

# MINNESOTA REGION 6E COMPREHENSIVE ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT STRATEGY

2022-2026

**MVDC**  
MID-MINNESOTA DEVELOPMENT COMMISSION

## **Table of Contents**

Introduction	Page 3
Summary Background	Page 3
Data Sets	Page 3
Population	Page 3-5
Race and Ethnicity	Page 5-6
Workforce	Page 6-7
Income	Page 8
Industry Employment	Page 9
Poverty	Page 10
Agriculture	Page 10-12
Renewable Energy	Page 13
Climate	Page 13
Natural Resources	Page 13
Leisure and Recreation	Page 14-15
Education	Page 15-16
Housing	Page 17
Region 6E County Profiles	Page 18-25
Top Five Industries in Region 6E	Page 26-28
SWOT Analysis	Page 29-37
Strategic/Action Plan	Page 38-40
Impact of the Coronavirus Pandemic	Page 41
Index	Page 42-43



## ***Introduction***

The Comprehensive Economic Development Strategy (CEDS) is used as a guiding document for Economic Development Districts throughout the United States. Every five years, this document must be updated and approved by the U.S. Economic Development Administration (EDA). Approval of the CEDS ensures regional eligibility for EDA's infrastructure and other funding. The CEDS document is strategy-driven and supports the goals determined at the regional level. The following document serves as the Comprehensive Economic Development Strategy for the Mid-Minnesota Development Commission District.

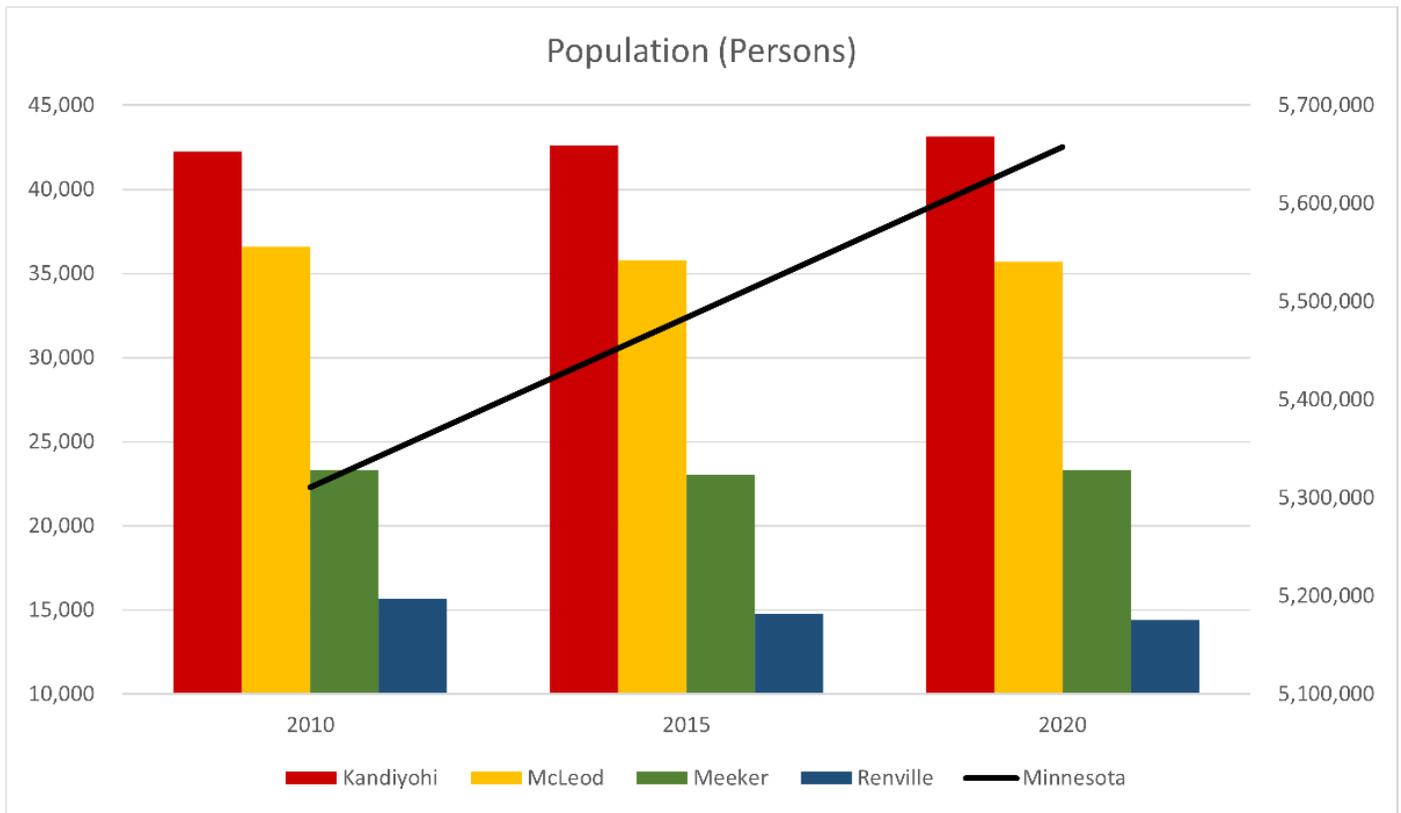
## ***Summary Background***

The Mid-Minnesota Development Commission is a regional development organization that serves the Minnesota counties of Kandiyohi, McLeod, Meeker, and Renville, also known as the Mid-Minnesota Development Commission District or Minnesota Economic Development Region 6E. The district employs eight staff members who work in areas of economic development, transportation planning, community planning, and administration. The district is governed by a 25-member Board of Commissioners representing counties, municipalities, townships, school districts, and other public interest organizations. Commissioners serve on various boards that guide the district's mission, including the CEDS committee.

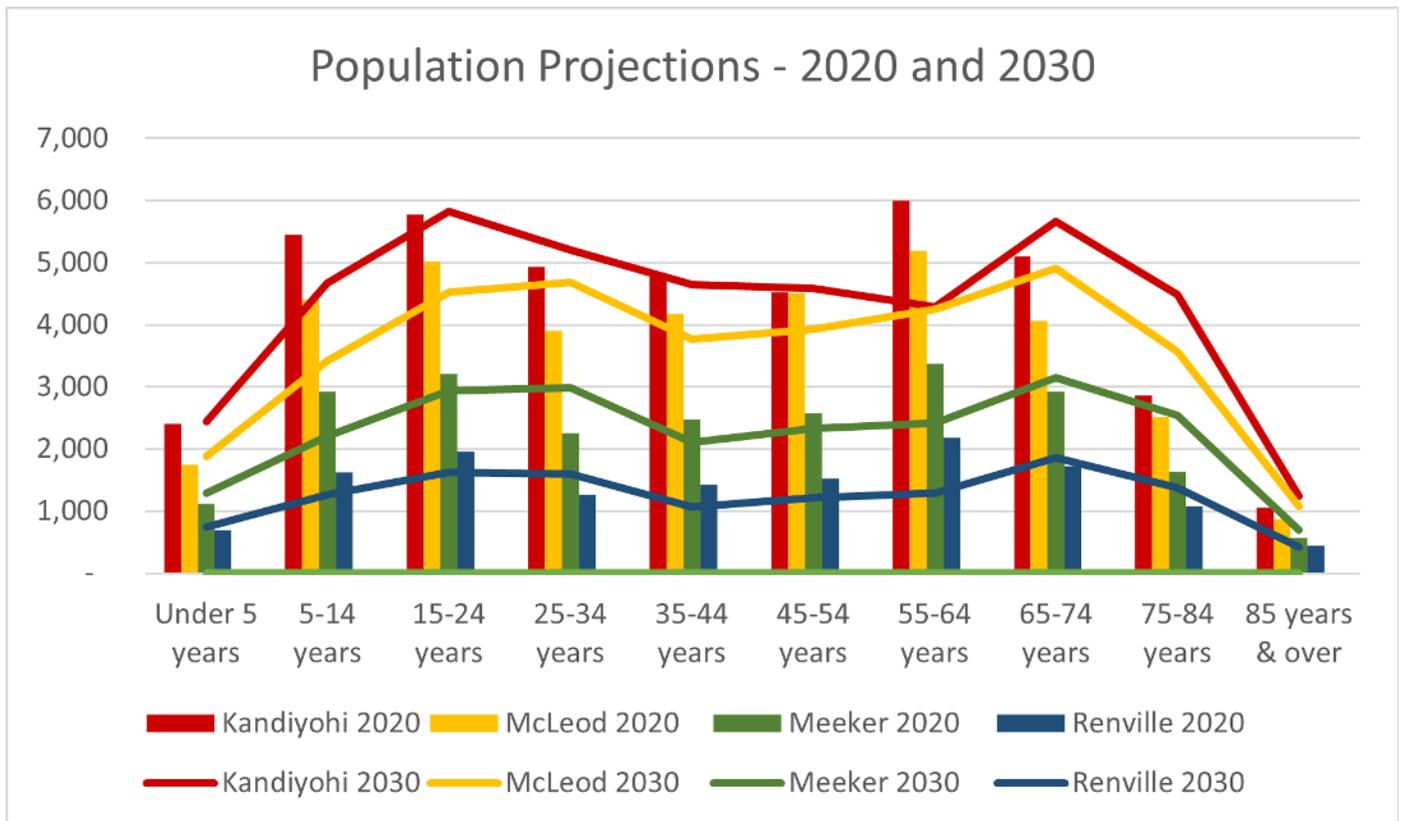
Our four-county region, located one to two hours directly west of the Minneapolis-St. Paul Metropolitan Area, is home to approximately 120,000 people. All four counties share a rural demographic. Primary regional industries include manufacturing, healthcare & social assistance, educational services, retail trade and accommodation & food services.

## ***Population***

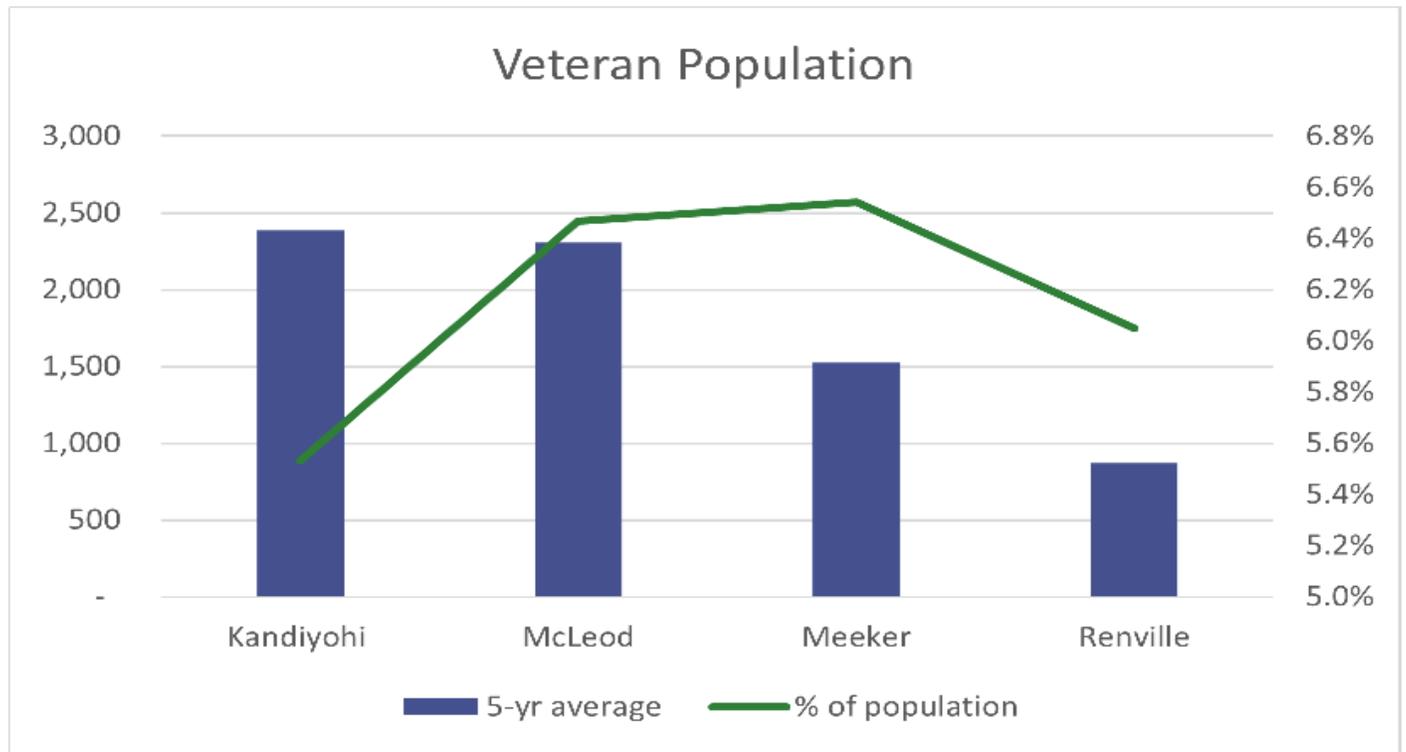
Based on data from the U.S. Census Bureau, the overall population numbers in Region 6E remained relatively stable between 2010 and 2020. The region's total population in 2020 was 118,626 - 2.1% of Minnesota's total population. Of the region's four counties, Renville County is the only county to show population decline. Kandiyohi County had the highest population increase of 4.0%. This may be attributed to several factors, including the City of Willmar's function as a regional hub for much of Southwest Minnesota and an increase in immigration and refugee settlement.



If projections hold true, each of our region's counties will see an increase in the number of people age 65 and older during the next decade. The chart below provides population projections for the next 10 years.

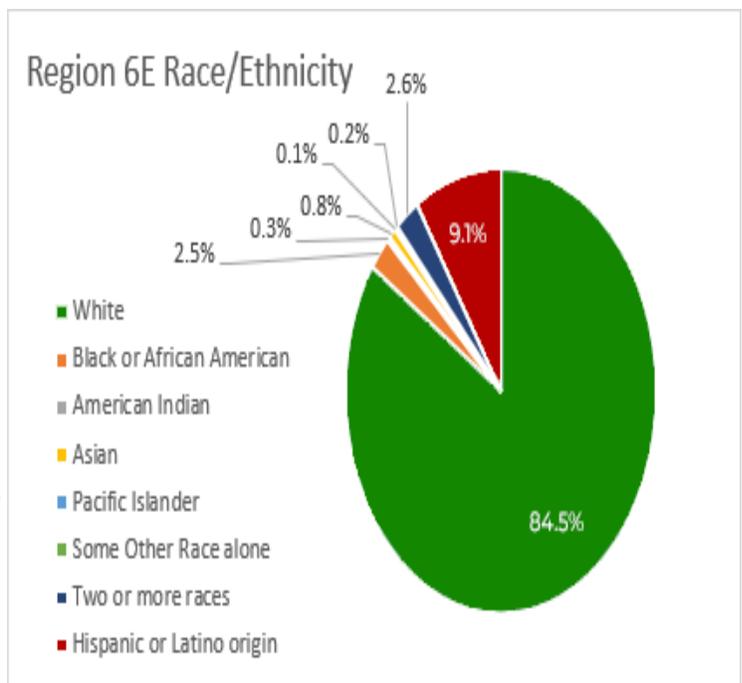


While no major military bases or stations, beyond National Guard Armories and Army Reserve Centers, are located within Region 6E, our counties are home to a fairly-significant population of armed services veterans. These veterans contribute to our regional economy as consumers, volunteers, and especially as highly-skilled workers.



### ***Race and Ethnicity***

According to the 2020 U.S. Census Bureau figures, 84.5% of our region’s residents identified as White and 9.1% identified as Hispanic or Latino. 2.5% of our residents were Black or African American. Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander, Asian, or American Indian and/or Alaska Native groups each comprised approximately 1.4% of the Region 6E population. 2.6% of our residents identified as being from two or more races.



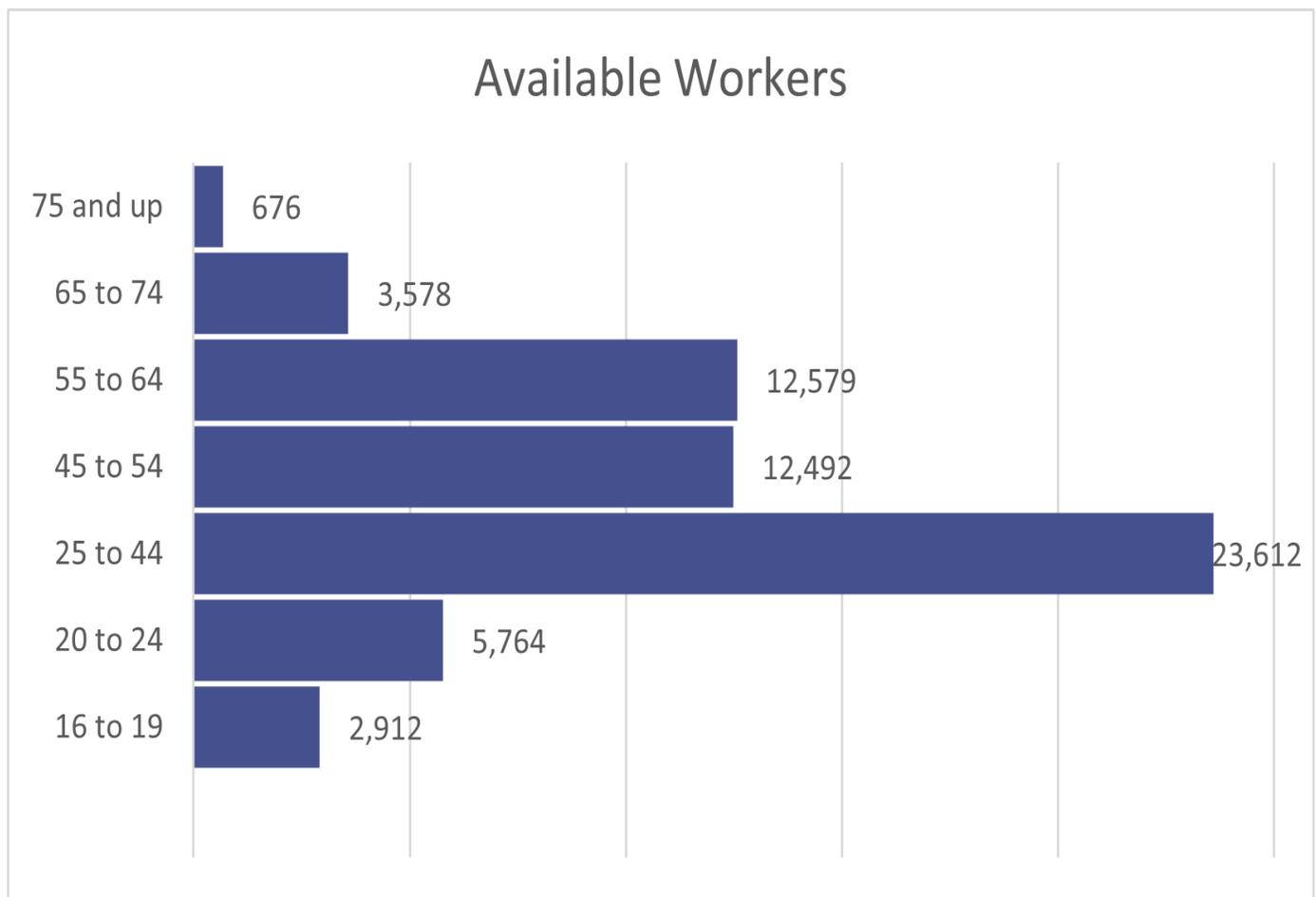
Kandiyohi County is our region’s most diverse county, with only 76.3% identifying as White. In each county, Hispanic and Latino populations make up the largest minority population. However, a substantial number of Black and African American people reside in Kandiyohi, primarily within Willmar (6.9% of Kandiyohi County’s population). This is, in large part, due to the resettlement of East African and Karen refugees.

Since 2000, Kandiyohi and Renville counties have experienced a decline in the White population and an increase in people of other ethnicities. Kandiyohi County also has the highest percentage of residents identifying as Hispanic or Latino (non-White).

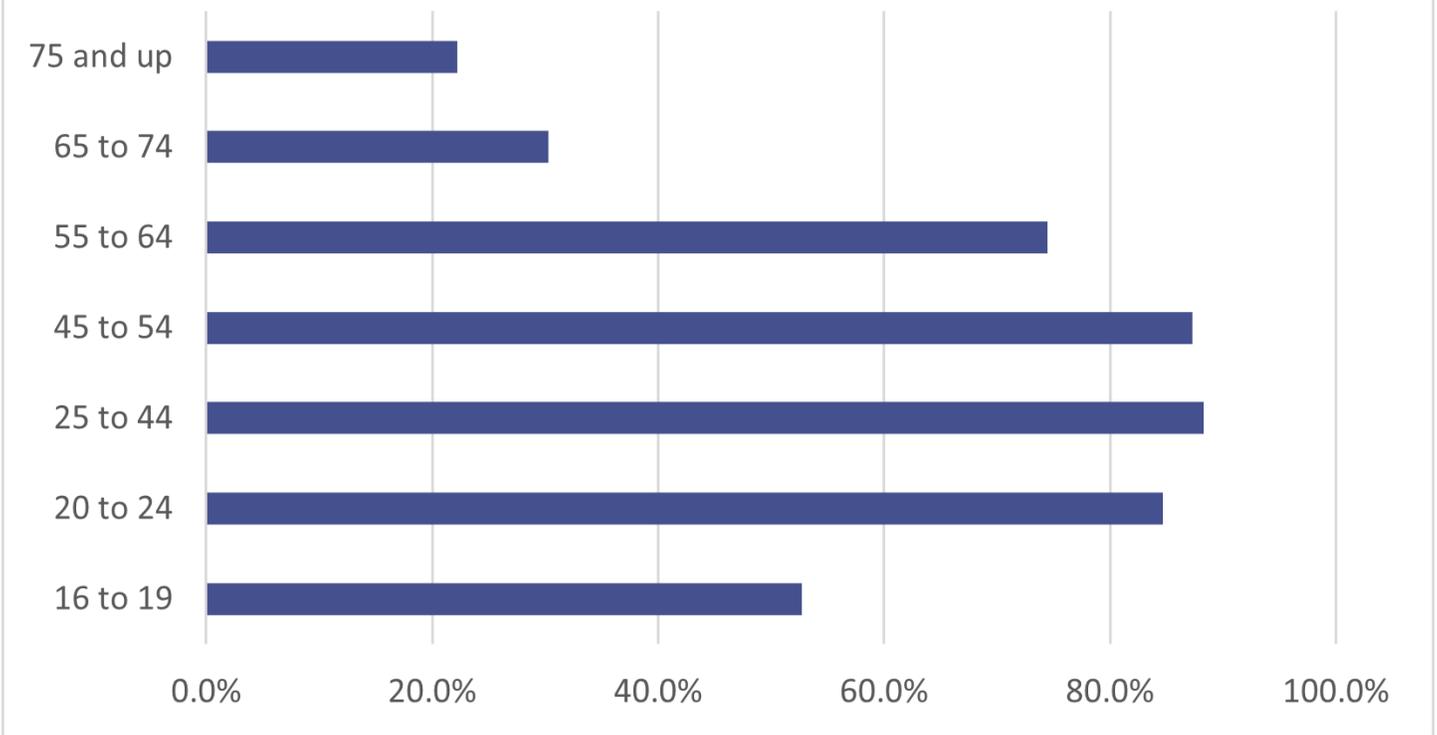
Between April 1, 2010, and July 1, 2019, vital events (births and deaths) in Region 6E had a positive net impact of 2,969. However, net migration (international and domestic) during the same period had a net impact of negative (-) 4,028.

### **Workforce**

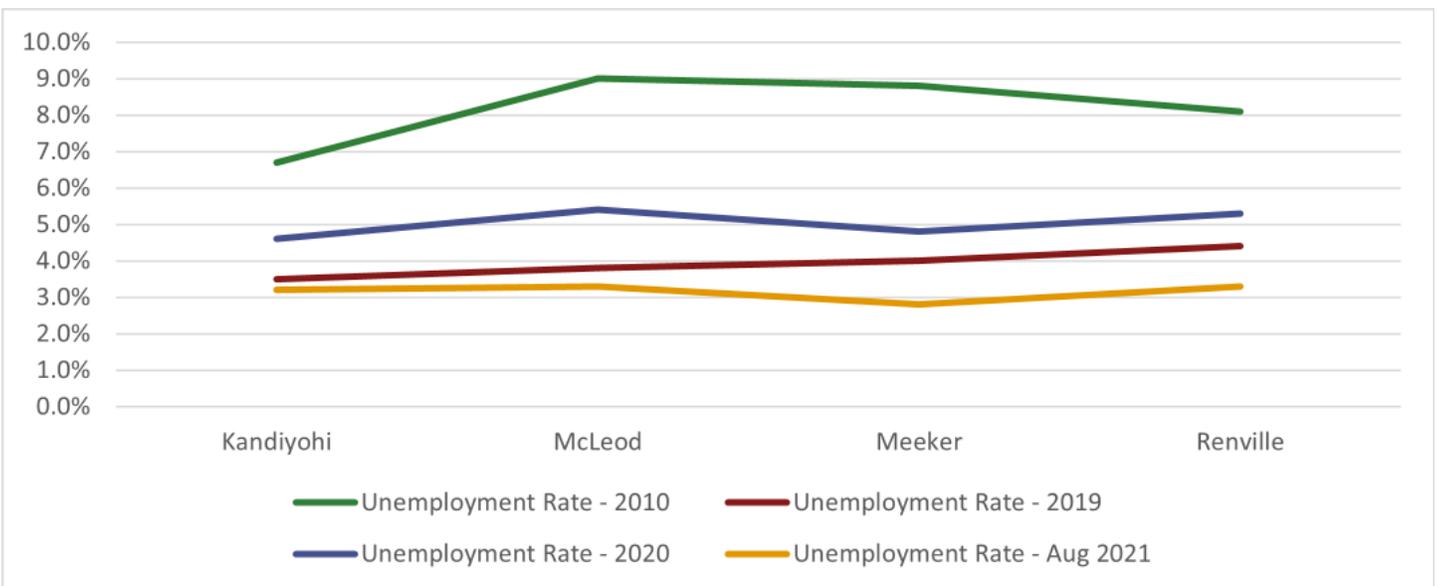
Region 6E has approximately 61,600 available workers and a workforce participation rate of 66.5%. Workers aged 24 to 44 lead workforce participation, working at a rate of 88.3%. The 45- to 54-year-old cohort is close behind with a participation rate of 87.3%. As older workers (age 55 to 64, our largest demographic) prepare for retirement and younger workers (age 16 to 24) remain more focused on education, training and other activities, projections show our labor market will remain tight for the foreseeable future.



## Participation Rate

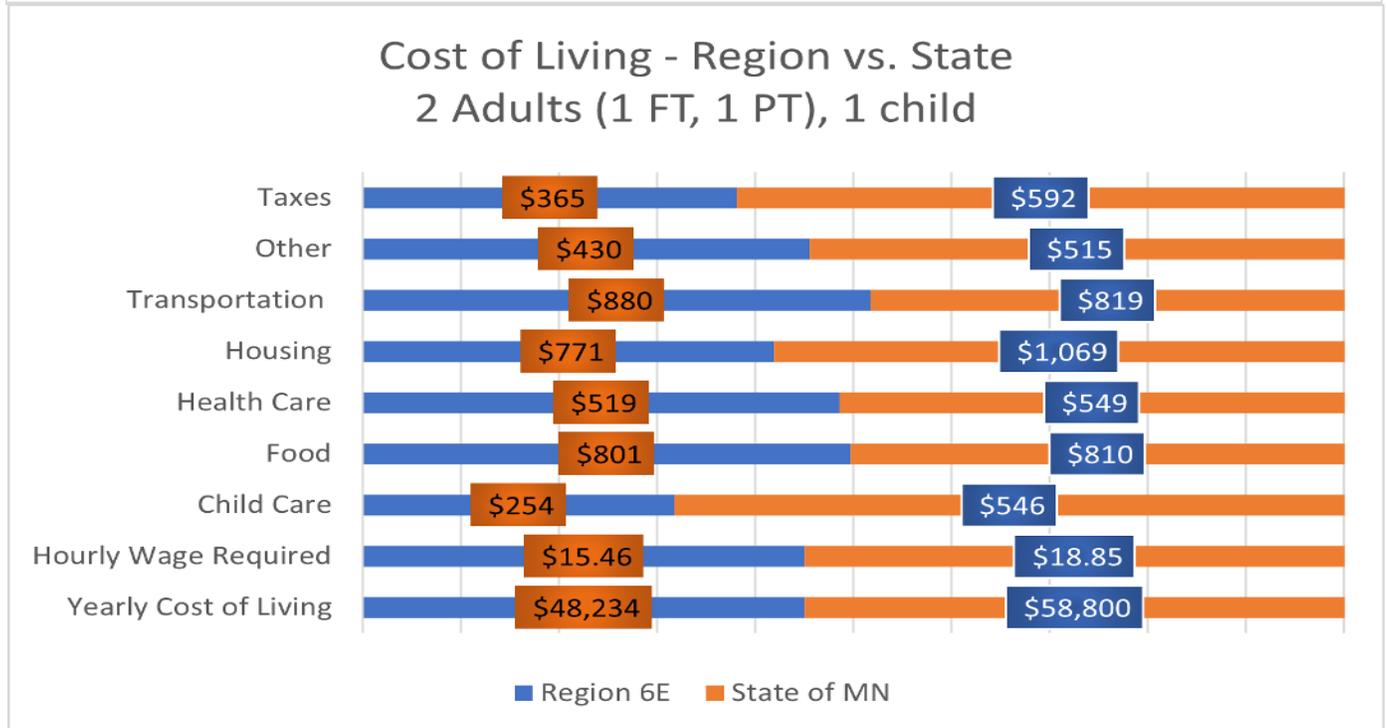
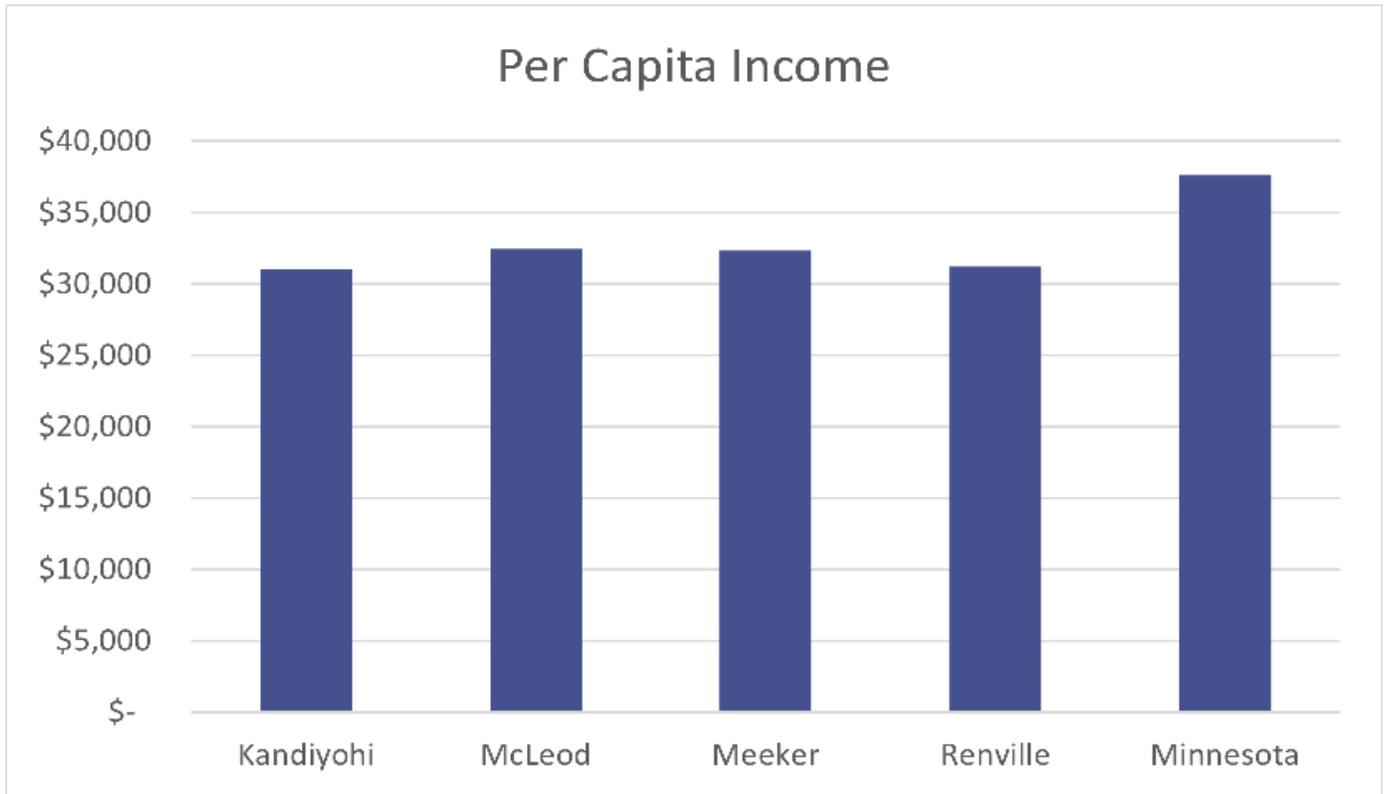


As a result of the Coronavirus Pandemic, our region’s unemployment rate, which had been quite low, temporarily increased between 2019 and 2020. However, this increase was less significant and far more short-lived than the unemployment increases experienced in 2010 and throughout the Great Recession. In August 2021, monthly unemployment rates dropped below pre-pandemic levels. Our region’s job market is very strong, and employers are in fierce competition for workers. Contributing factors include an aging population, remote work opportunities, lifestyle changes, and childcare shortages.



**Income**

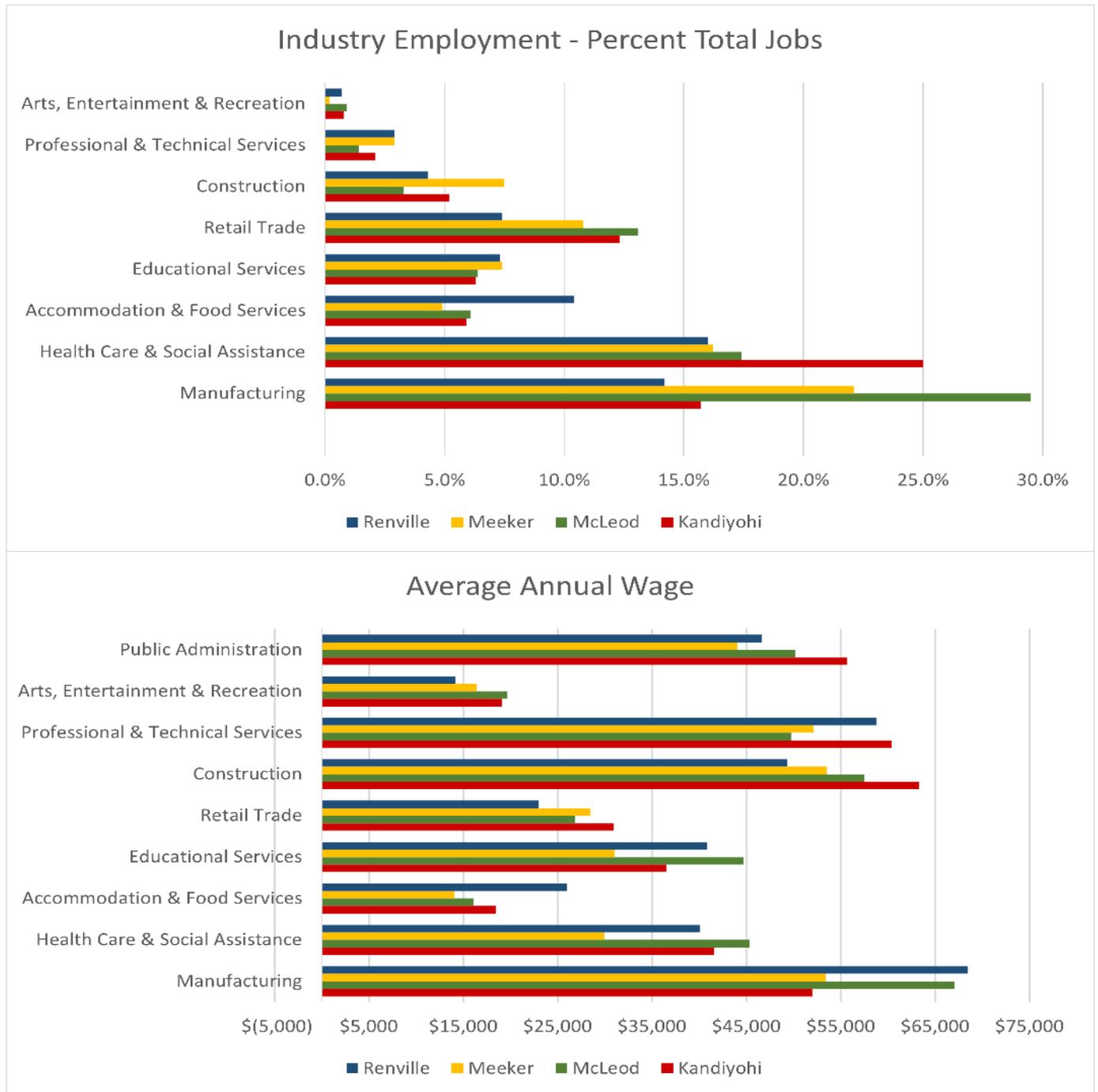
The average per capita income level for our region is \$31,781, which is 84.5% of the per capita personal income level for the State of Minnesota. However, while the State’s average cost-of-living for a family of three (two adults and one child, with one adult works full time and the other part time) is \$58,800, the cost-of-living for a similar family within Region 6E is just \$48,234 (82.0% of the state’s cost-of-living), making it possible for average earners to attain a relatively good quality-of-life within in our region.



## Industry Employment

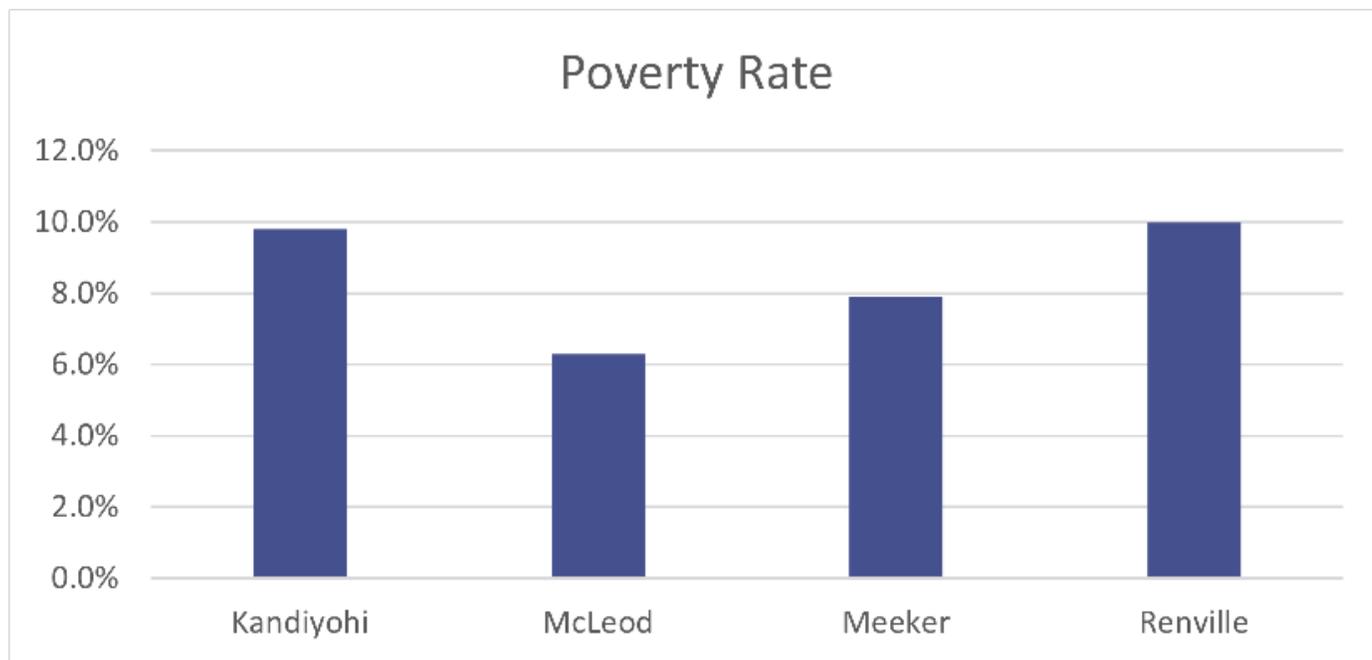
Region 6E has a diverse workforce economy, as shown in the following graph. In Kandiyohi and Renville Counties, the Health Care and Social Assistance sector is the largest employer. In McLeod and Meeker Counties, the Manufacturing sector employs the largest workforce. In all counties, the sector with the lowest percentage of jobs is Arts, Entertainment & Recreation.

The Region 6E industries with the highest wages are Construction, in Kandiyohi and Meeker Counties, and Manufacturing, in McLeod and Renville. The lowest paying industry in Kandiyohi, Meeker, and McLeod Counties is Accommodation & Food Services, while the Arts, Entertainment & Recreation pays the least in Renville County.



## Poverty

In 2019, Minnesota's rate of poverty was nine percent (9.0%). During the same year, both Kandiyohi and Renville Counties slightly exceeded that rate, at 9.8% and 10%, respectively. McLeod and Meeker Counties saw poverty at slightly below-average rates.

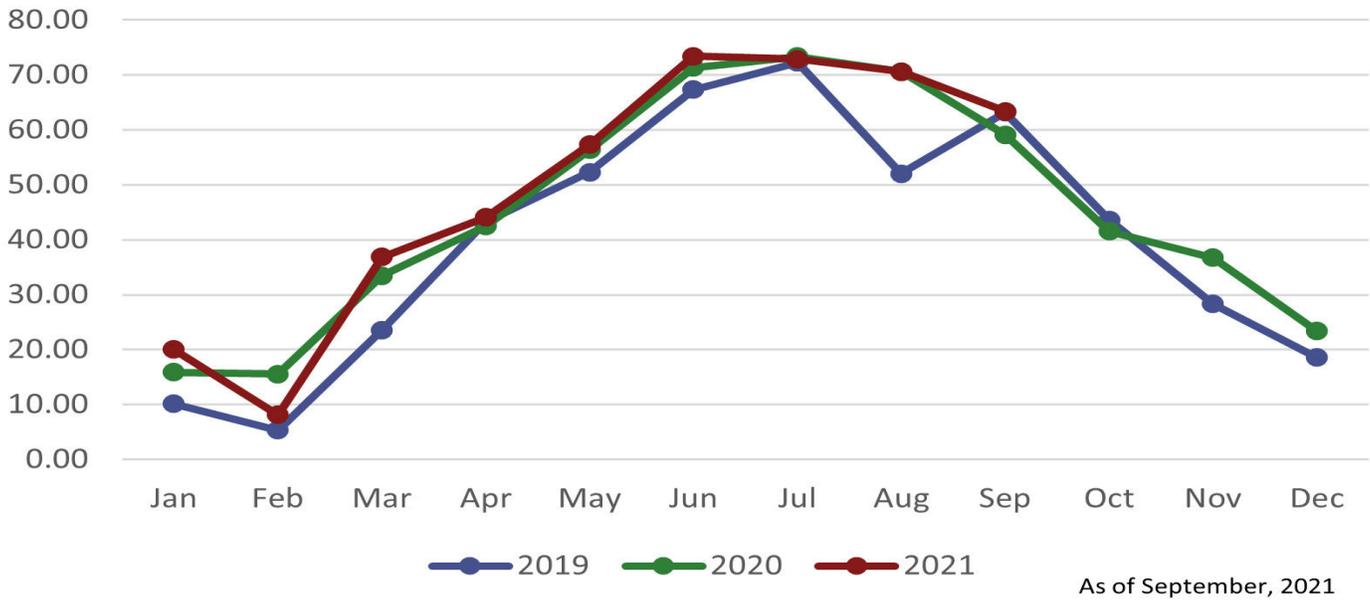


## Rooted in Agriculture

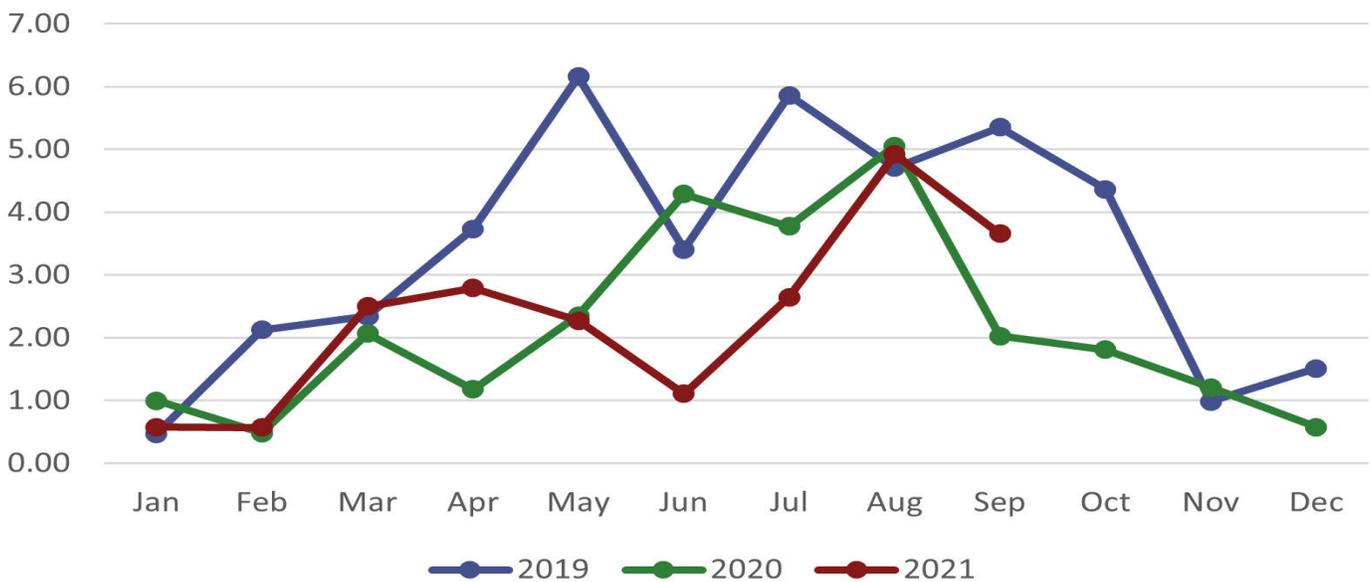
Agriculture provides the foundation on which Region 6E's economy is built. In addition to commodity production, much of our region's workforce is dependent upon jobs related to food production or the manufacturing of ag-related equipment and other products. Our farmers also purchase big-ticket items (e.g., tractors that can be priced over \$500,000, pickup trucks that can be as high as \$70,000 or more, and other equipment) and patronize a wide array of service providers (e.g., health, financial, and mechanical services, restaurants, etc.). Furthermore, the industry provides diverse employment opportunities, including those related to production and harvest labor, research, sales, and finance.

Counter-intuitively, while agriculture provides the foundation for Region 6E's economy, we have a relatively short growing season, typically beginning in May and lasting only until early October. While summer temperatures and heat indexes can climb well over 100 degrees, the region's average temperature for the May to October period is 62.3 degrees Fahrenheit, with precipitation averaging 3.75 inches per month. However, in recent years, localized weather events (e.g., heavy rains, hail storms) have become more common. In 2021, widespread severe drought conditions stressed crops and farmers alike. This increasing weather unpredictability is expected to make ag producers' success more tenuous as our climate continues to change. It is noteworthy that this uncertainty has also created some interest in new models for ag production including indoor hydroponic farming.

### Average Temperature - Region



### Average Precipitation - Region

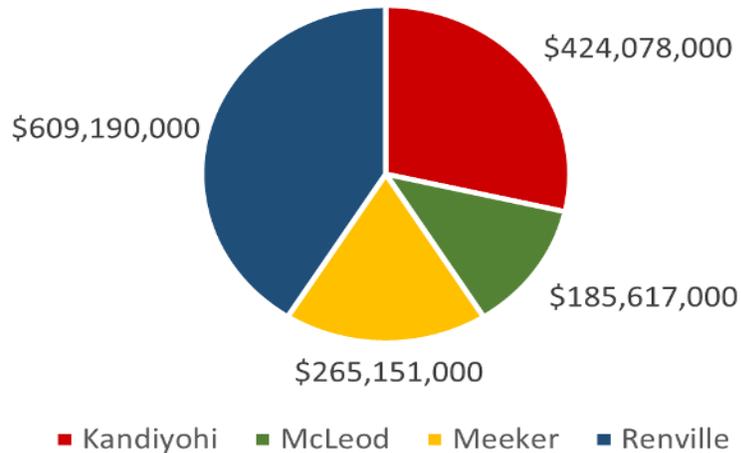


Our region includes roughly 8 million acres of land devoted to farming and other agriculture needs. In 2017, farms within Region 6E totaled 4,154, and produced crops and livestock valued at nearly \$1.5 billion. With 624,114 acres dedicated to ag production – more than any other county – and superior soil quality, Renville County saw the highest ag product market value – over \$609 million.

## Market Value of Products Sold

\$1,484,036,000 Total

*Census of Agriculture, 2017*



Historically, agriculture has been defined in the space of traditional farming, including land cultivation and animal husbandry. Our region's primary crops have been corn, soybeans, and sugar beets. Animals raised for consumption have typically included cattle (dairy and beef), poultry (turkey products and chicken eggs), and swine. As farmers have left the profession, due to job demands, insufficient scale for viability, or other reasons, corporate agriculture has become more common. While this has an effect on regional dynamics (e.g., population, family size, class sizes) large-scale farming operations still provide economies of scale and jobs for the region.

In recent years, the local definition of agriculture has expanded to include fisheries, beehives, apple orchards, organic farming, and indoor hydroponics. Shrimp is now being raised, both for retail sale and global post-larvae stage export, within our region, well over a thousand miles from any ocean. Hemp, a commonly raised crop in our area during the early 20th century, has seen a resurgence and is now cultivated for resale in health/medical and clothing markets.

Due in large part to our growing Muslim community, there is growing demand for goat products, especially milk and Halal-certified meat. Until recently, local ethnic markets had no option for locally sourced Halal-certified meat. Rather, market-sold meat was frozen (for up to six months) and imported from as far away as Australia. To provide a solution to this local problem, Mid-Minnesota Development Commission recently partnered with a regional producer, two processors, and two small local markets, establishing a small local supply chain in response to local demand.

Additionally, both locally produced goat milk and procured bees' wax are now used as ingredients for personal care items such as lip balm and soap. Edible beans, legumes, and other niche crops (e.g., aronia berries) have also been incorporated into the local growing scene, as have organic and small growers, intent on improving the quality and availability of local food. Farmers markets are popular throughout the region in the warmer months and provide more fun for \$5 than most anywhere else.

## **Renewable Energy**

There is a growing presence of renewable energy in Region 6E including wind, solar, and biofuels. The region is land-rich, which provides unique opportunities for incorporating renewable energy methods into the landscape. Minnesota's goal to provide at least 25% renewable electricity by 2025 is on track thanks to the efforts of electric providers and consumers.

**Wind** – There are at least 28 wind turbines operating in the region with capacity of approximately 45 megawatts.

**Solar** - Throughout the region, commercial solar gardens, often between five and ten acres in size, are increasing in number, as are small solar installations by homeowners and private businesses.

**Ethanol** - Bushmills Ethanol is a corn-processing facility located in Atwater, MN, producing 65 million gallons of ethanol per year. It is a cooperative with approximately 400 members and has been in operation since 2005.

## **Climate**

The Minnesota climate is one of extremes. During summer months (June-August), heat and humidity dominate our region's weather patterns. Winter months (December-March) are typically cold – at times, brutally so – and, while precipitation varies depending on the location of the jet stream, can be somewhat drier. In a given year, our region may experience extreme heat, humidity, tornadoes, and blizzards. In addition to the jet stream, Minnesota's winter weather is often influenced by polar vortexes and Alberta Clippers, which bring extreme cold and dangerous windchills. While our region's average temperature between the months of November and April is 25 degrees Fahrenheit, it is not uncommon to experience temperatures well-below zero.

### **Region 6E Interesting Fact:**

*The community of Willmar, our region's largest city, experiences, on average, 30 inches of rain per year (U.S. average = 38 inches), along with 47 inches of snow (U.S. average = 28 inches). The city also experiences 197 days of sun (U.S. average = 205 days).*

## **Natural Resources**

Region 6E is abundant in natural resources. These assets provide many opportunities for residents and tourists to explore and enjoy the outdoors through hiking, bicycling, and water activities. Local and visiting sportsmen contribute to our region's economy and are typically known to be good stewards of our lands and waterways. Unfortunately, these natural resources, particularly our lakes and streams, are increasingly threatened by pollution (e.g., fertilizer runoff) and invasive species (e.g., zebra mussels and Eurasian milfoil). The use of chemical fertilizers, field drainage, and other methods could be in conflict with sound environmental practices, emphasizing the importance for the district to build relationships with and support Minnesota's Department of Natural Resources and Pollution Control Agency as well as local champions working to slow, stop, or reverse the spread of chemical and biological contaminants.

## ***Leisure and Recreation***

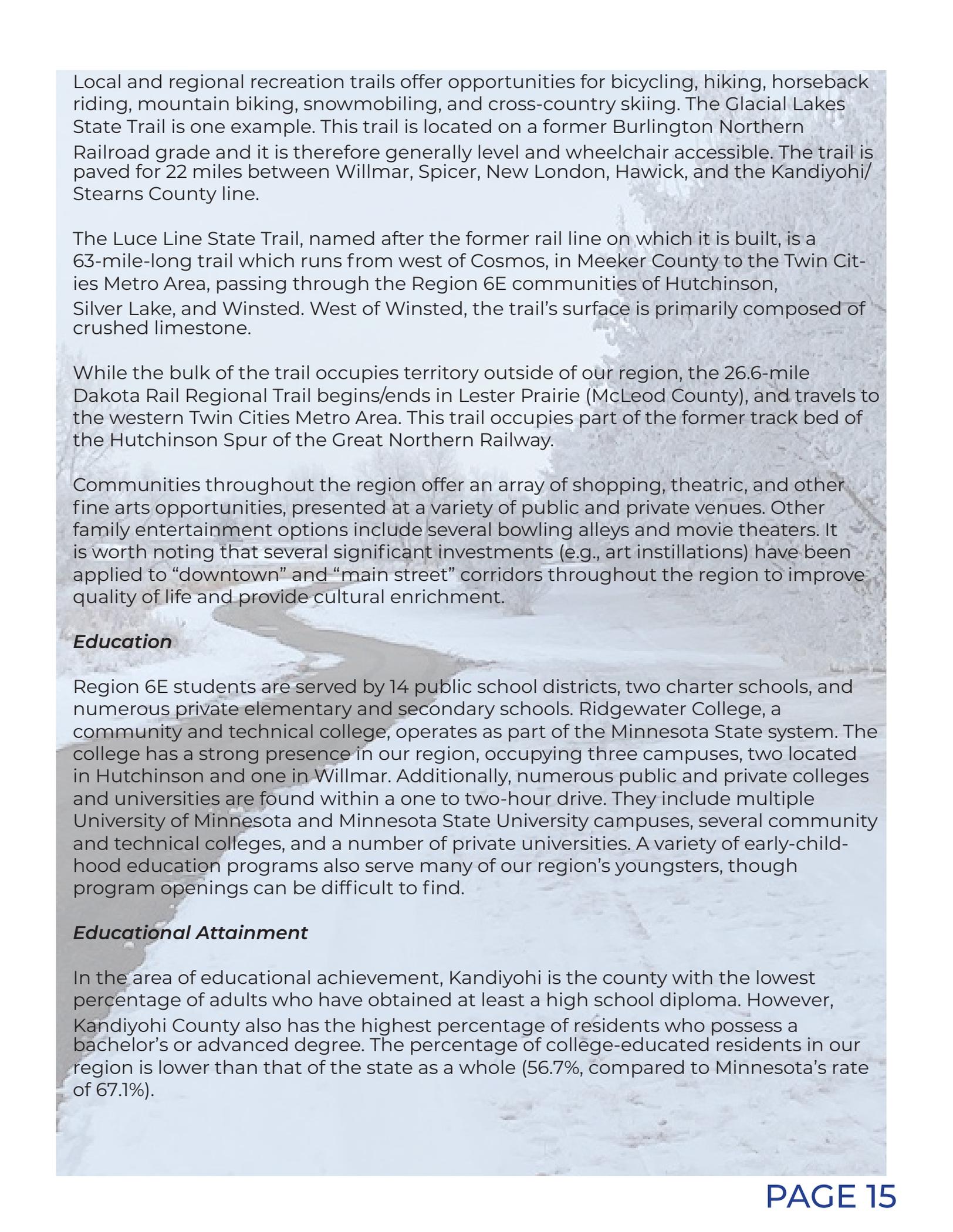
In addition to state and county parks located within and near our boundaries, the “lake life” mentality is abundant throughout the northern half of our region. Residents and visitors enjoy lake-centered activities, including boating, swimming, and fishing, throughout the year. Several public beaches and lakeside recreation areas offer picturesque views for photography and relaxation. Boat landing/launching facilities abound and provide broad water access to the general public. Ice fishing is a popular winter activity, and many lakes develop fish house “communities” once the ice is sufficiently thick. Additionally, our region provides ample opportunity for hunting, especially for deer, pheasant, turkey, and waterfowl. Region 6E also boasts hundreds of miles of groomed snowmobile trails during winter months and rolling hills and plains, found throughout much of the region, supply opportunities for cross-country skiing and snowshoeing. Fat-tire biking (electric and non-electric) is another activity which is becoming increasingly popular, even in winter months.

Beyond watersports and lake-centered leisure, during the summer, spring, and fall, locals benefit from our region’s many city, county, and state parks. Recent additions include pickleball courts, disc golf courses, and destination playgrounds. Camping is another popular pastime, with local options that range from primitive to relatively plush sites with full utility hookups and other features installed to ensure guest comfort. Several of our communities maintain outdoor swimming pool facilities and even, in some cases, indoor or outdoor water parks with large slides and other features. Some 120 local festivals and events attract and entertain residents and visitors alike. These activities provide leisure opportunities for residents while also drawing tourists, and their dollars, from the Twin Cities and other areas

There are several byways and trails that serve our region. The Glacial Ridge Trail Scenic Byway covers 220 miles between Willmar, Alexandria, and Sauk Centre, MN. It meanders through three state parks, including our own Sibley State Park, and offers views of lakes, woods, and farmlands as it winds through hills and ridges. Several stopping points along the route offer opportunities for hiking, bird watching, hunting, biking, fishing, and more.

The Minnesota River Scenic Byway is comprised of a series of paved and unpaved roads. It begins in far western Minnesota (at Big Stone Lake, near Browns Valley, MN) and travels southeasterly, ending in Belle Plaine, MN. The Byway follows along the southern edge of Renville County and our region, through Beaver Falls, Morton, and Franklin. Along the byway, travelers can pause to appreciate historic sites, where they can learn about the history of our region’s indigenous people (Dakota) heritage as well as the events of the U.S.-Dakota War of 1862. The byway also passes through Fort Ridgely, located in Brown County but within the borders of Fort Ridgely State Park, which is shared by Brown and Renville Counties.

While not a recognized national scenic byway, the Yellowstone Trail is a historic route. It served as our nation’s first transcontinental highway for automobiles and stretches coast to coast (Washington State to Massachusetts). In our region the Yellowstone Trail runs along U.S. Highway 212, crossing both Renville and McLeod Counties, where it travels through plains and fruitful farm land.



Local and regional recreation trails offer opportunities for bicycling, hiking, horseback riding, mountain biking, snowmobiling, and cross-country skiing. The Glacial Lakes State Trail is one example. This trail is located on a former Burlington Northern Railroad grade and it is therefore generally level and wheelchair accessible. The trail is paved for 22 miles between Willmar, Spicer, New London, Hawick, and the Kandiyohi/Stearns County line.

The Luce Line State Trail, named after the former rail line on which it is built, is a 63-mile-long trail which runs from west of Cosmos, in Meeker County to the Twin Cities Metro Area, passing through the Region 6E communities of Hutchinson, Silver Lake, and Winsted. West of Winsted, the trail's surface is primarily composed of crushed limestone.

While the bulk of the trail occupies territory outside of our region, the 26.6-mile Dakota Rail Regional Trail begins/ends in Lester Prairie (McLeod County), and travels to the western Twin Cities Metro Area. This trail occupies part of the former track bed of the Hutchinson Spur of the Great Northern Railway.

Communities throughout the region offer an array of shopping, theatric, and other fine arts opportunities, presented at a variety of public and private venues. Other family entertainment options include several bowling alleys and movie theaters. It is worth noting that several significant investments (e.g., art instillations) have been applied to "downtown" and "main street" corridors throughout the region to improve quality of life and provide cultural enrichment.

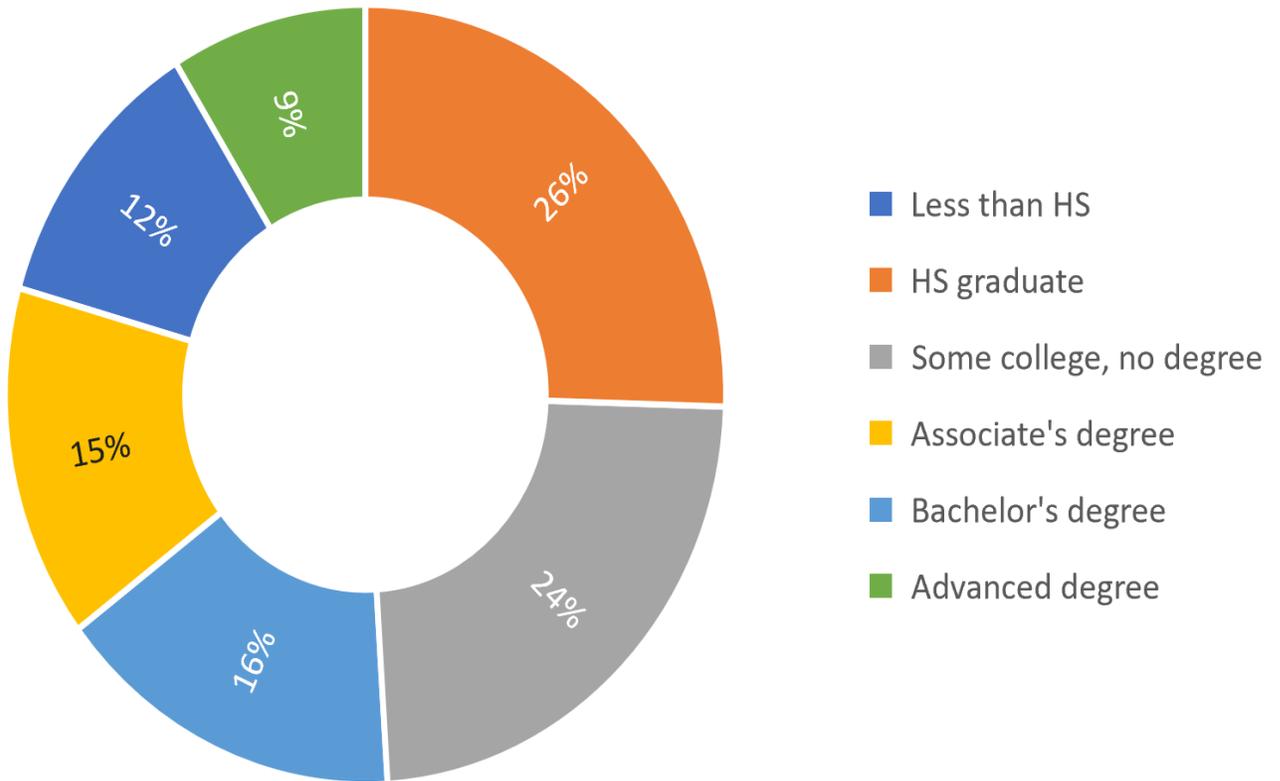
### ***Education***

Region 6E students are served by 14 public school districts, two charter schools, and numerous private elementary and secondary schools. Ridgewater College, a community and technical college, operates as part of the Minnesota State system. The college has a strong presence in our region, occupying three campuses, two located in Hutchinson and one in Willmar. Additionally, numerous public and private colleges and universities are found within a one to two-hour drive. They include multiple University of Minnesota and Minnesota State University campuses, several community and technical colleges, and a number of private universities. A variety of early-childhood education programs also serve many of our region's youngsters, though program openings can be difficult to find.

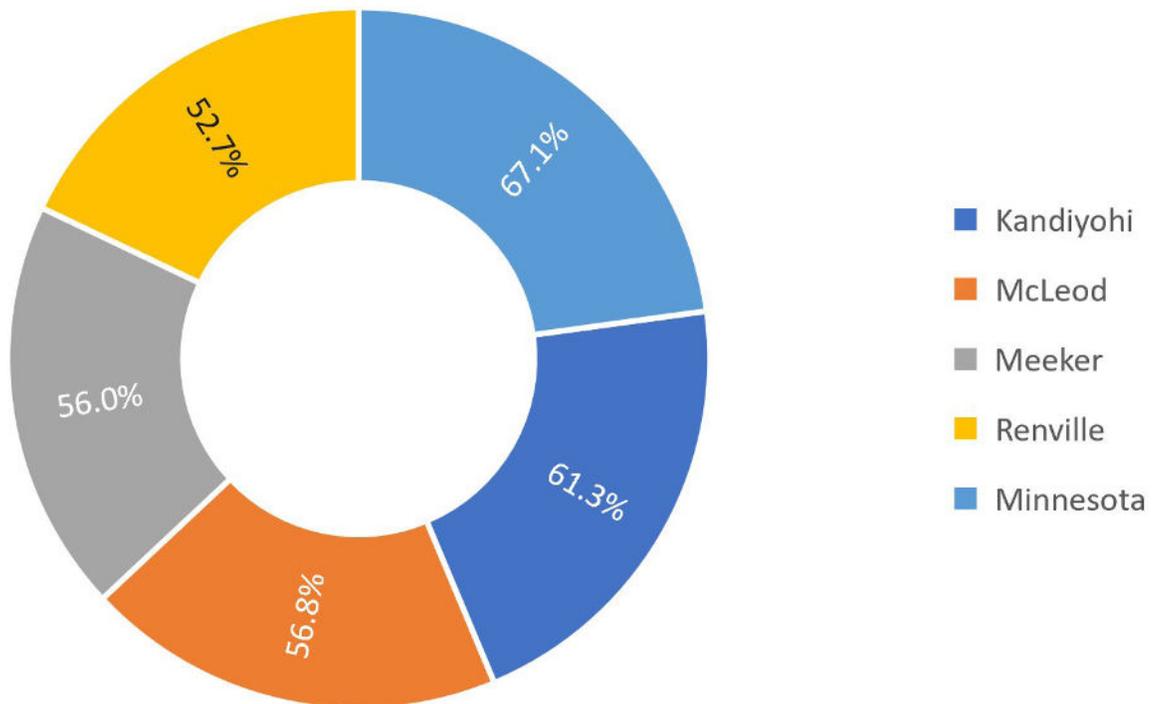
### ***Educational Attainment***

In the area of educational achievement, Kandiyohi is the county with the lowest percentage of adults who have obtained at least a high school diploma. However, Kandiyohi County also has the highest percentage of residents who possess a bachelor's or advanced degree. The percentage of college-educated residents in our region is lower than that of the state as a whole (56.7%, compared to Minnesota's rate of 67.1%).

## Educational Attainment - Region

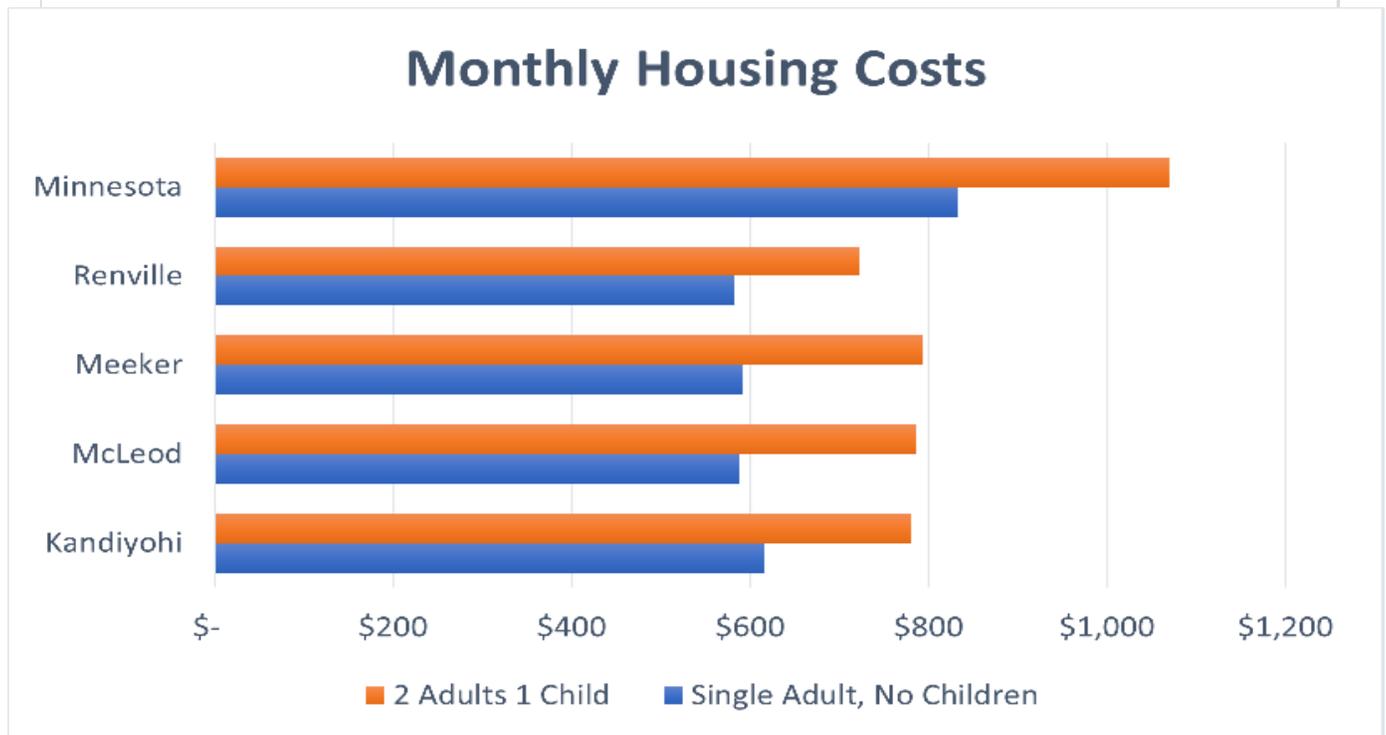
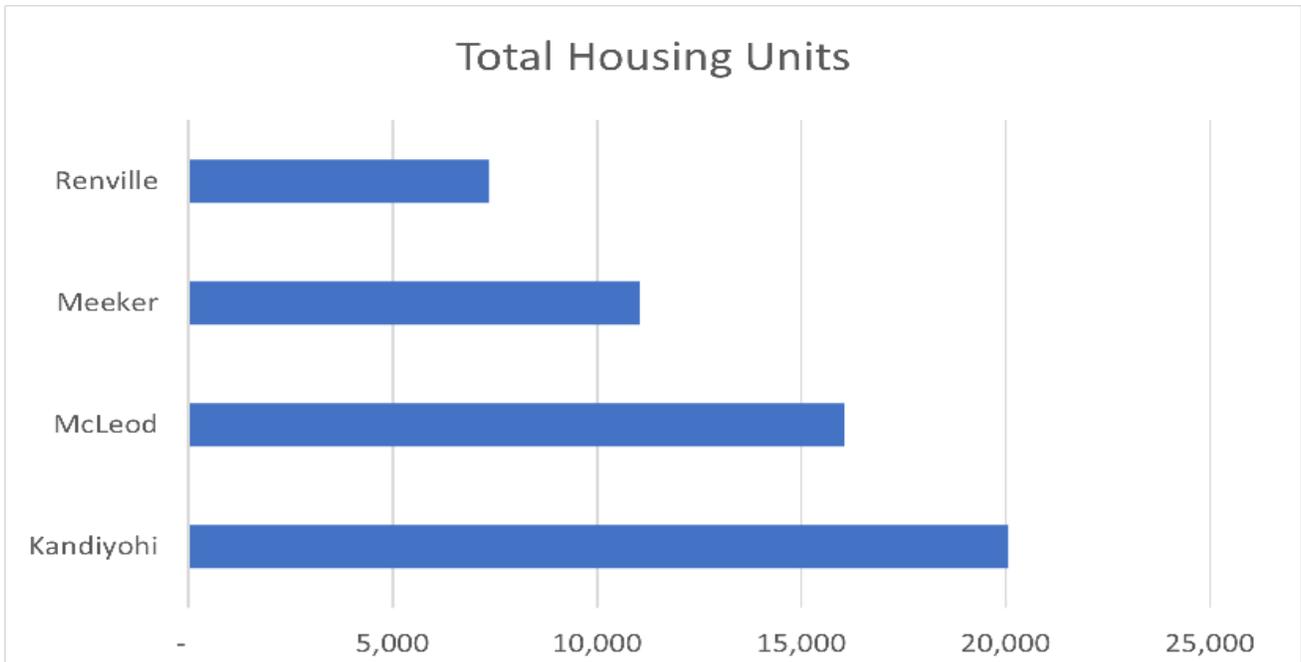


## College Educated



## Housing

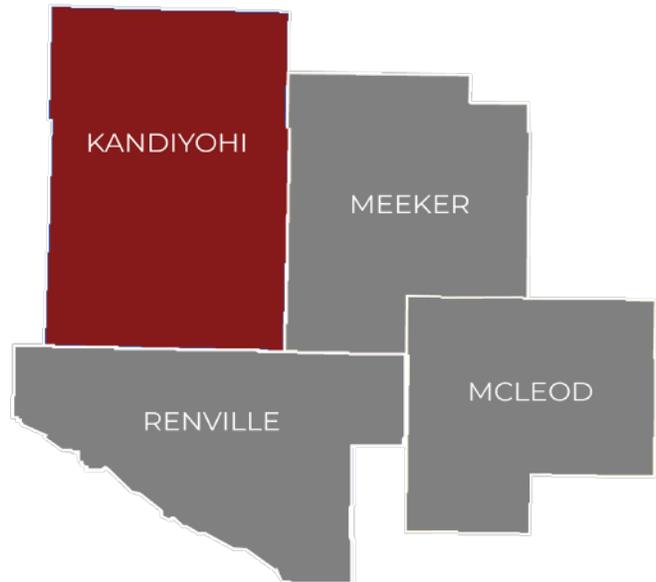
Housing has been identified as a weakness throughout Region 6E. Real estate inventories are at all-time lows and rents are increasing. While mortgage rates remain low, many would-be homeowners remain "boxed out" of purchasing affordable housing. This is due to inflated home costs and required down-payments during a period of limited supply. The issue is further aggravated by racial disparity, high credit/lending benchmarks, and building material and labor shortages. The number of tradespeople available to work in home construction, within Region 6E and beyond, is far lower than the number of jobs available, in effect stunting the growth of our housing stock.



## Region 6E County Profiles

### Kandiyohi County

Kandiyohi County is located approximately two hours west of downtown St. Paul, Minnesota's capitol city. It is found in the northwestern quadrant of Region 6E. Per the 2020 U.S. Census, the county is home to 43,732 people. The county seat is Willmar, our region's largest municipality (population 21,015). Kandiyohi County has 12 incorporated cities, five unincorporated communities, and 24 townships. Two U.S. highways and seven Minnesota State highways run through the county, along with an extensive network of paved and unpaved county and township roads. A municipal airport and a significant rail hub are also located in Willmar.



#### **Region 6E Interesting Fact:**

*Kandiyohi County was a site of significant events during the U.S. - Dakota War of 1862. The word "kandiyohi", rooted in the Dakota language, means "where the buffalo fish come". The county was first established in 1858, with the town of Kandiyohi as its county seat. At that time, Kandiyohi County was half of its current size. However, in 1870, the county merged with Monongalia County through state legislative action and in 1871, Willmar was named the county seat. This may have been due to its proximity to lakes and rail line expansion.*

There are approximately 75 lakes in Kandiyohi County, along with partially wooded areas, rolling hills, and, in the south, prime farmland. There are no major forest soils in the county but rather prairie ecosystems and a smattering of smaller wooded areas. There are 31 environmentally protected areas in Kandiyohi County, including 30 wildlife management areas and one Minnesota State Park - Sibley State Park - which draws visitors to Mount Tom. While not a true mountain, this overlook provides an unobstructed, 360-degree view of the surrounding county. Visitors can choose to trek the four-mile Mount Tom Trail, or drive to a sizeable parking lot, just a short walk from its observation platform. Kandiyohi County also maintains six county parks that provide year-round recreation opportunities. The North and Middle Forks of the Crow River Watershed run through the northeastern portion of the county.

Turkey production, and the industries that support it, is the primary economic driver in this part of our region. According to a November 2021 report, produced by the U.S. Department of Agriculture, Minnesota is our nation's top turkey producer. This is driven by Kandiyohi County-based Jennie-O , a subsidiary of Minnesota-based Hormel Foods, Inc. Jennie-O's production operation is fed by 58 contract, company, and independent farms scattered throughout Kandiyohi, Meeker, and Renville Counties, some of them quite sizeable. The company also operates several feed mills, one of which is located in Atwater, MN (located in eastern Kandiyohi County). Select Genetics, located in Willmar, provides 137 million poults (i.e., baby turkeys) per year and has capacity to satisfy 48 percent of our nation's turkey poult need. Between the hatcheries, farms, feed mills, production, and office staff, and other contracting businesses, Jennie-O supports thousands of jobs and invests tens of millions of dollars into our region.



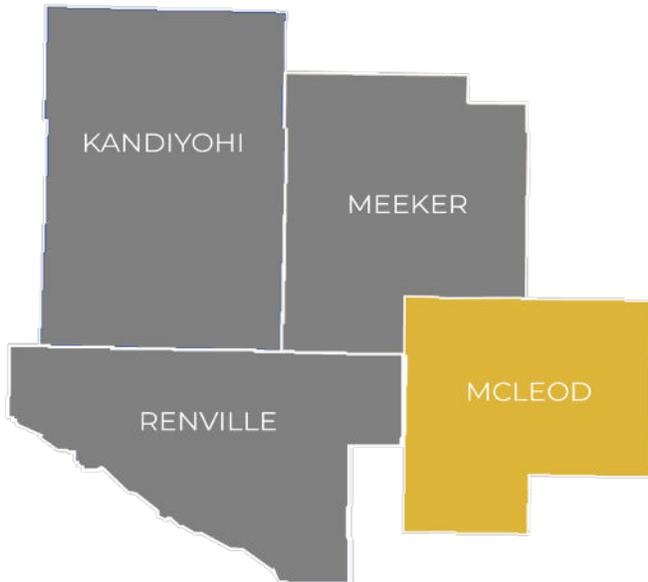
Other major Kandiyohi County employers include Ridgewater College, Carris Health (CentraCare), Life Science Innovations, and many nationally recognized retailers and service providers. Local craft beer and wine producers, cottage producers, and independently owned shops can also be found throughout the county. Within Region 6E, Kandiyohi County has the highest business ownership by People of Color in our region, with most of these businesses located within Willmar's city limits.

Several generations of immigrants and other ethnic minorities have made their home in the Willmar area, initially drawn by local meat processing and other agriculture related jobs. Today, at least 26 languages are spoken among students attending the Willmar Public School District. 48 percent speak Spanish and 45 percent speak Somali, with other languages including, but not limited to, Arabic, Karen, Ojibwa, Russian, and Vietnamese.



## Region 6E County Profiles

### McLeod County



McLeod County is located just over one hour west of downtown St. Paul, in the southeastern quadrant of our region. The 2020 U.S. Census indicates that 36,771 reside within the county's borders. The county seat, Glencoe, has a population of 5,722, and is home to a municipal airport. The county's largest community by population is Hutchinson with 14,599 people and is 15 miles to Glencoe's northwest.

Much of the growth of Hutchinson and the surrounding county is attributed to the 1947 decision by 3M (then known as Minnesota Mining and Manufacturing) to establish a production plant in the community. That plant now employs over 1,700 workers and has among the most

competitive wages in our region. 3M is a Minnesota-founded company that provides innovative solutions to daily life, including a wide variety of adhesive tape (e.g., Scotch Tape), bandages, and Post-It notes, all manufactured in Hutchinson. In addition to 3M, McLeod County is home to several large production companies, including Seneca Foods, Midwest Industrial Tool and Grinding, Miller Manufacturing Company, and Millerbernd Manufacturing. It is a county known for its manufacturing businesses and is surrounded by high-quality agriculture land.

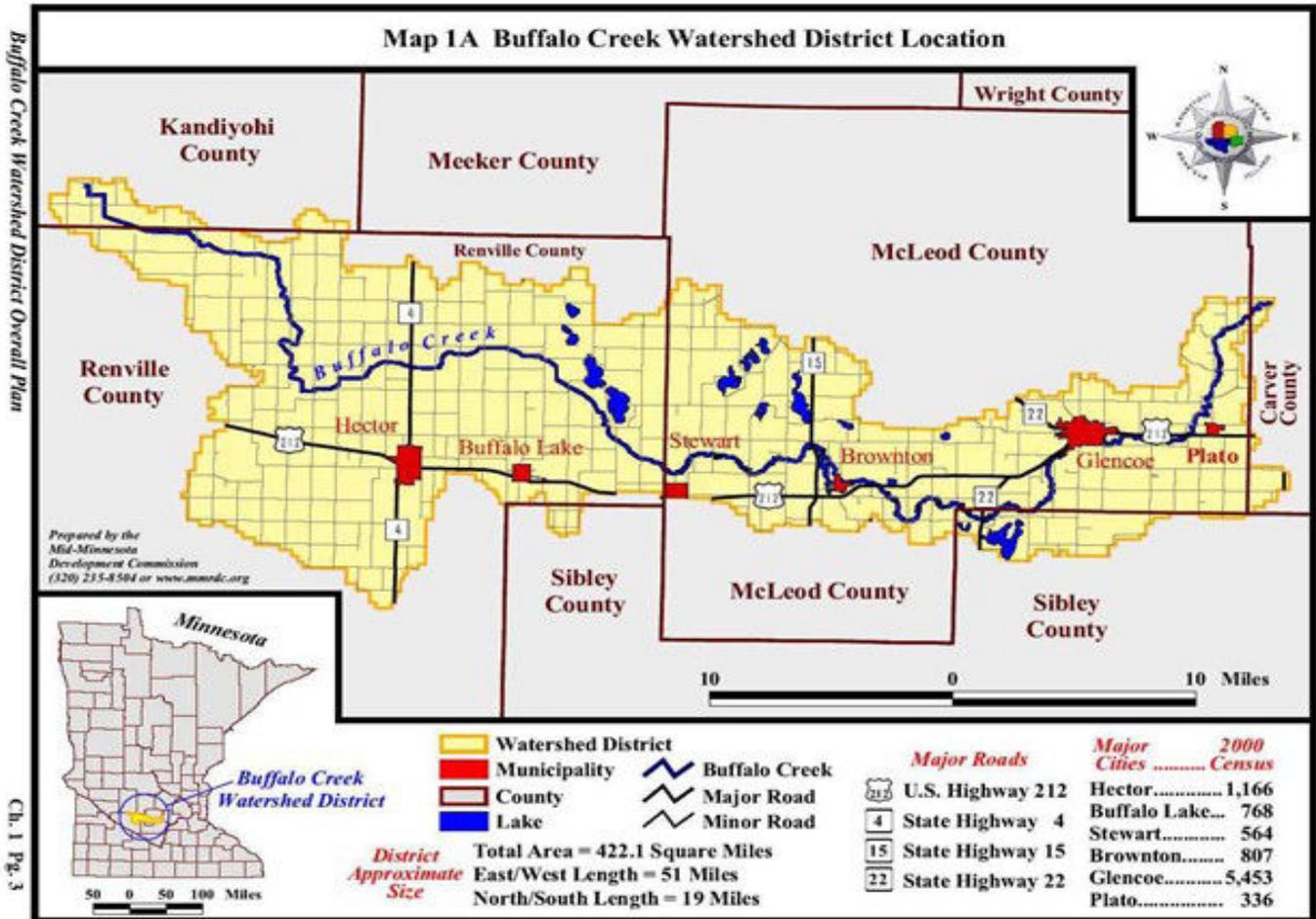
Today, nine cities and fourteen townships are found within the county. One U.S. Highway and three Minnesota State Highways, along with many paved and unpaved county and township roads, serve McLeod County's residents and industry. Municipal airports are found in both Hutchinson and Winsted, and the Twin Cities & Western railroad line crosses the southern portion of the county, largely paralleling U.S. Highway 212.

#### **Region 6E Interesting Fact:**

The county was established in 1856 and named for Martin McLeod, a Canadian-born adventurer who was also a fur trader and eventually a Minnesota territorial representative.



Land in McLeod County primarily consists of rolling hills and rich farmland. While only a few are well-suited for recreation, there are approximately 50 lakes completely within or bordering McLeod County. Ten protected Wildlife Management Areas can also be found here. There are no native forests in the county, only savanna and prairie soils. The Buffalo Creek Watershed District covers much of the southern half of the McLeod County.



### Region 6E Interesting Fact:

McLeod County was also the site of several notable events during the U.S. - Dakota War of 1862, including the September 4 Battle in Hutchinson.

The small town of Winsted lights up for a weekend with the Winstock Country Music Festival. This volunteer-driven festival, which includes music, camping, and revelry, has drawn big names including Alan Jackson, Blake Shelton, and Lynyrd Skynyrd. One hundred percent of the festival's net proceeds are directed to youth education at Winsted's Holy Trinity School. Drawing more than 20,000 attendees, the festival has an economic impact of more than \$3 million.

## Region 6E County Profiles

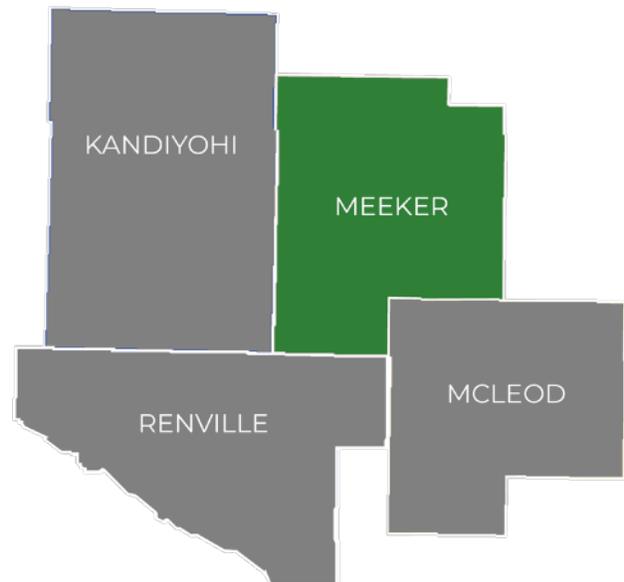
### Meeker County

Home to 23,400, according to the 2020 Census, Meeker County is found approximately 90 minutes west of downtown St. Paul. It occupies the northeastern quadrant of Region 6E. Litchfield, Meeker's largest municipality and county seat, is home to 6,624 residents.

A transportation network, including one U.S. and six Minnesota State Highways, can be found in Meeker County, along with numerous paved and unpaved county and township roads. There is a municipal airport in Litchfield and two major rail arteries, the Burlington Northern Santa Fe and the CP(SOO)

Roads, pass through the county. The county has nine incorporated cities, including one that spills into neighboring Stearns County, as well as eleven unincorporated communities (including Forest City, mentioned below) and 17 townships.

The geography of Meeker County ranges from low rolling hills, lakes, and lightly wooded and wetland areas to prime agricultural land. The county is home to over 20 lakes and Wildlife Management Areas. Litchfield, found at the relative center of the county, is home to a U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service office. During the season, deer and small game hunting is a common outdoor activity, as is ice fishing and angling. The Crow River Watershed dominates, with North, South, and Middle forks of the Crow found within Meeker's borders and provides ample opportunity for canoeing, fishing, and other activities.



#### **Region 6E Interesting Fact:**

Meeker County was originally part of Wisconsin Territory. After the Minnesota Territory was created in 1849, the legislature created four counties (Cass, Nicollet, Pierce, and Sibley). In 1855, these counties were further divided to include Davis County which, in 1856, was divided further to include Meeker County. Forest City was named Meeker's county seat. However, due to population growth and the arrival of a railroad spur, nearby Litchfield (formerly known as Ness) was voted county seat in 1869.



***Region 6E Interesting Fact:***

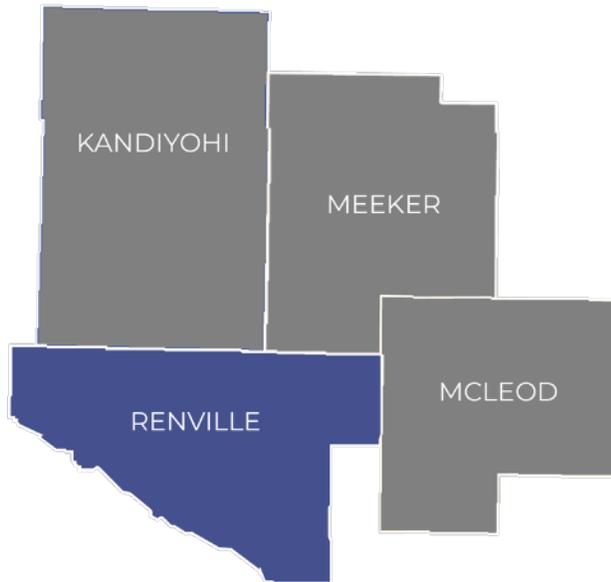
The Forest City stockade was the site of an attack during the U.S. - Dakota War of 1862. A replica of the stockade, along with a small period-correct village, can now be found on the battle site. It draws tourists to major history-focused events, held twice annually.



Major Meeker County employers include First District Association (a major producer of cheese and cheese-related products), Sparboe Farms (an egg producer), Doosan Bobcat, American Time, GVL Poly, Custom Products of Litchfield, Anderson Chemical, Felling Trailers, and Monroe Truck Equipment. Agriculture provides many jobs to residents, with numerous dairy and turkey producers, especially in the northern half of the county, and prime ag land in the south.

## **Region 6E County Profiles**

### **Renville County**



Renville County, which occupies our region's southwestern quadrant, is found approximately one hour and forty-five minutes west of St. Paul. The 2020 U.S. Census showed a total population of 14,723, with 2,484 of its residents making homes within the county seat of Olivia.

Two U.S. Highways and two state highways, along with an extensive network of paved and unpaved county and township roads, support residents and commerce throughout the county. Renville County holds two municipal airports (Hector and Olivia) as well as two rail lines, the Twin Cities & Western and the Minnesota Prairie Railroads, which run east and west through the county. Renville County

has 10 incorporated cities, including one that shares the county's name, as well as four unincorporated communities, and 27 townships. While no tribal lands are found within the county's borders, the Upper Sioux and Lower Sioux Tribes are located just across the Minnesota River, at Renville County's southern edge.

Aside from the Minnesota River Valley, which surrounds the major southeasterly flowing waterway, terrain is largely flat, with only a few rolling hills and wetlands. The rich land is well-suited for agriculture. The county recognizes nine lakes and 19 Wildlife Management Areas, along with a portion of Fort Ridgely State Park. Seven well-reputed county parks provide additional year-round recreation opportunities for outdoorsy residents and visitors. In addition to the Minnesota River's watershed, the Buffalo Creek Watershed District meanders through the northeastern portion of Renville County. While the Minnesota River provides a wealth of canoeing, kayaking, and fishing opportunities, the Buffalo Creek primarily serves to drain excess water from area farms.

#### **Region 6E Interesting Fact:**

Named for Joseph Renville, the county was established in 1855. Beaver Falls served as the County's original seat until 1900. Similar to other 6E counties, Renville County was the site of several significant engagements during the U.S. - Dakota War of 1862.

The largest Renville County employer is the Southern Minnesota Beet Sugar Cooperative. Other large employers include K&M Manufacturing, Rural Computer Consultants, Altimate Medical, Renville County Hospital and Clinics, Transystems (a bulk commodity transporter), a variety of seed companies and several long-term care facilities.

***Region 6E Interesting Fact:***

Fun fact: Franklin, MN, located along the banks of the Minnesota River in southern Renville County, is the self-proclaimed Catfish Capital of Minnesota.



## **Top Five Industries in Region 6E**

For a rural area, Region 6E has a relatively diverse, multi-sectored economy which improves regional economic resilience. This was proven true during the Coronavirus Pandemic. While all industries were forced to adjust their operations to some degree and many suffered losses, our regional economy has regained significant momentum. Currently, all sectors show a need for workers and wages are rising. Employers are scrambling to attract additional workers but are hindered by housing, childcare, and broadband limitations.

### **Manufacturing**

According to the Minnesota Department of Employment and Economic Development, based on the region's county averages, over twenty percent of Region 6E jobs are in production and manufacturing. Major companies, including several household names, have a substantial footprint within our region. They include 3M, Jennie-O Turkey Store, and Doosan Bobcat. Other regional companies manufacture components or produce ingredients used in other products throughout the country and globally.

*Just a few examples of other manufacturing-based companies headquartered in our region include:*

- **DI Labs**, located near Willmar (Kandiyohi County) is one of the fastest-growing technology companies in the Midwest. The company designs, engineers, and manufactures products using 3-D printing for a global market.
- **GVL Poly, located near Litchfield (Meeker County)**, is a full-service rotational molding manufacturer. The company also designs, engineers, and builds new or replacement molds for many different types of products. Final products include plastic machinery components, fuel tanks, and fan housings.
- **Hutchinson Manufacturing, located in Hutchinson (McLeod County)**, is a fabrication, machining, and welding manufacturer. They operate in over 120,000 feet of manufacturing space and serve a broad range of markets throughout the world.
- **K-Traps, located in rural Willmar (Kandiyohi County)**, manufactures minnow traps, which are globally distributed. The business began in 1995 and has been through two ownership changes, most recently in July 2019.
- **Southern Minnesota Beet Sugar Cooperative**, located in Renville (Renville County), is a member-owned cooperative that produces all-natural granular and liquid sugar from locally grown sugar beets. Customers can purchase refined sugar in bulk, as well as in 50-pound bags and super-sacks weighing up to 2,000 pounds. SMBSC employs nearly 400 full-time employees with an additional 500 seasonal employees during harvest.

- **West Central Steel**, located within Willmar (Kandiyohi County) is a locally owned and operated steel manufacturing businesses. Since 1949, the company has increased its footprint 11 times. The company is now planning its 12th expansion. West Central Steel partners with local secondary schools in several local workforce development initiatives including Kandiyohi Creating Entrepreneurial Opportunities (KCEO) and Manufacturing and Processing Careers (MAP).

## ***Health Care & Social Assistance***

Region 6E has a strong health care and social assistance industry, including having five hospitals; multiple large and small medical, dental, chiropractic, and other clinics; long-term care, assisted living, and rehabilitation facilities, and more. Major providers include Carris Health, a subsidiary of CentraCare, and Health Partners. Each of our region's counties also have their own Public Health or Health and Human Services Department, which work to ensure that the medical needs of our more vulnerable populations are met, while promoting activities that support healthy living.

## ***Retail Trade***

Retail trade was one of the harder-hit industries by the Coronavirus Pandemic. However, it still accounts for almost 11% of our region's jobs. Large retailers within our region are two Target stores, three Wal-Mart Supercenter stores, two Menard's, a Home Depot, and 11 Dollar General stores. Other major employers include grocery operations, Running's Farm and Fleet, numerous automobile, motorsports, and farm and heavy equipment dealerships. Many of our cities also feature smaller, specialty shops which sell everything from crafting supplies, to apparel, to fine chocolates.

## ***Educational Services***

There are well over two dozen public school districts that fall, at least in part, within our region's borders. Our region is also home to numerous private schools also serve elementary and secondary students. Additionally, Ridgewater College has a strong presence, with two campuses in Hutchinson (McLeod County) and one larger campus in Willmar (Kandiyohi County), Ridgewater delivers classroom and hands-on technical education onsite, online, and in locations throughout the region. In total, Ridgewater offers more than 100 programs, some of which are now fully online, in a variety of industries. By partnering with local businesses and organizations, Ridgewater's Customized Training and Continuing Education program provides over 80,000 hours of training annually.

## ***Accommodation & Food Services***

There are many accommodation and food options throughout the region. In addition to hotels and small resorts, options now include Airbnb and Vacation Rentals By Owner (VRBO). Restaurants include national chains, such as Applebee's, McDonald's, Perkins, and Taco Bell. However, the region is also home to several small, "mom and pop"-style cafes, ice cream shops, bars & grilles, and ethnic restaurants. In recent years, because of the pandemic, prepared food delivery services, such as Food Dudes and Door Dash, have become more popular. These businesses deliver food from multiple restaurants in the communities they serve and provide a flexible job opportunity for the regional workforce.



## SWOT Analysis

In August 2021, Mid-Minnesota Development Commission facilitated three community input sessions in each of Region 6E's four counties (12 sessions total). Sessions were held in the morning, during the noon-hour, and in the evening for each location. Members of the general public were invited and encouraged to these sessions via personal outreach, social media posts, and through partner networks. At each session, personal protective equipment (i.e., disposable face coverings, hand sanitizer) was made available and physical distancing was encouraged, to ensure participant safety due to continued spread of the Coronavirus. A survey was also created for those unable to attend an in-person session. Results from this survey are incorporated into this summary. Both the in-person sessions and the survey included SWOT (Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, and Threats) Analysis-focused questions as well as a "Blank Check" exercise.

Community responses were categorized, based on four Minnesota Association of Development Organizations (MADO)-identified cornerstones: Human Capital, Economic Competitiveness, Community Resources, and Foundational Assets. Using this information, our CEDS team created goals to guide the region's economic efforts for the next five-year period.



## **Human Capital**

### **Strengths**

Throughout the region, respondents noted the strength of the volunteer base, high levels of civic engagement, and diversity. Many mentioned how our small communities provide a high quality-of-life and how they are abundant with friendly and active people. There is a broad sense support for and inclusion of people with disabilities, as they participate in community activities and our workforce. Overall, community leaders are supportive of and supported by residents, and people tend to work together to make positive local changes.

### **Weaknesses**

Throughout our region the current workforce shortage, including but not limited to the shortage of volunteers, was recognized as a major weakness. This was attributed to a lack of qualified workers, a need for more workforce training, and the declining size of the workforce population. It was suggested that it will be increasingly difficult to replace retiring workers if our region is unable to keep young people from permanently leaving our region. It was also noted that many of our region's residents commute and work outside of our region. According to 2019 data from the Minnesota Department of Employment and Economic Development (DEED), 34.1% of Minnesotans work outside of their county of residence. That same year, over 30% of the available workforce, within three of Region 6E's four counties worked outside of their county of residence. Only Kandiyohi had a lower "commute out" rate, at 12.0%, likely because of the city's status as a regional economic hub for a significant portion of Southwest Minnesota. Meeker County's rate of outward commuters was 45.9%, the highest of all counties in the region. This is likely due to the county's location, roughly centered amid Twin Cities Metro Area, the St. Cloud Metro Area, and the larger towns of Hutchinson and Willmar.

Additional weaknesses included lack of activities and opportunities for young families, concerns about the small and shrinking size of the dedicated volunteer base, cultural tensions, political divisiveness, and a lack of exposure to or understanding of other perspectives. While not unique to our region, the long-term effect of the Coronavirus Pandemic, and its impact on social engagement and community, was also noted.



## *Opportunities*

Workforce training was listed as a top human capital opportunity. Ideas included ways to grow and retain the region's workforce using short-term training. The need to continue building up local community leaders, through programs such as Vision 2040 Leadership and Elevate Business Academy, was also discussed. Several community members suggested the incorporation of business incubators and other coworking spaces, which would give entrepreneurs an opportunity to share costs and foster partnerships. Career exploration for our region's youth also received great emphasis.

Empowering veterans, seniors, and new immigrants was also considered an opportunity for strengthening our region's workforce, as was encouraging young adults to move to, or move back to, our region. Additionally, some respondents indicated that the Coronavirus Pandemic may have created a broader opportunity for Region 6E to attract remote workers who may be ready to leave more urban areas, at the same time expanding the local tax base with new homes and local purchases.

## *Threats*

Some of the perceived threats to our region's human capital included changing demographics, specifically related to our aging population and to workers emigrating out of the area. A lack of business expansion was also noted. Another threat included a lack of understanding of the rural environment and the perception that it can be isolating. This may be a barrier to the recruitment of workers from more urban regions (e.g., the Twin Cities or St. Cloud Metropolitan Areas). Rural communities, such as those found in Region 6E, can also struggle with limited mental health and addiction recovery resources and services. Finally, the lasting effect of the Coronavirus Pandemic was also mentioned as a Region 6E threat.

## *Blank Check*

The Blank Check Exercise engaged the participants to think broadly about what they would like to see in their communities. Respondents were encouraged to think big, and so their "wish lists" were long and ranged from practical to fun.

In the Human Capital area, many leaned toward improving health care for all people, and developing the workforce necessary to fill all positions. Respondents also mentioned the provision of free tuition for college (including technical training) and even ensuring a "guaranteed income" for residents/families. Additionally, good discussion centered on finding ways to bring those young people, who previously left our communities, back to our region. Assisting families with childcare expenses and ensuring food security were other items listed, as were long-term community planning and increased cooperation between cities.

## **Economic Competitiveness**

### **Strengths**

Overall, despite the Coronavirus Pandemic, the 6E Region's economy is strong. One reason for this is our region's innovative spirit and diverse economy. Our region is strong in agriculture, healthcare, and manufacturing and this sector diversity helps us weather economic downturns. These sectors also provide a wide array of jobs. For example, a seed company will have employees ranging from warehouse workers, to accounting and office staff, to biologists. This offers employers and jobseekers flexibility in all economic conditions. Our region also boasts many small, family-owned, and diverse businesses, which provide niche opportunities. Other strengths included our region's proximity to the Twin Cities and a growing tele-commuter population. During the Coronavirus Pandemic and the State of Minnesota's stay-at-home orders, a significant portion of the region's workforce turned to remote work. This helped many find a different way to achieve work-life balance while still maintaining productivity. Local economic development administrations were also placed in the Strengths category, as they were widely believed to be great encouragers of economic growth and a stabilizing force for our region's businesses.

### **Weaknesses**

The bulk of community input in this area centered on the declining retail/shopping/dining environment and the closure of local businesses. Property taxes, high utility rates, and lower-paying jobs, as compared to neighboring metro-adjacent counties, were also listed as economic competitiveness weaknesses, and there is thought that workers may choose to live outside of Region 6E due to those issues. A lack of family- and community-focused events was also noted.

### **Opportunities**

Community respondents had many economic competitiveness-related suggestions for the region, including the addition of more shopping and dining options. Helping small businesses share resources to improve efficiencies and outcomes was also discussed. Supporting business development through the provision of both financial support and planning assistance was also mentioned.

Specific to business development, opportunities included: providing financial and technical assistance resources to encourage the opening of retail stores, restaurants, and, in small communities, shuttered grocery stores. Respondents also expressed a desire for more and greater access to local food producers. They also saw opportunity for development surrounding new technologies. These ideas were seen as suggestions that would contribute to the regional economy by bringing jobs, attracting workers, and providing the additional tax revenue necessary to strengthen our communities. Rejuvenating empty buildings, main streets, and industrial parks were also discussed as ways to increase local economies.

## Threats

Inflation, Minnesota's higher tax climate, and the "Amazon effect" were identified as top threats to regional economic competitiveness. Additional threats included drug use and chemical dependency, climate change/decreasingly predictable weather patterns, unfunded mandates, supply chain disruptions, and general economic uncertainty. There was also some discussion centered on the effects of the Coronavirus's economic impact, particularly the impact felt by those in the hospitality and other service industries.

## Blank Check

Respondents offered several ideas to improve regional economic competitiveness. These ideas included community marketing, the employment of tax forgiveness programs, and increasing retail and hospitality options to attract more workers and give residents more options for local spending. They also suggested increasing workers' wages and providing scholarships to help people train for positions in industries with high regional demand for workers.



## **Community Resources**

### **Strengths**

Community input respondents listed many community resources strengths. They include:

- Wildlife areas such as Prairie Woods Environmental Learning Center, Fort Ridgely State Park, Sibley State Park, Greenleaf State Recreation Area, and a multitude of State Wildlife Management Areas.
- The quality and abundance of our county and city parks
- Water resources (lakes and rivers) that support both recreation and the environment
- Well-maintained walking and bike trails
- Opportunities for visitors/tourists
- Opportunities for cultural enrichment ( e.g., art, history, community theatre)
- A multitude of festivals (community, music, etc.)
- Baseball parks and other sporting facilities
- Several outdoor pools and waterparks

### **Weaknesses**

While respondents were very enthused about the quality of existing walking and biking trails, identified weaknesses included a need for more of these features. The same was said to be true for both indoor and outdoor recreation facilities. Some respondents also identified other weaknesses, such as difficulty communicating with newer English-language learners, food deserts, and limited retail and dining options. Additionally, a theme of identified weakness included the perception that smaller communities can, at times, become stagnant and struggle to forward new, less conventional ideas and initiatives.

### **Opportunities**

Recreation defined the strongest “opportunities” theme across our region. Ideas included the addition of more indoor and outdoor pools and water features (e.g., “splash pads”), indoor entertainment and event venues, amphitheaters, hockey/skating facilities, increased art diversity, and support for more cultural enrichment-focused activities and facilities. Community and wellness centers that, provide opportunities for youth, families, and seniors, were also listed as opportunities for resident engagement and visitor attraction. Some respondents expressed that, as school buildings close due to district budgets and/or enrollment, there may be opportunity to repurpose them for recreation and community enrichment.

### **Threats**

Respondents reported that threats to community resources largely revolved around social media, a general tone of divisiveness, and missed opportunities for cooperation and collaboration. Misinformation and the dismissal of differing opinions were cited as problematic.

## Blank Check

Respondents' community resource-focused blank check ideas centered on increasing and improving event and recreation opportunities, such as concert venues, gathering spaces, water parks, sports facilities, playground equipment, entertainment complexes, parks, and bike trails. It is widely believed that more of these resources are needed for the youth, families, and seniors around the region. These items, in addition to our existing recreation and sporting opportunities (e.g., boating, fishing, hunting, snowmobiling) could also help to attract younger workers to our region. Improving the pedestrian environment for walkers, rollers, and bicyclists was also widely-believed to be a good community investment.



## ***Foundational Assets***

### ***Strengths***

Overall, there was wide-held belief among respondents that Region 6E has several solid foundational assets. Each county is located within reasonable proximity to a commerce-supporting rail line and has multiple state and federal highways, along with an extensive network of county, city, and township roadways, that are kept in reasonably-good condition. Additionally, existing industrial parks and “Opportunity” and “Renaissance” Zones provide incentives for business development. While limited, local transportation systems provide much-needed access to food, healthcare, entertainment, worship, and other communities for non-drivers. The quality of our region’s public and private education institutions, healthcare services, and childcare providers were all listed as strengths in each of our four counties. Only Meeker County respondents listed broadband access as a strength, presumably due to a significant recent investment made by their rural electric cooperative. From a regional standpoint, crime rates were perceived to be relatively low and manageable.

### ***Weaknesses***

While many foundational strengths were identified across our region, a few obvious deficiencies were identified. These weaknesses included lack of broadband access, housing cost and availability, childcare access, and public transportation limitations. Respondents from some communities also mentioned aging school buildings, distressed downtown areas, and lack of grocery stores in smaller municipalities

### ***Opportunities***

Identified foundational asset opportunities largely mimed identified weaknesses, as is typical when conducting a SWOT analysis. Higher priorities included increasing broadband, transportation, and childcare access. Developing more housing to meet the needs of seniors, families, and the workforce was also addressed, as was increased support for the agriculture industry, specifically farmers. By investing in these foundational assets, it is widely believed there is opportunity for our region to become more attractive to people looking for a place to live and work.



## Threats

Many losses were identified as regional threats. These include the loss of school districts and buildings, businesses, and public funding. Many public and private facilities are aging, and small farms are disappearing. While respondents were often pleased with the quality of regional healthcare services, the lack of mental health and chemical dependency treatment providers, services and facilities was an identified weakness. Due in part to our region's lack of childcare, housing, and broadband, it can be difficult for communities to attract qualified police, fire, and rescue personnel. This can cause some concern over the future of our region's level of public safety. Human diseases, such as the coronavirus, was listed as a threat and this extends to animal and plant diseases such as avian influenza and those that can spread rapidly through a flock, herd, or crop. Additionally, ecommerce was perceived to threaten the sustainable success of the small retailers found in Region 6E.

## Blank Check

Respondents put forth many ideas to improve Region 6E's foundational assets. They included:

- Improving transportation and transportation infrastructure (roads, rail, air, and public), including the completion of commerce and safety-improving divided highway projects
- Protecting and enhancing the quality of our lakes, streams, and other wetlands
- Directing more resources to support educators and childcare providers
- Investing in clean and renewable energy (e.g., solar and wind)
- Ensuring all residents have access to affordable and reliable broadband services
- Increasing airline access (e.g., supporting a regional passenger air connection or hub)
- Adding more housing throughout the region (affordable, market-rate, executive, and senior housing units)

Respondents from some communities also suggested that investing in medical facilities, such as hospice facilities and clinics, would benefit our communities. "Main Street" and "downtown" investments were also identified as worthwhile.



## **Strategic Direction and Action Plan**

### **Vision Statement**

A new Vision Statement for the economic development district (Economic Development Region 6E) has been created after considering input provided by community members during MMDC's CEDS-focused SWOT Analysis. This vision, and goals supporting it, will be used to guide regional activities during the next five-year period and beyond.

#### **Vision:**

*To create an atmosphere of innovation and resilience, in which a wide array of businesses can flourish, our diverse workforce can achieve, and families can thrive.*

The following development goals, also created with community input, encompass the needs of our entire region, while also recognizing the unique needs and aspirations of individual communities. Goals for each of the four cornerstones (Human Capital, Economic Competitiveness, Community Resources, and Foundational Assets) have been developed. Their attainment will hinge upon the local and regional collaboration of public and private partners. Mid-Minnesota Development Commission (MMDC) should not be considered wholly responsible for regional achievement but rather a resource, a supporter, and a collaborator. MMDC will work to be "top of mind" among regional stakeholders (e.g., local units of government, nonprofit organizations, and the business community) in need of assistance. When MMDC becomes aware of a stakeholder in need, our organization will apply in-house expertise and/or connect them with other regional experts better equipped to provide resources or otherwise address their individual situation. Coalitions will be formed to help stakeholders achieve their goals whenever possible and appropriate (i.e., when they align with the district's approved Comprehensive Economic Development Strategy).

MMDC District (Economic Development Region 6E) Goals:

Identify stakeholders responsible for implementation, timetables, and opportunities for the integrated use of other local, state, and federal funds.

### **Focus Area: Human Capital**

#### **Goal**

Create a strong, diverse workforce by providing education and training opportunities to residents, including those who are considered non-traditional workers.

## ***Strategies***

- Attract workers, and their families, to our region by supporting local community marketing and outreach programs.
- Support other organizations, including the business community, working to attract workers and/or providing training opportunities to strengthen our region's workforce.
- Support organizations that promote work, education, and leisure opportunities for diverse populations (Immigrants, people with disabilities, older people, veterans, etc.).
- Promote volunteerism to the region's residents and businesses.
- Reduce barriers to mental health, addiction, and other critical services, for veterans, People of Color, immigrants, aging people, people with disabilities, and others, by supporting the organizations that serve those individuals and communities.
- Support and partner with programs and organizations working to remove barriers and encourage participation in job skills training (e.g., short- and long-term post-secondary programs, apprenticeship, career exploration) to meet regional workforce needs.

## ***Focus Area: Economic Competitiveness***

### ***Goal***

Increase opportunities for entrepreneurs and small business owners who want to establish or expand their business within Region 6E.

### ***Actions***

- Provide outreach, assistance, and/or resource referral to existing businesses (including, but not limited to, businesses owned and operated by People of Color, people with disabilities, women, and veterans) to ensure they are well-positioned to establish, maintain, or expand operations.
- Provide financial and development assistance resources to businesses of all sizes (including businesses owned and operated by People of Color, people with disabilities, women, and veterans) via MMDC's own revolving loan fund programs and by connecting businesses to external financial programs (public and private).
- Provide resources and technical assistance to aid businesses, local government units, and nonprofits as they pursue grants that help them maintain, expand, or improve operations.
- Provide import/export-focused technical assistance and/or resources to businesses participating in international commerce.

## ***Focus Area: Community Resources***

### ***Goal***

Create opportunities for collaboration on projects that support improved community and regional resilience and/or quality-of-life.

### ***Action***

- Collaborate to provide and support learning opportunities that promote understanding, improved quality-of-life, equity, and leadership throughout the region.
- Support projects that encourage local and regional cultural enrichment and tourism.
- Ensure safe and healthy communities by joining and supporting those agencies who, with an equity lens, promote physical and mental health, combat chemical abuse and dependency, respond to local emergencies, and/or work to reduce crime (e.g., drug and human trafficking, fraud, domestic abuse/neglect).

## ***Focus Area: Foundational Assets***

### ***Goal***

Create and pursue solutions to foundational issues, including but not limited to workforce development, childcare, housing, transportation, environment, and broadband.

### ***Action***

- Collaborate on infrastructure projects that create sustainable, long-term benefits for our region's communities.
- Educate the public on the economic value of infrastructure projects.
- Grow opportunities for the region to increase housing and childcare capacity.
- Preserve and promote natural resources, while also supporting the thoughtful development and the incorporation of sustainable and resilience-promoting technologies and practices (e.g., renewable energy, proven conservation methods).

## ***Impact of the Coronavirus Pandemic***

On March 11, 2020, due to the outbreak of the novel coronavirus disease (COVID-19), the World Health Organization declared a global pandemic. The United States government declared a national emergency on March 13, 2020. Throughout the nation, states and cities put in place a variety of measures in an attempt to slow the spread of the disease. These actions included closing non-essential businesses and implementing stay-at-home orders. On March 15, 2020, Minnesota Governor Tim Walz declared a peacetime state of emergency and a statewide “stay-at-home” order took effect on March 25, 2020. This order also included the closure of all Minnesota schools and prohibited in-person instruction. Teachers pivoted to provide distance learning but were often hindered due to the lack of sufficient broadband infrastructure. The stay-at-home order was extended until May 18, 2020, when non-essential restaurants and retailers were allowed to reopen with curbside pickup or delivery to customer locations. Vaccinations for the disease became available in Minnesota in December 2020, first for emergency responders and at-risk populations and then later for the general public.

The Coronavirus Pandemic pushed businesses to drastically change operations and forced the permanent closure of some Region 6E businesses. To respond to this economic shock, and support improved economic resilience during future calamities, the federal government passed the Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security (CARES) Act. Later, the American Rescue Plan Act (ARPA) would be passed to provide additional support to communities, via six separate notices of funding opportunity, including:

- Build Back Better Regional Challenge
- Economic Adjustment Assistance
- Good Jobs Challenge
- Indigenous Communities
- Statewide Planning Research and Networks
- Travel, Tourism, and Outdoor Recreation

The short-term impact of the pandemic was most detrimental to the small business community and the education system. While long-term impacts have not yet been fully realized, several resilience gaps have come to the forefront. One of these is the need for a consistent and reliable broadband network, able to provide adequate speed for working, learning, healthcare, socialization, and entertainment in the Region 6E’s more rural communities. Additionally, already-significant workforce shortages have been further exacerbated by the pandemic, with some workers choosing to leave the workforce due to a lack of childcare options, higher-risk health status, retirement/early retirement, or other reasons. MMDC staff continue to monitor the effect of the Coronavirus Pandemic and respond to the pandemic-imposed needs of the region.

## ***Mid-Minnesota Development Board of Commissioners***

Robert Anderson: ——— Representing McLeod County Townships  
Jeff Benson: ————— Representing Transportation Sector in the Public Interest  
Kevin Crowley: ————— Representing Kandiyohi County Municipalities  
Doug Erickson: ————— Representing County of Renville  
Rick Fagerlie: ————— Representing City with Population Over 10,000 (Willmar, MN)  
Kathy Grochow: ————— Representing Region 6E School Boards  
Jon Hawkinson: ————— Representing Renville County Municipalities  
Sue Hilgert: ————— Representing Mental Health & Substance Abuse Recovery  
Sector in the Public Interest  
Jill Hoff: ————— Representing the Local Workforce Development Board  
Doug Krueger: ————— Representing County of McLeod  
Tom McDonnell: ————— Representing Production & Manufacturing Sector in the  
Public Interest  
Maureen Melgaard-Schneider: representing Aging Individuals in the Public Interest  
Robert Moller: ————— Representing Agriculture & Aggregate Mining in the  
Public Interest  
Tracy Montgomery: ——— Representing McLeod County Municipalities  
Shawn Mueske: ————— Representing Higher Education in the Public Interest  
Rollie Nissen: ————— Representing County of Kandiyohi  
Chris Rowan: ————— Representing Meeker County Municipalities  
Lorallen Schmeling: ——— Representing Meeker County Townships  
Steve Schmitt: ————— Representing County of Meeker  
Dave Sebesta: ————— Representing City with Population Over 10,000  
(Hutchinson, MN)  
Paul Simonsen: ————— Representing Renville County Townships  
Berit Spors: ————— Representing Youth & People with Disabilities in the  
Public Interest  
DuWayne Underthun: — Representing Kandiyohi County Townships  
Jeff Vetsch: ————— Representing Region 6E School Boards  
Vacant: ————— Representing Health Sector in the Public Interest

## ***Executive Committee***

Chair ————— Kevin Crowley  
Vice-Chair ————— DuWayne Underthun  
Secretary ————— Suzanne Hilgert  
Treasurer ————— Doug Erickson  
At-Large Member ——— Dave Sebesta

## ***CEDS Committee (Commissioners and community-interest)***

Jill Bengston:	Kandiyohi County Housing Redevelopment Authority
Jeff Benson:	Renville County (Olivia)
Adam Birkholz:	City of Winsted
Kevin Crowley:	MMDC Commissioner
Dan Ehrke:	McLeod Cooperative Power Association
Lisa Graphenteen:	Meeker County Economic Development Authority
Luke Greiner:	MN Department of Employment and Economic Development
David Krueger:	City of Litchfield
Susie Lang:	City of Olivia
Scott Marquardt:	Southwest Initiative Foundation
Maureen Melgaard-Schneider:	MMDC Commissioner
Tom McDonnell:	MMDC Commissioner, Southern Minnesota Beet Sugar Cooperative
Shawn Mueske:	MMDC Commissioner, Ridgewater College
Bridget Paulson:	Central Minnesota Jobs and Training
Chris Rowan:	City of Watkins
Nasibu Sareva:	African Development Center
Connie Schmoll:	Kandiyohi County and City of Willmar Economic Development Commission
Miles Seppelt:	Hutchinson Economic Development Authority
Jordan Zeller:	Renville County Housing and Economic Development Authority

## ***Other MMDC Committees***

- Bylaw
- Personnel
- Budget and Work Program
- Mid-Minnesota Regional Transportation Coordinating Council Grant
- Nominating
- Transportation Advisory (includes non-Commissioners)
- Legacy Revolving Loan Fund (includes non-Commissioners)
- CARES Act Revolving Loan Fund
- Marketing/Communications
- Area Transportation Partnership Representatives (staff and Commissioner participation)



Submitted  
January 2022

**MMDC**

MID-MINNESOTA DEVELOPMENT COMMISSION

Mid-Minnesota Development Commission  
1700 Technology Dr NE, Suite 300  
[www.mmrdc.org](http://www.mmrdc.org)