

2026 MMDC Comprehensive Economic Development Strategy: Results Summary

Executive Summary

The 2026 MMDC Comprehensive Economic Development Strategy (CEDS) survey collected responses from 246 residents, business leaders, elected officials, and stakeholders across Kandiyohi, McLeod, Meeker, and Renville Counties. Respondents represented all four counties relatively proportionally, with approximately 28–30% from Kandiyohi and McLeod Counties, 24% from Meeker County, and 20% from Renville County.

Overall, survey respondents expressed optimism about the region's quality of life, entrepreneurial climate, natural resources, parks, and community assets. At the same time, they identified significant concerns regarding workforce availability, housing affordability, workforce attraction and retention, childcare, downtown vitality, wages, business recruitment, and community collaboration.

Several issues consistently emerged regardless of respondents' political perspectives:

- Workforce shortages remain the region's most pressing economic challenge.
- Employers struggle to recruit and retain skilled workers.
- Respondents want stronger connections between schools, employers, and career pathways.
- Communities must become more attractive places to live, not simply places to work.
- Quality of life, including recreation, downtowns, healthcare, childcare, and amenities, is increasingly viewed as an economic development issue rather than solely a community development issue.
- Affordable housing has become one of the largest barriers to economic growth.
- Residents believe the region has strong assets but does not effectively market or leverage them.

The survey also reveals an underlying theme that should shape the region's CEDS: economic competitiveness will depend less on recruiting individual employers and more on creating communities where workers and businesses choose to locate.

Major Findings

1. Workforce is the dominant regional issue

Nearly every section of the survey ultimately circles back to workforce. Respondents overwhelmingly believe the region needs to:

- Retain young people
- Attract new residents
- Develop stronger workforce pipelines
- Increase housing
- Improve childcare
- Strengthen career pathways

Only 23% agreed that the region currently has enough workers to meet employer needs, while nearly two-thirds disagreed.

Likewise:

- 92% agreed more should be done to retain young people.
- 83% agreed the region should do more to attract new workers.

This is probably the clearest message in the entire survey.

2. Housing has become an economic development issue

Housing was, by far, the most common open-ended topic. Respondents repeatedly mentioned:

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- Lack of affordable housing
- Shortage of starter homes
- Lack of rental options
- Housing prices exceeding affordability, given wages
- Workforce unable to live where they work

Numerous respondents explicitly identified housing shortages as workforce recruitment and business expansion limiters. The survey suggests housing should become one of the highest priorities within the region's CEDS rather than remaining solely a local planning issue.

3. Wages and cost of living are increasingly misaligned

Many respondents noted:

- Wages have not kept pace with inflation
- Workers leave for higher-paying regions
- Employers struggle to compete

Comments frequently connected wages with:

- Housing
- Childcare
- Quality of life
- Recruitment

Rather than treating wages separately, the CEDS could frame this as **regional competitiveness**.

4. Childcare is now workforce infrastructure

Childcare appeared throughout the comments. Respondents repeatedly identified childcare shortages as limiting:

- Workforce participation
- Recruitment
- Retention
- Family attraction

Rather than viewing childcare as a social service, respondents increasingly framed it as workforce infrastructure.

5. Schools receive generally positive marks—but more career connections are desired

Respondents generally believe schools are improving. However, many comments requested:

- More career exploration
- More technical education
- Apprenticeships
- Internships
- Employer partnerships
- Trades education

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Several respondents specifically praised Ridgewater College while requesting expanded partnerships throughout the region.

6. The region is viewed as business-friendly—but not business-ready

Survey respondents generally agreed the region is a good place to start a business (62% agree/strongly agree). However, ratings declined regarding:

- Regulatory clarity
- Marketing
- Financing awareness
- Entrepreneurship support
- Outside investment

Many respondents simply answered "I don't know" to questions about business resources, suggesting an awareness gap rather than necessarily a lack of programs.

7. Marketing is viewed as a weakness

This theme appears repeatedly. Respondents believe the region does not adequately promote:

- Jobs
- Communities
- Tourism
- Quality of life
- Business opportunities
- Parks
- Downtowns
- Lakes
- Workforce opportunities

This appears consistently in both quantitative and qualitative responses.

8. Downtowns remain an area of concern

Many comments referenced:

- Vacant buildings
- Deteriorating commercial corridors
- Aging shopping districts
- Poor curb appeal
- Underused downtowns
- Declining retail

Willmar received particular attention, although respondents also mentioned opportunities in other communities.

9. Residents value quality of life

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Some of the highest-rated topics included:

- Parks
- Lakes
- Trails
- Public spaces
- Arts
- Healthcare
- Community amenities

Respondents generally believe these assets exist. However, many believe they could be promoted and maintained more effectively.

10. Community collaboration is viewed as moderate—not exceptional

Several comments referenced:

- Silos
- Overlapping organizations
- Lack of collaboration
- Same people leading everything
- Insufficient communication

This suggests an opportunity for MMDC to strengthen regional partnerships and cross-sector collaboration.

Themes that appeared most often in open-ended responses

Approximately in order of frequency:

1. Housing affordability
 2. Workforce shortages
 3. Childcare
 4. Wages
 5. Downtown revitalization
 6. Business recruitment
 7. Better marketing
 8. Tourism and recreation
 9. Career pathways
 10. Community collaboration
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Issues with polarized opinions

Some topics generated strongly opposing comments, including:

- Immigration
- Taxes
- State government
- Diversity and inclusion
- Environmental priorities

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- Data centers
- Cannabis
- Public spending

Rather than treating these as consensus findings, the CEDS should acknowledge them as areas where opinions differ significantly. The stronger consensus lies in the practical concerns that cut across viewpoints: housing, workforce, childcare, wages, downtown vitality, and economic opportunity.

Potential Strategic Directions for the CEDS

Based on the survey, the economic development strategy could be organized around six major goals:

- 1. Build and Retain the Workforce**
 - Youth retention
 - Talent attraction
 - Employer partnerships
 - Career pathways
- 2. Expand Housing and Community Infrastructure**
 - Workforce housing
 - Childcare
 - Broadband
 - Transportation
 - Healthcare access
- 3. Strengthen Business Growth and Entrepreneurship**
 - Small business support
 - Business succession
 - Access to capital
 - Business recruitment
 - Business expansion
- 4. Invest in Vibrant Communities**
 - Downtown redevelopment
 - Tourism
 - Arts and culture
 - Public spaces
 - Recreation
- 5. Promote Regional Competitiveness**
 - Regional branding
 - Talent marketing
 - Business marketing
 - Site readiness
 - Industry diversification
- 6. Strengthen Regional Collaboration**
 - Cross-sector partnerships

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- Leadership development
- Shared economic development initiatives
- Regional project implementation

Overall assessment

From a planning perspective, this is a strong survey because the quantitative results and open-ended comments reinforce one another. While respondents disagree on the causes of some challenges, they largely agree on the challenges themselves. That gives the CEDS a clear evidence base for focusing on workforce development, housing, quality of place, business support, and regional collaboration as the core pillars of the next five-year strategy.