

ANNUAL REPORT

JULY 2024 - JUNE 2025



EXECUTIVE STATEMENT

This past year has been one of growth, resilience, and innovation for Region Nine Development Commission (RNDC). The projects and partnerships highlighted in this report reflect the shared commitment of our staff, commissioners, and community partners to advancing economic opportunity, building sustainable systems, and creating a stronger future for South Central Minnesota.

Economic development remained at the heart of our mission. Projects such as the Camp Quarry Feasibility Study underscored the potential of outdoor recreation as an economic driver, demonstrating how vibrant community amenities can attract talent, support workforce retention, and enhance quality of life. Similarly, the City of Springfield's Strategic Economic Development Plan, developed in partnership with RNDC, laid the groundwork for long-term resilience by combining community input with practical strategies for growth.

We also advanced workforce solutions that respond to the developing needs of regional employers. The Global Hiring Toolkit and accompanying webinars provided timely, practical guidance to help businesses address labor shortages and tap into the skills of international students. By equipping employers with the knowledge and resources to broaden their hiring strategies, RNDC is helping Greater Minnesota businesses remain competitive in a global economy.

Community development was another area of significant achievement. With generous support from the Mankato Area Foundation and the Taylor Family Farms Foundation, RNDC launched a regional food rescue initiative to combat food insecurity and reduce waste. In just six months, the program recovered over 22,000 pounds of food, equivalent to nearly \$40,000 in value, while building sustainable systems for coordination and delivery. Efforts like these not only meet urgent needs but also strengthen community connections and resilience. Our work with local farmers also grew this year through initiatives such as the Grow-a-Farmer Grant and the third annual Local Foods Week. These programs provided direct support to farmers and expanded market opportunities through restaurant partnerships, ensuring that the stories and products of our local food system are celebrated and shared.

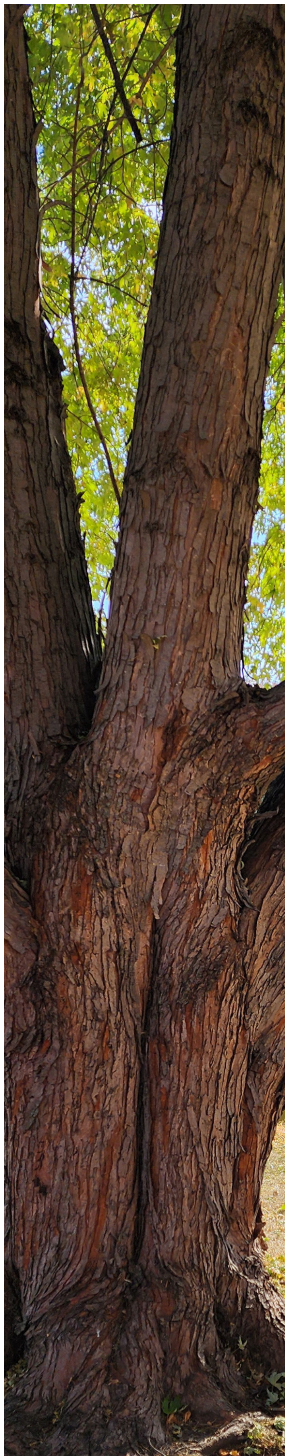
Rural areas need transportation and emergency services, and RNDC is proud to have partnered with the University of Minnesota to find ways to improve rural emergency medical services. Together with state and regional partners, we identified challenges and crafted actionable recommendations, from advocating for EMS as an essential service to enhancing training pathways and mental health supports for providers. The recognition of this project through national awards underscores the importance of innovative, community-driven approaches to rural challenges.

Finally, our international collaboration with the American Scandinavian Foundation and Uppsala University brought new capacity and fresh perspectives to the region. Hosting impact scholar Saga Rydåker demonstrated the power of global partnerships to inform local planning and expand our collective knowledge. This work, recognized by the National Association of Development Organizations with an Impact Award, is an example of how RNDC continues to build bridges across borders while delivering tangible benefits to our communities.

Looking ahead, RNDC will continue to build on this momentum, always guided by the voices of our communities and the vision of a resilient, thriving South Central Minnesota. Together, we will keep advancing innovative solutions, fostering partnerships, and ensuring that our region remains a place where businesses, families, and communities can prosper.



Nicole Griensewic
RNDC Executive Director



Board Chair Statement



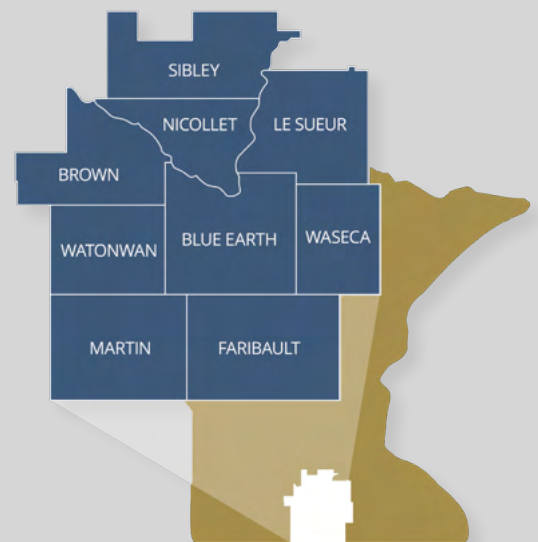
Serving as Chair of the Region Nine Development Commission Board I have witnessed the work happening across South Central Minnesota. Each year, I'm reminded that what makes this region special is the way people come together across counties, sectors, and communities to build something stronger than any one of us could do alone. This past year has been no exception.

As we look to the future, I'm filled with optimism and gratitude for our dedicated staff, our engaged board and commissioners, and the many partners who share in this work. Together, we'll continue to ensure that South Central Minnesota remains a place where communities thrive, businesses grow, and innovation takes root.

Mike Laven
RNDC Board Chair

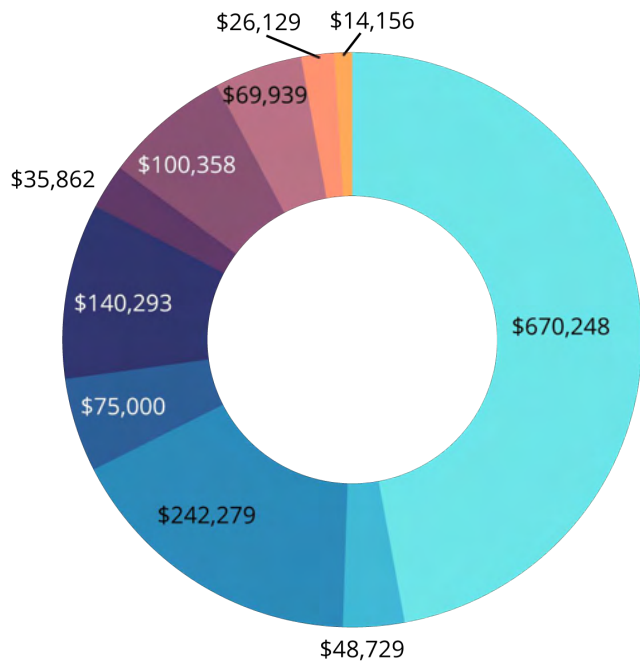
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FINANCE REPORT

Total RNDC Programs including General Fund, Revolving Loan Funds, and Capital Fund



Levy	670,248
EDA Planning Grant	48,729
Other Federal Grants	242,279
Transportation	75,000
Other Grants	140,293
Contract Revenue	35,862
Deposit Interest & Dividends	100,358
Loan Interest Earned	69,939
Transfer Funds	26,129
Other Revenue	14,156
Total	1,401,532

Expenditure Description	\$
Salary & Wages	831,006
Fringe	214,667
Indirect Costs	240,137
Consultants	215,701
Staff Travel	25,337
Supplies	5,442
Copying	2,159
Postage	692
Phone	1,784
Staff Development	16,602
Software	23,002
Dues, Membership, Registration	10,285
Marketing & Publication	9,928
Rentals	2,556
Bank Service Charges	7,436
Service Fees	2,454
Insurance	291
Legal Fees	18,598
Catering & Event Meals	2,773
Service Contracts	534
Bad Debt Expense	44,246
Equipment	59,551
Subgrantee	30,312
Bus Tour	1,815
Miscellaneous	4,912
Commission	26,392
Debt Service	3,490
Total FY24Expenditures	1,802,102

FY24 EXPENDITURES

Total Revenues = \$1,401,532

Total Expenditures = \$1,802,102

Revenues Over Expenditures = -\$400,570

Indirect Rate of 23.00%

Fringe Rate of 25.83%

2025 Audit being conducted by Abdo - Mankato.

REVOLVING LOAN FUND

RNDC operates several Revolving Loan Funds (RLF) within the organization. RNDC is a gap financier that partners with other financial institutions to make up a portion of the approved lending difference to the full request. This allows for new or existing businesses to meet capital goals when they may not otherwise be able to. The primary goal of the RLF is to create jobs within the nine-county area.

The RLF program is funded by the counties in the region, disaster and economic recovery aid, and the repayment of previous loans. Being a gap financier, RNDC looks to partner with outside organizations as much as possible to leverage the program's funds.

The following are two of the businesses RNDC's RLF program supported this year:

Crystal Clean Car Wash - St. James, MN

Crystal Clean Car Wash utilized the RNDC RLF program to help fund its new location in St. James. The car wash will offer automatic bays, a laundromat, and a pet wash; services St. James residents have been requesting. Owners Bramer and Michelle Powers broke ground on the new business on June 10 and expect to open in late 2025.



Left: St. James stakeholders at the June 10th groundbreaking.

Top: Owners Bramer and Michelle Powers at the groundbreaking of the Crystal Clean Car Wash.

Madelia Optometric - Madelia, MN

Madelia Optometric is a medical group practice located in Madelia, MN that specializes in Optometry and has been serving the city for 24 years. The business had outgrown its location in the Madelia Health building and it used the gap financing from the RLF program to move into its new location.

The new location was originally built in 1952 as a Standard Gas Station before being converted to a car wash in the 1960s. The building also housed an equipment shop and a quilt store. The funds provided by the RLF program not only helped with relocation expenses it also supported the renovation of the building to allow Madelia Optometric to provide the community with world-class optometry services.



ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT

City of Springfield Strategic Economic Development Plan

In 2024, the City of Springfield secured funding from the Southern Minnesota Initiative Foundation (SMIF) through its Small-Town Grant program to conduct a Strategic Economic Development Plan. Springfield partnered with RNDC to create a plan informed by community input and focused on strengthening economic resilience and sustainable development.

This plan envisioned Springfield as a thriving community with a diversified economic base, ability to weather economic stressors, and prepared for long-term growth.

The plan was structured through a three-step process:

- 1. Economic Development Assessment and Market Analysis**
- 2. Stakeholder Outreach**
- 3. Development of Recommended Strategies and Implementation**

The Strategic Economic Development Plan for the City of Springfield serves as a guiding document that outlines the community's economic vision and long-term goals based on community input. Through a comprehensive assessment of local resources and assets, this plan provides a framework to guide economic and community development efforts in the years ahead.



Camp Quarry Feasibility Study

RNDC conducted this study on behalf of Holtmeier Construction, Inc. and Mankato Area Mountain Bikers (MAMB) to identify the economic impact of a proposed redevelopment of more than 90 acres of former limestone mines in Lime Township into mountain bike trails, along with rock climbing areas, an expansive RV campground and a series of quarry ponds featuring a wakeboarding park. This study focuses on the impact of mountain bike trails as this non-commercial component will be handed over to MAMB and/or other nonprofits to own/manage.

The plan highlighted direct and indirect benefits including how outdoor recreation opportunities can play a key role in attracting talent to a region by offering a vibrant and active lifestyle, appealing to individuals who value outdoor activities. These parks can also enhance employee retention by providing employees with recreational outlets that improve work-life balance, leading to increased job satisfaction. Access to such parks can help lower healthcare costs by promoting physical fitness and reducing the risk of chronic conditions. For businesses, investing in outdoor amenities like bike parks can elevate corporate reputations, showcasing a commitment to employee health, sustainability, and community engagement.



REV & Economic Opportunities Assessments

This assessment was carried out by RNDC in close collaboration with the Southern Minnesota Initiative Foundation's (SMIF) leadership team. The findings of the assessment are based on an extensive evaluation process, focusing on six themes of needs identified through community conversations including:

- **Access to regional resources**
- **Technical assistance**
- **Community capacity building**
- **Inter-community collaborations**
- **Youth engagement**
- **Quality of life**

The goal for these assessments is to provide valuable insights and actionable recommendations aimed at optimizing the REV program's impact on rural entrepreneurship and community development in southern Minnesota. By addressing the identified needs and implementing best practices, SMIF and its partners can ensure the continued success and growth of the REV initiative, fostering economic resilience and long-term sustainability for the region.



Global Workforce Toolkit and Webinars

RNDC developed a Global Hiring Toolkit, that includes a step-by-step guide to hiring international students, practical legal guidance, and strategies to help employers better understand the value and process of engaging international talent.

The toolkit provides employers with actionable strategies to engage and hire international students. In today's competitive economy, hiring international students is a strategic approach for businesses in Greater Minnesota. It not only helps address workforce shortages but also brings fresh perspectives, fosters innovation, and strengthens connections to global markets, giving businesses a competitive edge.

To supplement the toolkit, RNDC hosted two webinars to make the information from the event available to all. The first webinar focused on Understanding International Students and Labor Shortages. The second webinar revolved around Fostering Dynamic Workforce Environments. The webinars featured regional stakeholders with backgrounds in education, hiring, immigration law, and economic development. Both the toolkit and webinars have been made available on the RNDC website.



COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT

Food Rescue

In early 2025, RNDC was awarded a \$100,000 grant from the Mankato Area Foundation (MAF) to develop and coordinate a regional food rescue effort. This grant is part of a \$300,000 contribution from the Taylor Family Farms Foundation to MAF, aimed at combating food insecurity in South Central Minnesota.

This funding supported RNDC's work to build a sustainable food rescue framework, reduce regional food waste, and strengthen food shelf capacity through strategic partnerships and resource coordination.

KEY DELIVERABLES AND MILESTONES

1. Food Rescue Coordinator Hired

- Tom Polich began his role as RNDC's Food Rescue Coordinator
- Completed onboarding, staff meetings, and professional development through national food recovery webinars.
- Office workspace established and systems put in place for tracking activity and communication with partners.

2. Regional Needs Assessment Conducted

- Met with food access organizations across the region to gather input and identify gaps in food recovery infrastructure.
- Developed a centralized list of partner needs, including equipment and transportation limitations.
- Created a prioritized call list by county to guide rescue logistics and delivery planning.

3. Internal Tracking & Documentation Systems Created

- Developed an internal food rescue tracking worksheet to document volume and source of recovered food.
- Established a regional partner communication workflow for scheduling and reporting food rescue events.



22,566 LBS

**FOOD RESCUED
AS OF JUNE 30, 2025**



\$39,334

**APPROXIMATE
MONETARY AMOUNT
OF FOOD RESCUED**

Grow-a-Farmer Grant



RNDC partnered with the Southern Minnesota Initiative Foundation (SMIF) to award grants between \$500 and \$2500. The program was created to help local producers strengthen their operations through equipment upgrades, sustainable practices, and resilience against challenges like extreme weather. By easing the cost of improvements, the program supports long-term success for small farmers and community food initiatives across the region.

One outcome of these grants was the purchase of an upgraded irrigation system for the Blue Earth County Community Farm by the Living Earth Center (LEC) in Mankato. The Community Farm, managed by LEC since 2021, had been relying on an older irrigation system that was wasting water due to leaks and loss of pressure. The Grow-a-Farmer Grant allowed LEC to replace it with a more flexible design that includes multiple valves and tubing, giving staff greater control over water use and helping conserve resources.



**MONEY
DISTRIBUTED**
\$50,000



**FARMERS AND FARM
ORGANIZATIONS SUPPORTED**
18

2024 Local Foods Week

RNDC organized the 3rd Annual Local Foods Week July 22-28, 2024. 12 local farms partnered with 11 restaurants to create special dishes highlighting the quality and variety of products available from Region Nine farms.

LFW is an annual event organized by RNDC. It grew out of a USDA Grant that aimed to increase the number of farmers in Region Nine and broaden their market opportunities.

Because of the success of this week-long event, next year's Local Foods week will take place throughout the month of August. RNDC will be working with the Strategic Partnership Center at Minnesota State University, Mankato to increase the reach and outcomes of next year's event.

THIS YEAR'S PARTNERSHIPS

FARMS	RESTAURANTS
ALTERNATIVE ROOTS	MOM & POP'S
BLUE DIRT FARM	PUB 500
CEDAR CRATE FARM	BEANS COFFEE HOUSE
LEUER GARDENS	TANDEM BAGELS
UPBEET ACRES	PLEASANT GROVE PIZZA FARM
WIIMANJ HOMESTEAD	CURIOSI-TEA HOUSE
SLEEPY BISON ACRES	FISCHER'S SLEEPY BISON GRILL
GROVE GROWN	LA PLAZA FIESTA
BACKSTREET COUNTRY MARKET	WOODEN SPOON
CEDAR CRATE FARM	REFINERY 507
FISCHER FAMILY FARMS & HANNAH'S HONEY	LUSH CAKES

TRANSPORTATION

Building a More Sustainable Model for Rural EMS in Region Nine

This award winning project was a partnership between RNDC, the University of Minnesota Extension - Regional Sustainable Development Partnerships, University of Minnesota School of Public Health, and South Central Emergency Medical Services (EMS). The goal of the project was to find and develop strategies to address the challenges and root causes of poor recruitment and retention in the rural EMS profession. Some of the challenges identified were a rapidly aging population, geographic isolation, and increasing demand for services, limited funding, and a shrinking, mostly volunteer-based workforce.



This project included an environmental scan of recruitment and retention practices and conditions in rural EMS nationwide, a review of relevant literature, interviews with stakeholders and key informants, and both in-person and online listening sessions with EMS professionals and other relevant stakeholders.

The project included recommendations including:

- **Make EMS an Essential Service:** Advocate for state-level policy reform to formally classify EMS as an essential public service.
- **Enhance Training Pathways:** Develop local and flexible training and certification programs to improve accessibility and career progression.
- **Support Mental Health:** Implement ongoing wellness programs, peer-support networks, and resilience training for EMS personnel.
- **Secure Sustainable Funding:** Reform reimbursement structures and pursue stable, ongoing funding mechanisms beyond temporary grants.
- **Strengthen Community Partnerships:** Launch school outreach programs, public awareness campaigns, and regional collaboration initiatives to boost recruitment and retention.



Safe Streets and Roads for All (SS4A) Grant

Region Nine was awarded a SS4A grant by the U.S. Department of Transportation. The grant award allowed RNDC to hire Road Safety Transportation Planner Mark Plotz to lead the project.

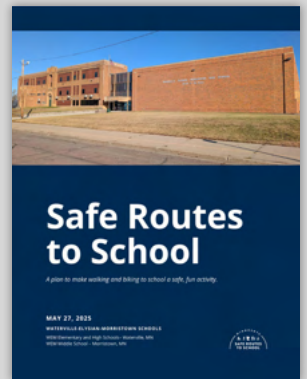
Mark will lead efforts to create a regional comprehensive road safety action plan for RNDC's nine county service area. This will involve coordinating committees and task forces, engaging with regional stakeholders, assessing current policies and plans, and identifying a comprehensive set of projects and strategies to increase safety for all road users.

The SS4A program funds regional, local, and Tribal initiatives through grants to prevent roadway fatalities and serious injuries.



Waterville, Elysian, Morristown Safe Routes to School

The Waterville-Elysian-Morristown (WEM) Safe Routes to School (SRTS) Plan was developed to make walking and biking to school safer, healthier, and more accessible for students. By engaging families, educators, city officials, and community partners, the plan emphasizes the importance of creating a supportive environment where students can safely arrive at and depart from school. The effort is guided by the "6 E's" framework, Equity, Engagement, Engineering, Education, Encouragement, and Evaluation, to ensure that strategies address safety, community needs, and equitable access.



The plan highlights that while many students live within a walkable distance to school, barriers such as high-traffic roads, incomplete sidewalk networks, and unsafe intersections discourage families from allowing children to walk or bike. Parents and students identified Highway 13 in Waterville and Division Street in Morristown as particular areas of concern due to traffic speeds and visibility issues. Crash data from the past decade further underscores the need for safer crossings, especially along Highways 13 and 60, which have seen both injuries and fatalities involving pedestrians and bicyclists.

In addition to infrastructure needs, the plan calls for expanding low-cost programs that encourage safe walking and biking habits. These include events like Walk to School Day, helmet giveaways, and incorporating bike and pedestrian safety into school curriculum. Recommendations also include creating a "Walking School Bus" program, installing additional bike racks, and strengthening community education and communication efforts. Together, these programs complement infrastructure improvements and build a stronger culture of active transportation.

Key priorities moving forward include improving crossings at Highway 13 in Waterville, filling sidewalk gaps near school campuses, updating curb cuts for accessibility, and enhancing lighting and signage around school zones. By addressing both immediate safety concerns and long-term cultural shifts, the WEM SRTS Plan provides a roadmap for safer, more connected communities. These changes not only benefit students but also enhance safety and quality of life for all residents who walk, bike, and roll in the district.

REGION NINE BUS TOUR

This year's Region Nine Annual Bus Tour brought together community leaders, partners, and stakeholders including special guests Minnesota State Representative Tom Sexton, NADO Executive Director Joe McKinney, and SMIF CEO Benya Kraus. With a focus on economic development, active transportation, and community well-being, the tour highlighted three impactful projects across the region.

The day began at the future site of the Rockwell RV and Adventure Park in Lime Township. Located on a former limestone quarry, the proposed redevelopment will transform 90 acres into an outdoor adventure destination featuring mountain biking trails, rock climbing areas, and RV campgrounds. RNDC partnered with Rockwell to produce an impact study on the project's potential, which highlighted the direct and indirect economic benefits of the adventure park.

The tour's second stop took place in Henderson at the National Ruby-Throated Hummingbird Center, where attendees enjoyed lunch while hearing from local stakeholders, including the Mayor of Henderson. RNDC transportation planners also provided a brief presentation on regional planning initiatives. After lunch, the group explored the nearby Hummingbird Garden and Henderson's historic downtown.

Open to the public year-round, the Hummingbird Garden features more than 20 feeders, butterfly-friendly flower gardens, and amenities such as benches, a picnic table, and a pergola. From May through October, the garden is alive with vibrant wildlife and offers a peaceful destination for nature lovers, photographers, and families alike.

The final stop of the day brought the group to Gaylord, where attendees toured the Sibley County FoodShare. This community-based nonprofit organization is dedicated to eliminating hunger by providing food and basic necessities to residents in times of need. Located in the county seat, the FoodShare offers clients access to additional local services and support systems.

Sibley County FoodShare operates independently of government funding, relying entirely on the generosity of area residents, businesses, churches, and civic organizations. The visit provided an opportunity to learn more about food rescue initiatives and how local partnerships help address food insecurity in the region. RNDC has been assisting the FoodShare in logistics and technical support.



NADO IMPACT AWARD

RNDC was awarded a 2024 Aliceann Wohlbruck Impact Award from the National Association of Development Organizations (NADO) for the American Scandinavian Foundation/RNDC Partnership for Regional Progress project.

Through an international partnership with the American Scandinavian Foundation (ASF), RNDC welcomed Saga Rydåker, an impact scholar from Uppsala University in Sweden to build community and economic development capacity in the region. Sponsored by ASF through the U.S. Department of State, this partnership enabled RNDC to host the scholar as a community and economic specialist for six months, working primarily on a strategic economic development plan for Sibley County. In addition to her contributions to Sibley County's project, Saga also led research initiatives alongside RNDC staff and regional partners.



As the host site and project lead, RNDC provided expertise to Sibley County without additional costs, making this collaboration an innovative model for maximizing resources and advancing community goals. With Saga's contributions, RNDC was able to offer comprehensive economic planning, adding both capacity and fresh, international insights to benefit the region. This collaboration exemplified how international partnerships can enhance local capacity while bringing new perspectives to regional planning and development.



The NADO Impact Awards honor regional development organizations and their partners for strengthening communities, building regional resilience, and enhancing local economies through innovative approaches to economic and community development.



Saga (second from the right) pictured with RNDC Economic Development Director Kristian Braekkan, US Economic Development Administration Representative Darrin Fleener, RNDC Economic Recovery Planner Alejandra Bejarano, and RNDC Energy and Sustainability Planner Sam Sharp

RNDC COMMISSIONERS*

*as of June 30, 2025

BLUE EARTH COUNTY

Jeff Annis
Lynda Kruse
Mike Laven, Chair
Patty O'Connor

BROWN COUNTY

Andrea Boettger, Vice Chair
Dave Borchert
Robert Goblirsch
Gary Richter

FARIBAULT COUNTY

Jean Anderson
Tom Loveall

LE SUEUR COUNTY

Liz Krocak
Steve Rohlfing
Scott Schlueter

MARTIN COUNTY

Elroy Glidden
James Kotewa
Billeye Rabbe
Phil Schafer

NICOLLET COUNTY

Marie Dranttel, Treasurer
Mary Milbrath
Shanon Nowell
Matt Peterson
Pam Rodewald

SIBLEY COUNTY

Dawn Kratzke
Christian Lilienthal
Bob Nielsen

WASECA COUNTY

Brad Krause
Julie Tesch
Rob Wilkening

WATONWAN COUNTY

Jim Branstad, Secretary
Steve Cooling
Paul Harris

PUBLIC INTEREST GROUPS

Sarah Berry
Chris Dalton
Hunter Jordan
Katelynn Kratz
Mike Pfeil
Rita Rassbach
Luisa Trapero

9

COUNTIES

72

CITIES

147

TOWNSHIPS

33

SCHOOL
DISTRICTS

Administration



Nicole Griensewic
Executive Director



Jessica Beyer
Deputy Director



Sarah Janovsky
Executive Assistant



Nate George
Communications
Specialist

Economic Development



Kristian Braekkan
Economic Development
Director



Alejandra Bejarano
Economic Recovery
Planner

Transportation



Joel Hanif
Transportation Planner



Mark Plotz
Road Safety
Transportation Planner

Finance



Jazmine Flores
Lending Specialist

Community Development



Sabri Fair
Environment and
Sustainability Planner



Samuel Sharp
Energy and
Sustainability Planner



Tom Polich
Regional Food Rescue
Coordinator

Research



Aaron Pacheco
PT - Research Associate

Consultant



Mercedes Sempe
PT- Economic
Development Assistant

GreenCorps Member



Lisa Callahan
Community Readiness
and Outreach

