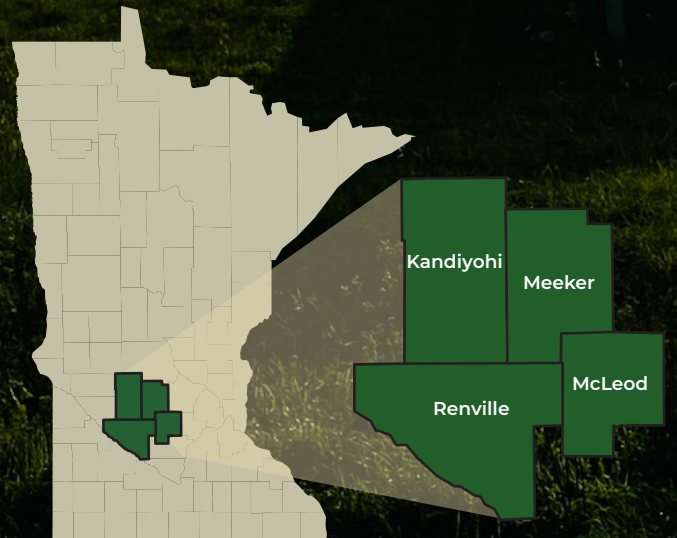




MID-MINNESOTA DEVELOPMENT COMMISSION

# ANNUAL REPORT

## 2024



## Table of Contents

Mid-Minnesota Development Commission	2
New Opportunities and Initiatives at MMDC in 2024	3
Mid-Minnesota Development Commission Board of Commissioners	4
Meet Our Team of Professionals	5
Financials	6
MMDC Economic Development: 2024 Highlights	7-8
MMDC's Revolving Loan Fund: 2024 Highlights	9
MMDC's Value Statement	10
MMDC Community Development: 2024 Highlights	11
Planning - Frequently Asked Questions	11
New MMDC Planning and Development Professionals	13
Mobility Management	14
National Recognition	15

## Mid-Minnesota Development Commission

Mid-Minnesota Development Commission (MMDC) is one of nine regional development commissions serving communities across rural Minnesota. We're an independent regional government entity resulting from Minnesota's Regional Development Act of 1969. We serve the four Minnesota counties of Kandiyohi, McLeod, Meeker, and Renville, an area also known as Minnesota Economic Development Region/District 6E. MMDC is governed by a Board of Commissioners, which includes a majority of locally elected officials but also incorporates other non-elected subject matter experts who lend their experience and expertise to guide our work.



MMDC partners with local stakeholders to strengthen communities by improving quality-of-life and increasing opportunities for economic prosperity. We often provide technical assistance to communities, businesses and local organizations who lack the staff, time, or expertise required for planning and other goal achievement. We also work to help our residents and communities overcome shared barriers so they can achieve success. This often includes partnering with other entities (local economic developers, CareerForce Partners, Ridgewater College, local and regional foundations, etc.) to tackle underlying, region-wide issues like workforce, housing, childcare, and transportation shortages. We do this while also applying our dollars, expertise, and connections to empower our entrepreneurs as they strengthen our region's economy through business establishment and expansion.

## New Opportunities and Initiatives at MMDC in 2024

2024 has been another year of opportunities for Mid-Minnesota Development Commission. Along with our more traditional economic and community development work, the last year has brought with it the funding necessary to dramatically ramp-up our focus on energy and environmental projects. Early this year, MMDC received funding from the Minnesota Department of Commerce to assist regional stakeholders interested in the clean energy funding made possible by the U.S. Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act (IIJA) and Inflation Reduction Acts (IRA) to facilitate local clean energy projects. In short, MMDC can now write grants on behalf of our stakeholders, without charging a professional services fee. MMDC is currently collaborating with other regional development commissions across the state to pursue substantial funding for things like electric vehicle charging infrastructure and solar energy installations for our interested local communities.

In addition to the funding described above, MMDC received a second allocation from the Minnesota Department of Commerce. The Energy Efficiency and Conservation Block Grant Program (EECBG) gives MMDC the ability to provide sub-awards to small communities (less than 15,000 residents) to support the development of Energy Efficiency & Conservation Strategies and pay for energy audits of public community facilities and related work.

Because this work is well-aligned with their priority areas, the McKnight Foundation has generously provided additional funding to help MMDC do even more for our communities in this climate and energy arena. These McKnight Foundation dollars can be applied by MMDC as matching funds to leverage federal, state, or other private grants. They also allow us to pursue funds beyond the scope of MMDC's Department of Commerce funding. Furthermore, they give MMDC the ability to significantly reduce the local contribution typically required for the development of energy and environmental resilience strategies. Also notable, these funds can be used to provide clean energy-related education and outreach to our communities, including our disadvantaged communities, so they can develop both the foundational knowledge and the common resolve needed to become more climate resilient.

While MMDC is excited to help our communities reduce their energy consumption and prepare for more unpredictable, high-intensity weather events, this is just the tip of our regional iceberg. Within this report readers will also learn about several MMDC initiatives, including a couple of nationally recognized projects aimed at improving and protecting the standard of living for nearly 120,000 regional residents. Readers will also learn about the new business ventures MMDC is supporting with the help of our three revolving loan funds. Thank you for your continued support of our organization and our broader mission.



"Brownton-Area Bins" photo by Blake Barnard

# Mid-Minnesota Development Commission Board of Commissioners

## Kandiyohi County Elected Commissioners

Mike Brouwer	Kandiyohi County Townships (Willmar Township)
Kevin Crowley	Kandiyohi County Municipalities (City of Pennock)
Roger Imdieke	Kandiyohi County Board of Commissioners
Carl Shuldes	Municipality Over 10,000 Residents (City of Willmar)
Jeff Vetsch	MMDC Region School Boards (New London-Spicer)

## McLeod County Elected Commissioners

Tiffany Barnard	MMDC Region School Boards (Hutchinson District)
Tony Hausladen	McLeod County Townships (Winsted Township)
Doug Krueger	McLeod County Board of Commissioners
Yodee Rivera	McLeod County Municipalities (City of Glencoe)
Dave Sebesta	Municipality Over 10,000 Residents (City of Hutchinson)

## Meeker County Elected Commissioners

Chris Rowan*	Meeker County Municipalities (City of Watkins)
Lorallen Schmeling	Meeker County Townships (Cedar Mills Township)
Steve Schmitt	Meeker County Board of Commissioners

## Renville County Elected Commissioners

Doug Erickson	Renville County Board of Commissioners
Jon Hawkinson	Renville County Municipalities (City of Olivia)
Scott Refsland	Renville County Townships (Emmet Township)
Paul Simonsen*	Renville County Townships (Bandon Township)

## Public Interest Commissioners

Brent Guyan	Renewable Energy Sector
Jill Hoff	Local Workforce Development Board
José Luciano	Communities of Color
Rollie Nissen	Transportation Sector
Thomas McDonnell	Information Technology Sector
Maureen Melgaard-Schneider	Aging Population
Robert Moller	Agriculture and Aggregate Mining Sectors
Shawn Mueske	Higher Education/Ridgewater College
Kiza Olson	Healthcare Sector
Reagan Quinn	Mental Health Sector
Berit Spors	Youth & People with Disabilities

\*These regional leaders retired from Commission service during the 2024 calendar year.

## Meet Our Team of Professionals



Eric Day  
Executive Director  
Eric.Day@mmdcc.org



Darla Bajari  
Finance Director  
Darla.Bajari@mmdcc.org



Nikki Johnson  
Finance Assistant  
Nikki.Johnson@mmdcc.org



Nate Reuss  
Economic Developer  
Nate.Reuss@mmdcc.org



Mike Nicholas  
Economic Developer  
Mike.Nicholas@mmdcc.org



Terry Smith  
Mobility Manager  
Terry.Smith@mmdcc.org



Blake Barnard  
Transportation &  
Community Planner  
Blake.Barnard@mmdcc.org



Carol Lundgren  
Regional Development  
& Grant Specialist  
Carol.Lundgren@mmdcc.org



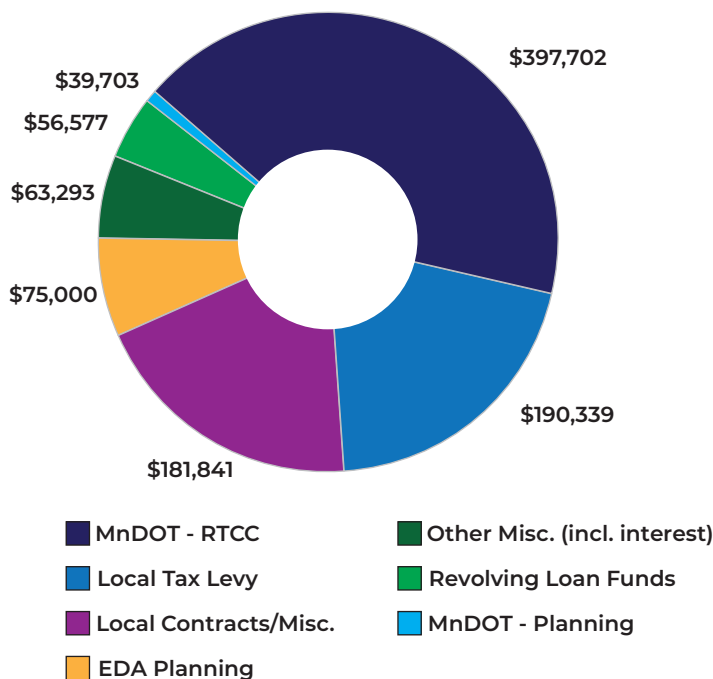
Ben Carlson  
Communications Specialist  
Ben.Carlson@mmdcc.org



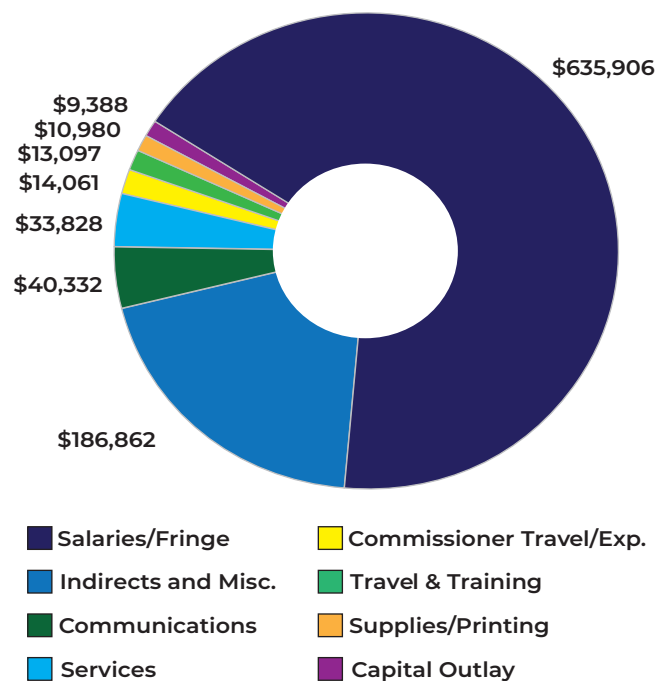
## Financials

REVENUES	FY 2023 Actuals	FY 2024 Actuals	FY 2025 Budget
Local Tax Levy	\$ 385,506	\$ 397,702	\$ 408,715
EDA Planning	182,334	63,293	70,000
Other Misc. (incl. interest)	40,167	56,577	17,000
Revolving Loan Funds	31,060	39,703	38,000
Local Contracts/Misc.	56,233	190,339	283,681
MnDOT - Planning	75,000	75,000	75,000
MnDOT - RTC	169,108	181,841	210,600
<b>Totals</b>	<b>\$ 939,408</b>	<b>\$ 1,004,455</b>	<b>\$ 1,102,996</b>

### FY 2024 Revenue (Total \$1,004,455)



### FY 2024 Expenditures (Total: \$964,232)



**FY 2024 Indirect Cost Rate: 24.85%**

**FY 2024 Fringe Rate: 33.24%**

EXPENDITURES	FY 2023 Actuals	FY 2024 Actuals	FY 2025 Budget
Salaries/Fringe	\$ 635,906	\$ 655,684	\$ 709,634
Supplies/Printing	5,352	10,980	5,371
Communications	53,470	40,332	31,794
Services	5,980	33,828	18,149
Capital Outlay	1,944	9,388	3,500
Travel & Training	15,159	13,097	46,160
Indirect and Misc.	181,269	186,862	238,958
Commissioner Travel/Exp.	12,500	14,061	16,500
<b>Totals</b>	<b>\$ 911,580</b>	<b>\$ 964,232</b>	<b>\$ 1,070,066</b>

## New MMDC Finance Assistant

In September, MMDC's Board of Commissioners approved a new part-time MMDC Finance Assistant position. Several goals were considered when determining the need for this addition, including improving segregation of financial duties, increasing capacity to execute finance projects and take on more clients for fiscal services, and adding reinforcement to ensure essential Finance Department functions (e.g. payroll, accounts payable) could continue in the event of an unexpected or prolonged absence of MMDC's Finance Director.

In November, Nikki Johnson was welcomed to the MMDC Team, as our new Finance Assistant. Johnson brings with her a wealth of finance and business/entrepreneurship experience from her previous roles. With her help, MMDC will elevate finance processes and serve our region even better. If you're aware of an organization in need of fiscal hosting services, contact MMDC Finance Director Darla Bajari at (320) 235-8504 or [Darla.Bajari@mmdc.org](mailto:Darla.Bajari@mmdc.org).



Nikki Johnson

## MMDC Economic Development: 2024 Highlights



Mike Nicholas

### A New MMDC Economic Developer

While he originally joined MMDC in 2023, MMDC professional Mike Nicholas pulled up to the economic development table in the Spring of 2024. While he remains MMDC's lead for projects like the Renville County Comprehensive Plan, he now has more opportunity to support our region's business community while also giving attention to the critical housing issue. Additionally, with support and mentorship from MMDC Economic Developer Nate Reuss, Nicholas is learning the ins and outs of MMDC's three revolving loan funds. In December, he gained approval for his first revolving loan application, the result of some fantastic learning and effort!

### Regional Food Business Center

MMDC recognizes that the business of food (i.e., both agriculture and the closely related production and manufacturing sector) is key to the economic health of our region. In 2024, with support of several other MMDC professionals, Economic Developer Nate Reuss took significant strides in advancing our region's food economy. As a partner member of the U.S. Department of Agriculture's North Central Regional Food Business Center (RFBC) Reuss leveraged MMDC's agribusiness, production and manufacturing, and economic development expertise to lead initiatives aimed at bolstering regional stakeholders working in the food space.



Photo submission by James Misuraca

Major achievements include increasing stakeholder engagement. This included the facilitation of meetings with local farmers, food producers, and community leaders to identify challenges and opportunities within our food system. These efforts ensured numerous points of view were captured and incorporated into the RFBC strategy. MMDC also provided outreach for and supported key grant and financing opportunities to fund infrastructure improvements, business startup, and educational programming. These funds can be key to in enhancing both the capacity and the reach of our region's food businesses.

Throughout the year, Reuss has also worked to develop and strengthen a network of food-focused professionals, including regional universities, nonprofit organizations, and government agencies. These collaborations give us the ability to pool resources and expertise to help our essential food businesses. Those with questions about MMDC's Regional Food Business Center efforts can reach Nate at [Nate.Reuss@mmdc.org](mailto:Nate.Reuss@mmdc.org) or (320)235-8504.

## More MMDC Economic Development: 2024 Highlights

### Economic Development Administration Grant Support

Much of MMDC's economic development work is supported by the U.S. Department of Commerce, via the Economic Development Administration (EDA). The EDA provides MMDC with a Planning and Local Technical Assistance Grant to support economic development, foster job creation, and attract private investment. In addition to working to create and support a regional environment that is attractive to businesses and workers, by addressing housing, childcare, transportation, broadband, and other gaps, MMDC offers technical assistance to those pursuing EDA Public Works and Economic Adjustment Assistance (PWEAA) Grants. These often large grants are available to help communities in economic distress by helping them fund commerce-supporting infrastructure projects (e.g. roadways, industrial parks) and workforce training programs for in-demand, family-sustaining wages. In 2024, MMDC assisted several local stakeholders with PWEAA applications.

Unfortunately, in the context of the MMDC Region's relatively strong economy, the EDA's rigid application criteria can make it difficult for our applicants to show the amount of distress needed for PWEAA approval. Therefore, despite our best efforts to assist, no PWEAA Grants were awarded within the MMDC Region in 2024.

However, hope looms on the horizon. In December, the Thomas R. Carper Water Resources Development Act of 2024 (WRDA) was passed by Congress with bipartisan support and was later signed into law by President Joe Biden. The WRDA includes a provision to reauthorize the Economic Development Administration, something that hadn't been done since 2004. While the details are still coming to light at the time of this report, it is believed that, in addition to increasing the authorized funding level for EDA Partnership Planning Grants, reauthorization will allow for the modernization of eligibility criteria, allowing for the consideration of additional key statistical factors. In other words, there is optimism that more MMDC communities will be able to meet PWEAA funding criteria.



### IGNITE Your Future

Again in 2024, MMDC was excited and honored to assist with the IGNITE Your Future career exploration event. This October event, held on Ridgewater College's Hutchinson campus, gave over 1,000 sophomores from 17 area school districts a chance to sample 80 different careers, highlighting rewarding vocational opportunities in the MMDC Region. Fast-paced, hands-on career focused activities helped the students learn about professions in a wide variety of sectors, including agriculture, business, engineering, construction, transportation, healthcare, government, and the arts.

IGNITE provides an amazing opportunity for our regional employers to engage with our emerging workforce. By giving students exposure to their industries, these employer partners can plant seeds of possibility before students disregard potentially satisfying careers due to a lack of awareness and information.

This year, in addition to assisting with planning and serving as "human arrows" (aka: hallway navigators/helpers), MMDC also hosted two career stations. They included a non-emergency medical transportation station, facilitated by MMDC Mobility Manager Terry Smith, and a community planning station, hosted by MMDC Community Development & Grant Specialist Carol Lundgren and MMDC Transportation & Community Planner Blake Barnard. MMDC participates in IGNITE Your Future because we know the importance of showing our future workers and leaders that there are good opportunities for them close to home. While we know some may feel the need to explore other areas or try out life in larger cities after high school, we want them to know there is excellent opportunity for them to apply their education and experience when they are ready to return. To learn more about the IGNITE Your Future event, visit <https://ridgewater.edu/admission-aid/visit-tour/igniteyourfuture/>



## MMDC's Revolving Loan Fund: 2024 Highlights

MMDC collaborates with private lenders and other economic development partners to ensure our region's entrepreneurs can benefit from the expertise and financial resources necessary to turn their business dreams into realities, encouraging a more vibrant regional business tapestry. Our three revolving loan funds, made possible with significant investments from the U.S. EDA, allow us to fill financing gaps when private lenders are unable to meet a business's entire need. In 2024, MMDC approved several business loans, including:



**6th Street Logistics, LLC.:** With a commitment to reliability, safety, and customer satisfaction, 6th Street Logistics, LLC. has quickly established themselves as a trusted name in our region's trucking industry. 6th Street Logistics is dedicated to ensuring goods arrive on time, every time, whether they're moving across the state or across the country. While the company was established in 2021, MMDC joined other financiers to provide owners Chris and Krista Nehk the capital they needed to grow their operation. Visit <https://www.6thstreet-logistics.com> to learn more.

**Rendezvous, LLC.:** MMDC recognizes the importance of giving residents a "third place." A space to feel comfortable and enjoy a sense of belonging outside of the home and workplace. Rendezvous was designed to answer that need by providing a place for friends to gather and make memories. In addition to a variety of other activities, Rendezvous features eight axe throwing lanes. This activity is akin to darts, but with a little more Viking swagger! Incorporated is technology that makes it possible for throwers to safely play a wide variety of axe throwing games.



Owners Hans and Victoria Hibma used an MMDC loan to renovate and redevelop an under-used Willmar building for their exciting and fun operation, providing a real entertainment asset for the surrounding area! Reserve your lane, or book a party at <https://rendezvouswillmar.com/>.



**K-Traps, LLC.:** For various reasons, many who fish prefer live bait. Rather than making frequent stops at their local fish shack, some prefer to catch their own minnows. K-Traps works to answer their needs. Owned by Joy and Shawn Henkel, K-Traps specializes in the production and marketing of high-quality, handmade baitfish traps. This small and nimble operation has the ability to customize their traps to meet customer specifications. With the help of MMDC's financing, the Henkels were able to move their operation into Pennock, from its original countryside location. K-Traps now has room to increase production and meet customer demand. Order a trap for yourself or your favorite fisher, at <https://ktraps.com/>.



43 Active Loans



Active Loan Balance  
of \$1,990,771.00



Three New Loans in  
2024



\$180,000.00  
Loaned in 2024

## **LMAO, LLC. - doing business as Smokey Dukes:**

Cofounded by siblings Lance Walter and Mari Wildt, Smokey Dukes is a new and unique snack food company, specializing in pellet-smoked and seasoned pretzels. What sets this company apart is their true slow-smoking process, as competitors' products are typically made with artificial liquid smoke or smoked seasoning. The Smokey Dukes duo is using MMDC financing to purchase the equipment and inventory needed to significantly ramp up their production, first in the Hutchinson EDA's Enterprise Center, and later in their own production facility. With the help of a distributor, Smokey Dukes will bring their product to a broader market, including well-known retailers and even airlines. Look for them on Facebook, Instagram, and soon, at a retailer near you!



**If you're interested in launching a business or expanding your current enterprise with the financial resources an MMDC business loan can provide, please contact MMDC Economic Developers Mike Nicholas or Nate Reuss at (320) 235-8504. They'll be happy to discuss your idea, connect you with local resources and help you to complete a quality loan application!**

## **MMDC's Value Statement**

**Vision/Goals:** While acknowledging and valuing the history of our Region, we will influence decisions that result in healthier, more resilient, more inclusive, and more prosperous communities while maintaining a future-focused perspective.

**Accountability:** We believe the MMDC should be held accountable to the residents of our Region, and to our funding partners, for the quality of our work, for the fiscally-responsible management of our budget, and for the continuous promotion of opportunity and development throughout our Region.

**Professionalism:** We will promote opportunities for MMDC staff and Commissioner development, encourage leadership at all levels, and expect professionalism to be demonstrated through our conduct and through our achievements.

**Communication:** We value timely, open, honest, and respectful communication as a pathway to improved MMDC effectiveness.

**Adaptability:** We welcome new ideas and challenges as opportunities for improvement and the advancement of the MMDC organization and Region.

**Diversity:** The MMDC aspires to lead as an organization where equality and inclusion is achievable for all, regardless of ethnicity, age, ability/disability, religion, gender/gender identity, sexual orientation, or other difference. We believe that all deserve respect, dignity, and an opportunity to learn, grow, and achieve.

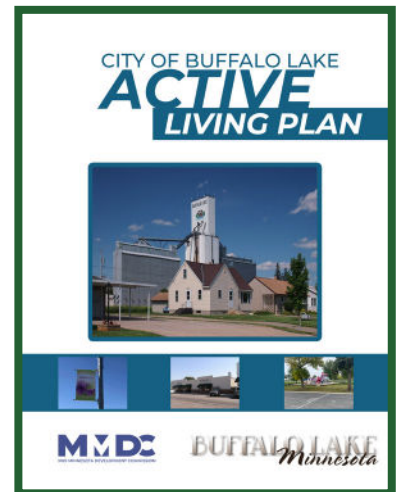
**Teamwork:** The MMDC supports teamwork throughout the organization and collaboration, both throughout our Region and beyond its borders. We will not hesitate to share our talents when partnering will lead to the achievement of greater outcomes for our communities.

**Imperfection:** We acknowledge our humanity. As humans, we will make mistakes. We will help each other learn from these mistakes and will strive for continuous improvement.

# MMDC Community Development: 2024 Highlights

## Planning

2024 saw the successful conclusion of several community focused planning projects. These included the Buffalo Lake Active Living Plan, the updated Kandiyohi County Bicycle and Pedestrian Trails Plan, and the City of Renville's ordinance and zoning update. Significant work was accomplished on both the Renville County Comprehensive Plan update and the McLeod County Solid Waste Plan, both of which will be completed in 2025. To view completed plans, each of which benefited from the dedication of their local steering groups and input from other local residents, please visit <https://mmrdc.org/publications/>.



## Planning - Frequently Asked Questions

### What is a Comprehensive Plan?

A comprehensive plan is a long-range planning document that outlines a community's vision for future development, including goals and strategies for issues including land use, economic development, housing, transportation, utility infrastructure, community-provided services, and more. These plans are tailored to the specific community, often a city or county. These plans incorporate significant public input and support directional continuity during changes of staff or elected leadership. However, these plans can and should be adjusted, as needed, to account for local goal accomplishments, setbacks, and other occurrences.

### What is an Active Living Plan?

An active living plan is a strategy developed to help a community's residents incorporate physical activity into their daily lives by making it easier for people to walk or bike to reach their destinations, essentially designing communities that encourage movement and promote overall health through the built environment. Examples of plan inclusions can be ensuring accessible sidewalks, adding bike lanes or trails, and ensuring well-connected transportation networks that help people safely walk or bike to common destinations (e.g., post office, library, central business districts/downtown areas, schools).

### What is a Safe Routes to School Plan?

A Safe Routes to School (SRTS) plan is a strategy specifically tailored to encourage students to walk or bike to school by making their routes safer and more accessible through infrastructure improvements, education programs, community engagement, and enforcement.

### What is an Energy Efficiency and Climate Resilience Plan?

An Energy Efficiency and Climate Resilience Plan identifies community goals and strategies related to the natural environment. These plans consider hazards, public health, environmental conservation, energy consumption, renewable energy, and other topics deemed important by community members to ensure long-term vitality. In addition to supporting a healthy environment, these plans can help communities identify potential cost savings (e.g. ways to lower energy bills and/or make investments that prevent significant future losses due to flooding or other events).

### Why Plan?

Communities with well-developed and actively utilized plans are more likely to achieve development goals. Often times, they are also more competitive when applying for grants. These plans demonstrate thoughtful consideration and a commitment to addressing critical issues, making funding requests easier to justify. In some cases, funders require a current, relevant plan as a prerequisite for grant eligibility.

If you believe your community could benefit from any of the planning services described above, please reach out to MMDC at (320) 235-8504, or email Executive Director Eric Day at [Eric.Day@mmrdc.org](mailto:Eric.Day@mmrdc.org).

## Energy and Environment

For numerous reasons, including climate change mitigation, environmental protection, resource conservation, economic benefits, public health, energy security, and community development, more of our communities are considering ways to meet their energy and development needs while also minimizing long-term negative impacts. In 2024, MMDC received both a Local Grant Development Assistance Grant and an Energy Efficiency and Conservation Block Grant from Minnesota's Department of Commerce. These grants were provided to help our region's communities connect with and benefit from the clean energy dollars made available via the federal Inflation Reduction Act (IRA) and Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act (IIJA).

Additional dollars were generously provided by the McKnight Foundation to help round out MMDC's energy- and environment-focused work, and help us ensure our region's communities, including our disadvantaged communities, are in position to benefit. MMDC can now provide no-cost grant assistance to any MMDC community pursuing a clean-energy grant supported by the IRA or IIJA. To learn more visit <https://mmrdc.org/energy-environment/>.

### Energy Efficiency and Conservation Strategies Grant - A Funding Opportunity

While larger communities typically have planning departments who are able to help plan for current and future environmental concerns, smaller communities often don't have the necessary capacity and in-house expertise to do the same. MMDC offers energy and environmental resilience planning services to help address this need. By working with MMDC's dedicated planning professionals, our communities can identify goals and action steps that will help them prepare for changing weather and extreme weather events, incorporate strategies to reduce carbon emissions, and even save their residents money by reducing utility costs.

To support this crucial planning, communities with less than 15,000 residents are encouraged to apply for MMDC's Energy Efficiency and Conservation Strategies grant. Learn more and view a recorded information session, visit <https://mmrdc.org/energy-environment-grants/>.

Additional funding, made possible by the McKnight Foundation, may be available to further reduce a community's planning cost. Any community interested in learning more should contact MMDC Regional Development & Grant Specialist Carol Lundgren at [Carol.Lundgren@mmrdc.org](mailto:Carol.Lundgren@mmrdc.org) or (320) 235-8504 for a complimentary, no obligation consultation.



## New MMDC Planning and Development Professionals

To ensure MMDC was positioned to deliver on our new commitments, in early 2024, MMDC created a new professional role – Regional Development & Grant Specialist. This position, which replaces a previous community planner generalist position, was filled by Carol Lundgren in January. Carol comes to MMDC with significant experience from previous energy, environmental, and customer service roles with the City of Eden Prairie, the Capital Region Watershed District, and private industry. She also holds a Bachelor of Environmental Planning from the University of Minnesota and is happy to apply her knowledge, skills and experience to help our communities identify and meet their energy and environment goals.



**Carol Lundgren**



**Blake Barnard**

Also new to MMDC's Planning and Development team is Transportation & Community Planner Blake Barnard. Barnard joined our organization in May, after his predecessor, Mike Nicholas, made an internal move to MMDC's Economic Development Department. While new to community planning, Barnard joins MMDC with a wealth of professional experience, including project management and business/entrepreneurship.

A large portion of Blake's time is dedicated to assisting and serving as an extension of the Minnesota Department of Transportation (MnDOT), via a long-standing service agreement. He joins planners from Southwest Regional Development Commission (SRDC) and Upper Minnesota Valley Regional Development Commission to support the MnDOT District 8 Area Transportation Partnership. This includes providing a healthy amount of technical assistance aimed at helping communities apply for various transportation-related grants, providing and conveying input into the Area Transportation Investment Plan, and taking part in various other activities aimed at improving transportation infrastructure and safety in the MMDC region.

Along with this MnDOT focused work, Blake is available to assist local communities with transportation-related projects, including Active Living and Safe Routes to Schools planning, trail planning, demonstration projects, and more. Communities with transportation planning needs should contact Blake Barnard at [Blake.Barnard@mmdc.org](mailto:Blake.Barnard@mmdc.org) or (320) 235-8504 to learn more.

### Cover Art:

The cover of this report features a photo taken by MMDC Transportation & Community Planner Blake Barnard, depicting a solar garden, east-southeast of Lake Lillian, MN, along Minnesota State Highway 7. This photo was selected as a 2024 National Association of Development Organizations (NADO) Photo Contest winner in the Sustaining Our Communities category.

Solar installations, like the one depicted, have popped up across the MMDC region over the course of the last 10 years, adding clean energy to our area's electrical grid. Much larger solar farms are now being considered for several rural locations within the borders of our four counties, where the transmission capacity is or soon will be sufficient. If these projects come to fruition, they will harness enough power to satisfy the electricity needs of many thousands of Minnesota homes.



## Mobility Management

In addition to funding received to support the planning and prioritization of Southwest Minnesota's transportation infrastructure projects, MMDC receives Minnesota Department of Transportation (MnDOT) funding to improve the coordination of transportation services and reduce transportation gaps for non-drivers. This includes many of our older neighbors as well as many with disabilities, youth, and others who choose not to use a car or are unable to drive for other reasons. Without transportation, these individuals are often left unable to work, attend school or vocational training, participate in community activities, attend worship services, socialize with their friends and family, or even get to important medical appointments. It's important to consider that, no matter how terrific a community amenity or service may be, it is rendered useless if the intended consumer is unable to gain access to it. Furthermore, transportation barriers limit nondrivers' abilities to contribute their own gifts and talents, to our communities' detriment. MMDC Mobility Manager Terry Smith's number one goal is to reduce barriers for the MMDC region's nondrivers. His work includes public outreach and education to ensure that nondrivers, and those who care for them, are aware of the transportation services that are available to them. Smith's role also includes working with our region's transportation providers, of all sorts, to ensure they have the resources and talent they need to maintain and increase service. Often, this includes working to attract prospective drivers, professional and volunteer alike, and connecting them with a transportation provider in their area.



Downtown Willmar Block Party Outreach

To learn more about MMDC's transportation-focused efforts, or to see how you might contribute to the solution by becoming a volunteer or professional driver, contact Terry Smith at [Terry.Smith@mmdc.org](mailto:Terry.Smith@mmdc.org), call him at (320) 235-8504 or visit <https://mmdc.org/ride-resources/>.



"First Day of School" by Blake Barnard

## National Recognition

In 2024, MMDC was honored with two Aliceann Wohlbruck Impact Awards from the National Association of Development Organizations (NADO), a Washington D.C.-based membership association of regional development organizations. Each year, NADO's Impact Awards Program offers an opportunity to celebrate the meaningful contributions member organizations, and their partners, make in the regions they serve.

### Fare-Free Pilot

The first of MMDC's two Impact Awards was received for the successful delivery of the Fare-Free Transit Pilot. With generous financial assistance from the Willmar Area Community Foundation (WACF), this pilot gave riders of Central Community Transit's (CCT) Willmar bus route the opportunity to ride without fare, provided they boarded and departed at a regular route stop.

While this pilot was originally intended to run only from July 1 to December 31, 2023, CCT was able to use WACF grant dollars to extend the fare-free opportunity through early June 2024.

Several thousand rides were provided over the course of the pilot, which improved mobility for the Willmar communities non-drivers, especially those of less financial means. However, the pilot also served to support transit efficiencies and capacity as some riders were financially motivated to walk to a bus stop rather than requesting curbside/door-to-door service. The project also helped MMDC and CCT identify opportunities to improve the route, and new stops have been added at important destinations (e.g., Kandiyohi County Food Shelf) since the pilot's commencement.



Willmar Fests Parade Outreach

### Fraud Awareness & Prevention



MMDC earned a second NADO Impact Award for the successful creation and delivery of a program developed to help individuals, particularly our region's aging community, protect themselves from "scammers, swindlers, cheats, crooks, and other no-good dirty, rotten people after their hard-earned money."

With the help of a grant from Southwest Initiative Foundation and with terrific partnership from local law enforcement professionals, MMDC assembled two series of in-person workshops to inform on the most recent tactics being used to steal information, and ultimately money, often from overseas locations. Attendees also learned how to protect themselves and left knowing how to take action in the event they or someone they know has been victimized.

The first workshop series was intended for older adults, who are often targeted and victimized by scammers. A second workshop series was developed specifically for those who care for older adults in a personal or professional capacity. To view a recorded fraud prevention presentation, made available in English, Somali, and Spanish languages, please visit <https://mmrdc.org/economic-development/fraud-awareness-training/>.



2024



<https://mmrdc.org/>



[/MidMinnesotaDevelopmentCommission](https://www.facebook.com/MidMinnesotaDevelopmentCommission)

1700 Technology Drive NE, Suite 300 Willmar, MN 56201

[www.mmrdc.org](http://www.mmrdc.org) - 320 235-8504

Photo by Ben Carlson