 19 buildings in the region to complete the Safe Routes to School planning process through a grant provided by MnDOT. Planning committees were convened at Lincoln Elementary (Ivanhoe), Marshall, Redwood Falls, Pipestone, Murray County Central (Slayton), and Hills-Beaver Creek. Basing their decisions on local data, the teams discussed ways to increase walking and biking to school and how to increase safety for students who choose to do so. In order to ensure a holistic approach, the teams' efforts revolved around the "6 Es" of Safe Routes to School Planning: Education, Encouragement, Enforcement, Engineering, Evaluation, and Equity.

### **Active Living**

In partnership with the A Healthier Southwest SHIP (Statewide Health Improvement Partnership), the SRDC completed Active Living Plans for the cities of Minneota and Tracy. Active Living Plans are written with the goal of identifying ways to make walking, biking, and other active lifestyle choices an integral part of daily life. Because every community is different, the plans incorporate unique goals such as viewing active living through an economic development lens in Minneota while the City of Tracy's approach incorporated more infrastructure development. Our work continued after the planning process with these cities to assist with the implementation of the plans. The SRDC also worked with the City of Mountain Lake and Community Wellness Partners SHIP to update their plan and continue working toward implementation.

### **RLF**

During 2017, the SRDC's Revolving Loan Fund, (RLF), closed three loans totaling \$139,000. These loans assisted businesses in Pipestone, Redwood, and Rock Counties. The SRDC RLF is a financing tool for businesses that is used to make up any gap in financing from the primary lender, which in most cases is a local bank. SRDC staff works closely with banks to partner on projects of value to the region, whether it be startup capital, an expansion of an existing business or a business succession plan to keep a small business in the region. Since its inception, the SRDC RLF has issued 154 loans totaling just over \$8 million. The total funds leveraged by the program in that time are over \$52 million. The total jobs created/retained are 1,666.

### **Comprehensive Economic Development Strategy (CEDS)**

In conjunction with the DevelopMN statewide plan, all of the Economic Development Districts in Minnesota submitted a new Comprehensive Economic Development Strategy, (CEDS) to the US Department of Commerce, Economic Development

Administration in December of 2016. A CEDS is a five year plan to promote economic development within the region. The strategies developed by the SRDC were devised with local input from throughout the region and with the assistance of the CEDS Committee, made up of economic developers and officials from the region. A copy of the CEDS can be found on the SRDC's website at [www.swrdc.org](http://www.swrdc.org).

## **SRDC PERFORMANCE HIGHLIGHTS - 2018**

### **City of Worthington Planning and Zoning**

When faced with a vacancy in their Community Development Department, the City of Worthington contacted the SRDC to see if we could help. From April through October of 2017, SRDC Physical Development Director Annette (Netty) Fiedler was the acting Zoning Administrator for the city, working with the city's planning department staff to keep up with the workload during a particularly busy summer and fall. Netty worked a few days a week out of the city offices, attended Planning Commission and City Council meetings, and together with city staff reviewed development applications. It was a unique opportunity for the SRDC to provide assistance to the city, and allowed the city the necessary time to conduct a successful search for their new Community/Economic Development Director.

### **Solar Energy Loan Program**

SRDC partnered with Region 5 Development Commission (R5DC) for seven months to complete a planning assessment of supply, demand, and approach to offering a residential Solar Energy Lending Program (SELP). This planning assessment was funded in partnership with the McKnight Foundation for the purpose of determining the viability of the organizations offering a SELP as an adjunct to their existing loan portfolios. Surveys, meetings, and phone and personal interviews were conducted to assess: partnerships, homeowner interest, contractor, and installer and assessor availability to meet potential increased demand. After conducting research, commission staff constructed program formation, including: • Lending and underwriting criteria and loan terms • Program targets and projections • Program launch, outreach and uptake • Legal authority to deliver the program • Ideal success measures. The complete report is available at: [www.swrdc.org](http://www.swrdc.org) or [www.regionfive.org](http://www.regionfive.org)

### **Safe Routes to School and Active Living**

The City of Fulda and Fulda Public Schools initiated the Safe Routes to School planning process during the 2017-2018 academic year, engaging a wide group of community stakeholders to envision what safer walking, biking, and transportation would look like for their community. Many action steps came out of the process, and one team member took the idea of a bike fix-it station for the community and made it a reality. Through setting up a bike fix-it station, Fulda hopes to not only encourage students to bicycle, but also to create a wider culture of bicycling for all ages in the community. After

implementing about a quarter of their Active Living Plan, the City of Mountain Lake received assistance from the SRDC in the form of meeting facilitation and grant-writing during the past year. The goal was to not only gauge the community's active living needs and interests, but to also keep their momentum moving. With the SRDC's assistance they have received funds for new benches along their trail as well as for a bike-share system that the city plans to use to boost bicycling along their 5-mile trail and throughout the city.

### **Nobles County Hazard Mitigation Plan**

In 2017, the SRDC initiated work on six county-wide hazard mitigation plans to address natural and man-made hazards. As a result of an upcoming mitigation project near Worthington, the Nobles County Hazard Mitigation Plan was expedited and completed on a highly reduced timeline. The first planning team meeting was held on November 7, 2017, followed by a Mitigation Strategies subcommittee meeting on November 30, and by January 16, 2018, the plan was in public review. The plan lays out various actions that units of government and other stakeholders can take to reduce potential risk with a given hazard. These include actions such as ensuring access to backup generator power for severe storms, educating residents on disaster preparedness, developing quarantine plans for public health emergencies, and others.

### **Examining Ordinances in Southwest Minnesota**

The SRDC partnered with the University of Minnesota's Center for Urban and Regional Affairs (CURA) to examine the ordinances of nine counties in Southwestern Minnesota, where county officials wanted to learn more about the similarities and differences in how each county regulated five subjects: 1. Feedlots 2. Shoreland 3. Renewable energy 4. Telecommunications 5. Agricultural preservation. This effort was made to identify potential sources of conflict for development that may be sited in multiple counties, and to also identify areas where some counties may be more restrictive or relaxed than their peers. The latter has economic development and quality of life impacts as regulations should not be so strict as to cause development to locate elsewhere, but should also not be so relaxed as to have negative impacts on the environment or quality of life. The participating counties in this project were Cottonwood, Jackson, Lac qui Parle, Lincoln, Lyon, Murray, Pipestone, Rock and Swift.

### **RLF**

The SRDC Revolving Loan Fund (RLF) is a financing tool for businesses that is used to make up any gap in financing from the primary lender, which in most cases is a local bank. SRDC staff works closely with banks to partner on projects of value to the region, whether it be startup capital, an expansion of an existing business, or a business succession plan to keep a small business in the region. The latest RLF plan was approved in 2017. The SRDC approved seven business loans over the course of the past year. Loans were approved for businesses in the following counties: Cottonwood (2

loans), Jackson, Lyon, Nobles, Redwood, and Rock. EDA determined the initial risk rating for the SRDC RLF is a Level A (highest rating possible). The score was based on 15 measures of the Risk Analysis System, including capital, assets, management, earnings, liquidity, and strategic results.

In FY2018, six PACE loans were financed, totaling \$237,573.29. Projects are located in Cottonwood (2), Jackson, Lincoln (2), and Nobles. Projects include a variety of locations, including gas stations, restaurants, multi-unit housing, grocery stores, motels, car wash, rural welding shop, and several main street retail businesses. FY 2018 also included the first solar loan project.

## **SRDC PERFORMANCE HIGHLIGHTS – 2019**

### **Murray County Ordinances**

Following the County Comprehensive Plan update in 2016, SRDC worked with the Murray County Planning Commission and Staff on an update and re-codification of their Land Use Ordinances (Zoning, Subdivision, & Energy). The process encountered a few unexpected twists and delays, such as: DNR has made changes to both the Shoreland and Floodplain Ordinances which needed to be incorporated and documented. MnDOT Office of Aeronautics has been addressing changes in airport setbacks and height limitations. As a result, an Airport Overlay District was added. While overseen by the joint city-county joint planning board, if not identified in the County Ordinance, setbacks might get overlooked. Many of the Planning Commission members in our rural counties are active farm operators. In 2019, farming experienced several weather incidents which allowed very short windows of time to earn a living (1st priority) before serving on boards and commissions.

### **Hazard Mitigation**

The SRDC was working under a Joint Powers Agreement with Minnesota Homeland Security and Emergency Management (HSEM) to complete Hazard Mitigation Plan updates for Cottonwood, Murray, Lincoln, Pipestone, and Redwood Counties. Final public meetings were conducted in May and June of 2019, with review by HSEM and submittal to FEMA during the summer of 2019. Local units of government must have adopted a FEMA-approved local hazard mitigation plan to be eligible to receive project grant funding under certain FEMA programs. A current Hazard mitigation plan is required for a community to be eligible to apply to FEMA for pre-disaster mitigation funds or the FEMA Hazard Mitigation Grant Program (HMGP). Both programs use the potential hazards identified in the Mitigation Plan to identify projects that could be done to assist a community in becoming more resilient in case of a disaster. In 2017, the SRDC expedited the Nobles County Plan Update at the request of FEMA so that a pre-disaster project in Nobles County could go forward in a timely fashion.

## **Safe Routes to School**

In 2018, Luverne Public Schools began a major construction project on their building, anticipated to continue for two years. With this construction project in mind, the City of Luverne and Luverne Public Schools initiated the Safe Routes to School (SRTS) planning process during the 2018-2019 academic year in an effort to use the SRTS planning process as a way to explore how construction might impact walking and bicycling, as well as to come up with strategies to address those concerns before they arise. The SRTS planning process engaged a wide group of community stakeholders to envision what safer walking, biking, and transportation would look like for their community. Former SRDC staff Max Kaufman was instrumental in working with the Luverne SRTS Team throughout the process. Many action steps came out of the process, including the creation of a distributable map which identifies and promotes specific walking and biking routes, as well as promotes bicycle safety. The plan is available on the SRDC website at [www.swrdc.org/planning/transportation/safe-routes-to-school-plans](http://www.swrdc.org/planning/transportation/safe-routes-to-school-plans).

## **GreenStep Cities**

The SRDC, as part of its work with the Clean Energy Resource Teams (CERTs), assists with the GreenStep Cities program. Current members in the southwest region are Marshall, St. James, Sherburn and Vesta. SRDC is looking to expand the number of participants. The GreenStep Cities program is a voluntary, free program that encourages cities to choose actions from a menu of 29 best practices to help them achieve sustainability and quality-of-life goals. As cities complete task from the best practices, they get recognition that starts at step 1 and culminates at step 5. Every summer the League of Minnesota Cities formally recognizes all new and continuing GreenStep cities at its annual conference. Cities benefit from a highly structured framework to assess what they have already accomplished and to prioritize goals and strategies to become more sustainable. Highlights from our region:

- Marshall: In December of 2018, the City of Marshall was named a Bronze Level Bicycle Friendly Community by the League of American Bicyclists. They have recently begun a free Bike Share program with nine Trek bicycles at three locations.
- St. James: The downtown now has a mini-roundabout and bump-outs. Also, last November, the city contracted with West Central Sanitation for their solid waste needs. West Central has a fleet of vehicles that only use natural gas, which makes them quieter and greener.
- Sherburn: This city is great about inputting their utility data into the B3 database that allows them to track their energy efficiency over time. Another big win for them has been construction of a water treatment facility that utilizes reverse osmosis, creating a reduction in the amount of chloride in their wastewater system.
- Vesta: Newest to the GreenStep Cities, Vesta is working to create a “Green Team” to start checking off best practice action steps.

## **RLF**

The SRDC Revolving Loan Fund (RLF) continues to be a vital part of our economic development efforts. RLF is a tool that helps strengthen and grow businesses in the region by partnering with primary lenders on projects of value, whether it be startup capital, an expansion or relocation of an existing business, or a business succession plan to keep small businesses in the region. Successful projects require collaboration from multiple funding sources, which continues to be a strength in this region. The SRDC approved four loans in FY19, totaling \$284,000. Loans were approved for businesses in Murray and Nobles counties.

## **SRDC PERFORMANCE HIGHLIGHTS – 2020**

### **Operation Prairie Venture**

During 2019-2020 the SRDC had the opportunity to help concerned citizens address problems created when the nursing home in Slayton closed in May 2019. SRDC staff met Lynn Johnson, a local lawyer and advocate for older adults, back in November of 2019. During that first meeting she had a white board filled with ideas, groups, and people that she thought could help tackle the service and housing gap in the area. In the coming months our staff continued to talk to Lynn and others who had rallied to the cause. In spring 2020 the group decided that the best way to move forward was to create a new nonprofit called Operation Prairie Venture (OPV). Shortly after they incorporated, the City of Slayton contracted with the SRDC to facilitate visioning, create a strategic plan, and conduct an outreach campaign in partnership with OPV to address housing and service issues for older adults. SRDC conducted a series of meetings and short surveys with the OPV board to initially develop their mission, vision, and value statements. After in-depth discussions we arrived at a final product (see below). During the next stage of assistance, SRDC staff launched a survey to gain community input on intergenerational housing and care, created their website, [operationprairieventure.org](http://operationprairieventure.org), and their Facebook page, [@OperationPrairieVenture](https://www.facebook.com/OperationPrairieVenture), and began a marketing and outreach campaign in Murray County. To help realize their vision, Molly Malone, an OPV board member, wrote a successful grant request to the University of Minnesota Extension's Southwest Regional Sustainable Development Partnership. This grant supported a 13-week architecture and design student, Rajeev Atha, to develop an intergenerational model neighborhood that provides housing options for older adults. The SRDC provided the history and community feedback to help Atha with his design process. A common theme in the survey responses was that Slayton and Murray County need memory care services, more assisted living, a variety of housing options for all ages and income levels, and services that allow people to stay in the area. All partners continue to engage a variety of stakeholders in the community to make progress on this complex issue. The SRDC is excited to be a partner helping to turn these visions into a reality.

## **Safe Routes to School**

MnDOT awarded two Safe Routes to School (SRTS) Planning Grants to the SRDC for the 2020-21 Fiscal Year. SRDC planners will have the privilege to serve both the city of Tyler and the Jackson County Central (JCC) School District (located in both Jackson and Lakefield) to help them prioritize projects to make walking and biking to school a safe, healthy choice for their students. Safe Routes to School planning efforts are based around the 6E's (Encouragement, Education, Engineering, Equity, Enforcement and Evaluation). Some common projects that build on those "E's" include incorporating a "Walk to School Day," building new sidewalks, hiring and training crossing guards, hosting bike rodeos, and evaluating whether those changes led to more students walking or biking to school. By promoting a more active lifestyle, there are a number of positive effects, including improved academic performance, reduced traffic congestion near schools and in the community, better air quality around schools and in the community, and an overall healthier community.

## **Lincoln County Zoning Ordinances**

Following the Lincoln County Comprehensive Plan update in 2018, SRDC has been working with the Lincoln County Environmental Officer on an update and additions to zoning ordinances. One of the suggested changes includes the addition of ordinances that applies to renewable energy production such as wind-turbines and solar panels. The addition of a renewable energy ordinance reflects the recent growth seen within the industry, and assists the county in being prepared for future projects. Zoning ordinances are enacted to promote the health, safety, and general welfare of a community through reducing congestion in the public rights-of-way; securing safety from fire, panic, and other dangers; providing adequate light and air; facilitating the adequate provision of water supplies, sewage treatment, and other utility services; solid waste management; protecting and preserving the air quality, land and water; conserving the value of properties and encouraging the most appropriate use of the land; and maintaining eligibility for and participation in the National Flood Insurance Program.

## **City of Pipestone Comprehensive Plan**

In April 2020, SRDC began working with the City of Pipestone on an update to its current comprehensive plan. A Comprehensive Plan serves two main objectives. First, it provides a legal basis for a community's land-use map and future land-use investments. Second, the process allows for the community and its members, to create a generally shared vision of its future, and its investments. The process began with a review of 2010 decennial census data, 2015, and 2018 American Community Survey estimates. Initial analysis of changes from 2010-2015 census products found that Pipestone experienced some delayed impacts from the 2007-2009 housing crisis, mainly accelerated population loss, a decrease in earnings, and a decrease in industries that require any form of post-secondary education. However, the trend of recovery is present when looking at the 2015-2018 data. Population loss has slowed, mean and median

incomes have risen, and industries that initially shrank have grown. City staff met with Land-Use/ Transportation Planner Rosemary Bruce-White to discuss the initial findings and updates. The next steps include drafting goals for the city and creating a public engagement plan.

### **Southwest Regional Transportation Coordination Council (RTCC)**

In 2017, United Community Action Partnership (UCAP) and SRDC began meeting with stakeholders from throughout the nine counties of Southwest Minnesota in response to an action from the Minnesota Department of Transportation (MnDOT) calling for the development of Regional Coordinating Councils to coordinate transportation/transit efforts statewide. These stakeholder meetings resulted in an application to MnDOT from UCAP for planning funding for the southwest. After review with MnDOT and stakeholders, particularly county representatives, UCAP was granted planning dollars in the second round of funding provided that a standalone RTCC was created. UCAP and the SRDC reconvened the RTCC stakeholder group and began working on implementing the proposal. During these stakeholder meetings, in response to numerous inquiries from the counties, MnDOT decided to allow the development of the RTCC as a partnership with an existing entity. Due to the vast transit experience of UCAP, the stakeholder group asked UCAP if they would be the governing agency and UCAP agreed. In early 2020, UCAP and SRDC staff began working with the stakeholder group to get specific about organizational structure, bylaws and plans for implementing the RTCC. The final plan was submitted to MnDOT in June of 2020, with the RTCC being established as an ad-hoc committee of UCAP. The goal of the RTCC is to provide coordination between transportation providers and service agencies to fill transportation gaps, provide more service with the same or fewer resources, streamline access to transportation, and provide customers more options of where and when to travel. UCAP was awarded a grant to begin implementation of the plan in 2020. SRDC will also be assisting with plan implementation in the upcoming Fiscal Year.

### **Friends of the Casey Jones State Trail**

Recent work over the past year on the Casey Jones State Trail connected the cities of Pipestone and Woodstock. Eager to build momentum following the trail expansion, the Friends of the Casey Jones State Trail Association began working on efforts to further their connection with trail advocates. Created in 1967, the Casey Jones State Trail was the state's first designated paved trail. Friends of the Casey Jones State Trail Association is a non-profit group that advocates for the development of the trail and maintenance of the existing trail, which is owned by the State of Minnesota and managed by the Minnesota Department of Natural Resources (DNR). SRDC staff began attending the Friends meetings earlier this year as part of active living initiatives in the region. In February 2020 SRDC staff began working with the group on outreach efforts. The group's first priority was to create a new logo that better showcased what the trail had to offer. Their vision included a stroll through the prairie, winding through and over Buffalo Ridge. SRDC staff developed and presented the new logo over three phases,

working with members of the Friends group to fine-tune the group's vision. The next phase in assistance will be updating their website, assisting to establish and grow social media efforts, and the development of outreach materials. While the pandemic has created challenges in hosting events, it has showcased the need and desire for local parks and trails. The Friends group is eager to build on the increased use of local parks and trails to trail advocates and share the story of the Casey Jones State Trail. SRDC is excited to continue working with the group to help promote the group's dream of an expansive multi-use trail in Southwest Minnesota.

## **Active Living**

Everyone benefits in an active community. People are healthier, transportation is less congested, the air is cleaner, and personal relationships are stronger. SRDC continues to work with several cities in our region to promote projects that make it easier and safer to stay on the move in the region. In 2016 the SRDC partnered with the Southwest Statewide Health Improvement Program (SHIP) to do Active Living Plans in Minnesota, Tracy, Edgerton, and Slayton. Those plans did not just sit on a shelf. Thanks to SHIP organizing regular meetings and SRDC staff providing technical assistance, those plans continue to evolve and produce tangible results. Below are some of the project highlights in each community that grew out of these plans. We look forward to keeping the momentum going in these communities in 2021 and beyond!

## **SRDC PERFORMANCE HIGHLIGHTS – 2021**

### **Regional Economic Resiliency Plan**

Last year SRDC began work on a Regional Economic Resiliency Plan with the purpose of identifying the region's economic weaknesses and connecting its assets and opportunities for potential partnerships to aide in establishing economic resilience for the region. This work started in response to the COVID-19 pandemic and its impacts on Southwest Minnesota. In order to better understand the current context of the region, SRDC began in summer 2020 with a comprehensive review of available planning documents and data packages, including: Local comprehensive plans, One Watershed One Plan Water Management Plans, All-Hazard Mitigation Plans, Census Bureau Data, and USDA Census of Agriculture Data. This review assisted in establishing a regional perspective and three overall priority issues impacting economic resiliency in Southwest Minnesota. During winter 2020, staff hosted regional economic workshops using these priority issues as guides for discussion. Workshops included representatives from family farming operations, business owners, local government officials, first responders, and economic development professionals. Through these workshops we found that in response to COVID-19 economic resilience depended on four main foundations. During 2021, resiliency planning efforts shifted from technical analysis of available resources to establishing SRDC's role in fostering economic resilience in the region. The first portion of this phase included a COVID-19 Business Response survey to better understand the needs of small business in Southwest Minnesota during times of economic downturns.

SRDC heard from 56 businesses around the region about the resources they were aware of, technical assistance needed, and how the pandemic has impacted their business.

## **Comprehensive Economic Development Strategy**

One of the major projects SRDC has focused on this fiscal year is the development of a new Comprehensive Economic Development Strategy (CEDS) for Southwest Minnesota. The CEDS serves as a roadmap for regional partners to advance policies, programs, and projects that support economic opportunity and contribute to the well-being of our nine-county region. Every five years a new CEDS is submitted to the Federal Economic Development Administration, with revisions updated annually. This regionally-driven planning process engages community leaders, leverages the involvement of the private sector, and establishes a strategic blueprint for regional collaboration to create an environment for economic resiliency and prosperity. The CEDS includes a summary of current demographic and economic conditions; an analysis of economic and community development strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats; and goals to implement that build upon the region's unique advantages based on four cornerstones: Human Capital, Economic Competitiveness, Community Resources, and Foundational Assets. The new CEDS will also build upon economic resiliency strategies from the 2020 CEDS revision that work toward helping the region respond to and recover from economic disturbances and maintain long-term sustainability. In spring 2021, regional engagement efforts began. These efforts have included two online regional workshops, a Regional Data Dive Webinar, as well as a community survey on the region's top concerns and opportunities for growth. SRDC staff continue to conduct individualized meetings with community leaders, businesses, organizations, and community groups with the goal being to discuss one or more CEDS cornerstones in-depth, and identify service gaps, priority projects and partnerships. The final copy of the 2022-2027 CEDS will be adopted by SRDC and sent to the Federal EDA in January 2022. Over the next five years, SRDC will work with regional partners on implementation of the strategies developed.

## **Building Economic Resilience through Clean Energy & Equity in Minnesota (BERCEE)**

Over the last year, SRDC participated in the BERCEE initiative, an effort co-convened by the Great Plains Institute and BlueGreen Alliance to find opportunity at the convergence of three complex and interrelated challenges facing Minnesota today: a global pandemic that has incurred economic devastation; long-standing racial disparities that can no longer be ignored; and the growing urgency to significantly reduce greenhouse gas emissions. In the face of these challenges, BERCEE is an attempt to seize this moment to promote massive re-employment, investment in 21st century infrastructure, and innovation towards a decarbonized economy, all while ensuring equitable outcomes for all Minnesotans. The initiative resulted in a finalized report that puts forth a diverse list of initial economic recovery recommendations for Minnesota that

have been developed by an equally diverse group of stakeholders, including state and local governments, tribal nations, economic development organizations, organized labor, clean energy and environmental advocates, consumer advocates, agriculture and forestry representatives, large and small business representatives, and academic institutions.

## **Green Step Cities**

We are excited to welcome New Ulm as the latest city in the Southwest CERTs region to join the GreenStep Cities program. Development & Energy Planner, Jason Walker, serves as the SW CERTS Coordinator, and, in that role, he presented to the Energy Awareness Commission of New Ulm in March about becoming a GreenStep City. In early April the New Ulm City Council passed a resolution to join the program. Since then, Derek Nelson, the Energy Services Representative from New Ulm Public Utilities and GreenStep Cities champion, has been working hard to enter all their data about best practices they have already implemented and all of the utility information for their city buildings. All of this information will enable them to track their energy and water usage over time and inform their decision-making for a more sustainable city for years to come. Our region now has five GreenStep Cities: Marshall (Step 3), Sherburn (Step 2), St. James, Vesta, and New Ulm (all Step 1)

## **SRDC RETURN ON INVESTMENT**

During the last five years the SRDC operations have brought in approximately \$6.31 for every \$1.00 of local tax money assessed through the General Purpose Tax. If the RLFs are included in the calculation, the return on investment for the region is nearly \$11. Having local taxing authority allows the SRDC to use these funds to leverage other dollars for the continued betterment of the region. Undoubtedly there are many other monetary benefits brought to the region by the SRDC, but we only included those local revenues that could be specifically monetized either through a funded grant or backed up by the SRDC's audited financial statements.

Not included is the impact of the SRDC on the creation of other entities in the region that bring in funds, such as Prairieland Economic Development Corporation which was founded by the SRDC and the Southwest Minnesota Housing Partnership of which the SRDC was one of the original investors and partners. The impact of these organizations on the region would greatly increase the value brought to the region by the SRDC.

## **CONCLUSION**

As can be clearly seen, it is our belief that the performance of the Southwest Regional Development Commission during the last five years has more than fulfilled the purposes of the Regional Development Act and that “the existence of the commission is in the public welfare and interest.” The SRDC’s partnership with the federal Economic Development Administration as a federally designated Economic Development District has brought much needed investment to the area as the region struggles with the economic impacts of the ongoing pandemic. EDA awarded the SRDC \$1.48 million in CARES Act dollars to capitalize a new revolving loan fund to assist businesses in the region. The SRDC was able to get all of those dollars out into the region in less than a year. As new federal funding becomes available, the SRDC will continue to partner with federal agencies and our local jurisdictions to assist in the recovery of the region. The structure of the Commission makes it different from most other governmental entities in that the base funding of local taxes amounts to roughly 25% of the operating budget of the agency with the remaining 75% being funds that are earned through services provided. This makes the SRDC unique in the public sector in that it is entrepreneurial in nature, yet still provides services based on sound public policy established by local elected officials. This meeting of professional services and public policy is the true strength of the Southwest Regional Development Commission and will continue to be into the future.