

JUL/AUG 2023

# MINNESOTA CITIES

A PUBLICATION OF THE **LEAGUE** of **MINNESOTA CITIES**

## ***League Leaders***

The outgoing president, past president, and other departing Board members reflect on their experiences. PAGE 12

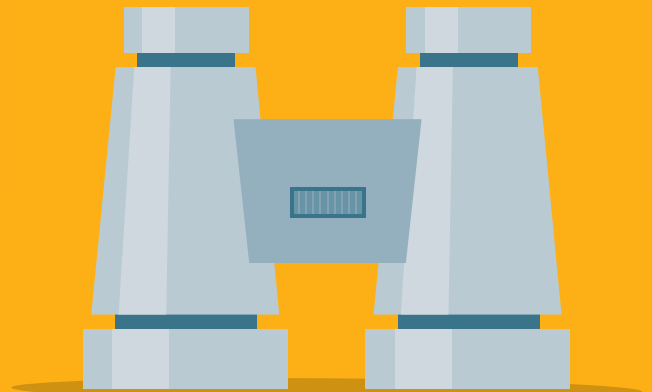
## ***ROCORI Trail Project***

Rockville, Cold Spring, and Richmond work together to connect cities. PAGE 30



## Keep An Eye on the Economy DURING THE City Budget Planning Process

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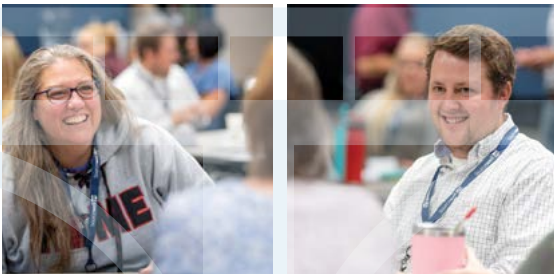
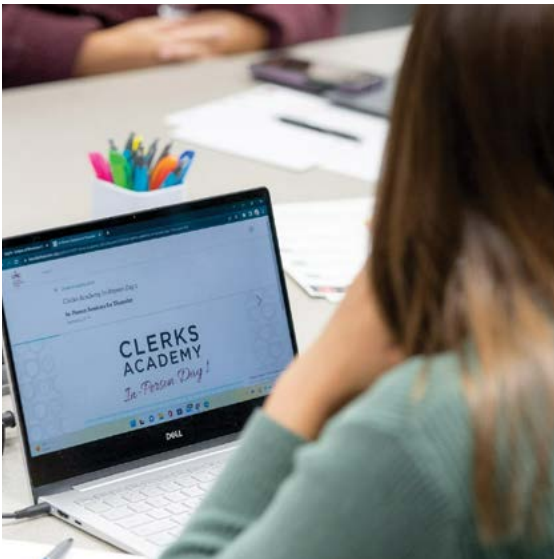
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Check out *Minnesota Cities* online at [mncities.org](http://mncities.org).

# MINNESOTA CITIES

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# Understanding Your 'Why'

BY LUKE FISCHER

When former League of Minnesota Cities Executive Director Dave Unmacht announced he'd be retiring, a search was conducted to recruit his replacement. I applied for the position and after being selected by the LMC Board, I began serving Minnesota cities as the League's executive director on May 22.

As you might expect, I spent a lot of time preparing for the search that landed me in this new role. My wife, Rachael, also works outside the home and both she and I try to not let office-talk dominate the conversation at the family dinner table. It's usually more fun to hear what our kids, Ellie (9 years old) and John (5 years old), are up to on any given day.

We thought we were doing a pretty good job focusing on our family, but the week of the final interview Ellie asked me why we were talking about work all the time. Rachael leaned into it and asked the kids what they think dad does at work every day. Let me tell you, if you've got young ones this can be an illuminating question.

Ellie, a third grader, kind of rolled her eyes and said, "That's easy — dad helps people who work in cities." My life's work in just nine words.

John, the budding socialite, confidently announced, "No, dad goes to cities, talks to people, and takes pictures next to things." Hilarious and accurate.

Through the executive director search process, I was often asked the "Why do you want this job?" question. My answer was consistent all the way through. I love the people that represent local government in our state and I want to do everything I can to help support them. I believe deep in my core that city officials can improve peoples' lives through their service. That's the Ellie answer to the question.

The follow-up question was always, "And how are you going to do that?" Though the specifics were tailored by audience, the root of my response was always to show up, listen, align, and help people feel good about their service. It's



Through the executive director search process, I was often asked the "Why do you want this job?" question. My answer was consistent all the way through. **I love the people that represent local government in our state and I want to do everything I can to help support them. I believe deep in my core that city officials can improve peoples' lives through their service.** —LUKE FISCHER

motivating to me to see firsthand the new park that was built, visit a renovated public works facility, or check out a downtown improvement district. So much of city service is tangible — you can actually see the difference you're making! That's the John answer to the question.

As I settle into this new role, it's important for you to know that I've got clarity around my "why" and the work that we have ahead of us as an organization. The League isn't a building in St. Paul, this magazine, or the *Handbook for Minnesota Cities*. It starts with you — our members — and includes our staff, Board, and key partners. We're a collection of people who care deeply about improving our own cities and communities across the state.

Through the relationships League staff have developed, we know you have a lot on your plate. And our resources need to be focused on the help we give so you can get what you need and get on with your day. You can already see strides that we're making in more tailored resources in the Small City Center ([lmc.org/smallcity](http://lmc.org/smallcity)), which breaks down common inquiries into an easy-to-understand question-and-answer format.

It's also important for you to know how much I value the work you do and going to your city to see the things that make your community unique. Over the course of the past five years as the League's dep-

uty director, I've visited with city officials and heard what keeps you awake at night and what gives you hope for the future. Your stories and experiences reflect our shared values — that local government can make a positive impact for people, where you live matters, and the work of cities is a team sport.

Through conversations, city leaders have shared that they're ready for a big project, but struggle to find the resources to make these important investments. To help address this concern, the League rolled out the Grant Navigator program, which makes up to \$5,000 available to cities to offset the cost of hiring a grant writer for a city project.

Reflecting back on my kids' assessment of what dad does every day, I'm proud that they can see the value and ethic behind my work. To me, this opportunity to serve as executive director is a vocational calling, an opportunity that aligns with the core of who I am. To see my kids recognize and describe that is a special thing.

So, tonight when you head home, ask your family why you're a mayor or a council member or fire chief or city clerk. While the response might surprise you, I've got a feeling they see the "real" you and can tell you exactly what you already know. ☺

Luke Fischer is executive director of the League of Minnesota Cities. Contact: [lfischer@lmc.org](mailto:lfischer@lmc.org) or (651) 281-1279.



## Check Out LMC’s Budget Guide Before You Set Your City Budget

By this point in the year, most cities have discussed priorities and are now putting final touches on their 2024 budgets. Before your city adopts its next levy, it is important to learn about any new laws that may impact your city’s budget.

The League of Minnesota Cities’ (LMC) *Budget Guide for Cities* is a great place to learn about new state and federal laws that significantly affect city budget decisions, including annual financial figures for minimum wage, cost-of-living adjustments, local government aid (LGA), PERA and payroll withholding updates, and more. This guide is updated annually, shortly after the close of the legislative session, and can be found at [lmc.org/budgetguide](http://lmc.org/budgetguide).

## GreenStep Cities Program Captures the Attention of Minnesota Schools



### Minnesota GreenStep Schools

The popular Minnesota GreenStep Cities program, now nearly 150 members strong, has recently inspired the creation of a similar program designed for public and private K-12 schools in the state. Like GreenStep Cities, GreenStep Schools is a free and voluntary best practices-driven program.

Differences between the two programs include the specific best practice categories and actions recommended. The menu of best practices options for GreenStep Schools applies to the education sector and its unique opportunities, including environmental studies, and engaging students in learning about and improving their schools and communities.

The primary goals of GreenStep Schools are reduction of environmental impacts and achievement of cost savings in buildings and grounds; improvement of the health and well-being of students, staff, and community; and to provide effective environmental and sustainability education, linking to STEM (science, technology, engineering, and mathematics) careers. GreenStep Cities and GreenStep Schools are potentially compatible programs and encourage city-school collaborations when possible.

The GreenStep Schools pilot version launched in 2020 and has gained interest across the state. By the end of last year, contacts at 15 school districts, 36 schools, and 44 resource organizations throughout Minnesota have expressed interest in the pilot program. If your city’s schools or local school district is interested in learning more about the Minnesota GreenStep Schools program, they should contact Jonee Kulman Brigham at [kulma002@umn.edu](mailto:kulma002@umn.edu) or visit [www.mngreenstepschools.org](http://www.mngreenstepschools.org).

## New Salary & Benefits Survey Launching in 2023



Since fall of 2022, the League and its partners, Metro Cities and the Association of Minnesota Counties, have been working to find a new vendor for the Local Government Salary & Benefits Survey. After a very thorough request for proposals process, the partners unanimously agreed to work with Arthur J. Gallagher for the 2023 salary and benefits survey, which will launch this summer.

The survey tool allows you to compare the salaries and benefits of your staff to those of other organizations throughout Minnesota. The new survey will not only be able to provide data cuts including average salary data, but there will be an option to also offer incumbent data for city staff who prefer to work with raw data for compensation analysis. LMC staff will reach out to city staff responsible for completing the survey with more information about the launch of the new tool.

# Long-Time LMC Lobbyist Gary Carlson Enters Retirement

If you needed an organized log of every bill’s status in the busiest legislative session in state history, Gary Carlson had you covered.

When LMC staff wanted to take a guided tour of the state Capitol and learn the history of every nook and cranny within the building, Carlson made time.

If a reporter needed a briefing on a historic legislative topic — no matter how obscure — Carlson welcomed their inquiry.

If Minnesota cities felt unaccounted for at the Legislature, Carlson was there to be a dedicated, nonpartisan advocate.

Carlson, the long-time LMC intergovernmental relations (IGR) director, announced his retirement in December 2022 and concluded his final legislative session as a part-time IGR adviser in June. Even though Carlson won’t be around the League building or the Capitol (we’ll see if he can stay away), his impact on local government and LMC will be felt for many years.

A few of Carlson’s achievements during his 32 years with the League include:

- ▶ Reworking the local government aid formula multiple times throughout his career.
- ▶ Securing funding to enhance city services.
- ▶ Securing and enhancing pension finances and policies for the retirement security of thou-

sands of public employees throughout the state.

- ▶ Securing sales tax exemptions for local governments.
- ▶ Riding his bike to work rain or shine.
- ▶ Being a go-to human encyclopedia on Minnesota-related topics.
- ▶ Leading a stalwart IGR team that will continue to protect cities’ needs after Carlson’s retirement.
- ▶ Creating a reputation of resilience, dedication, and reliability for the League of Minnesota Cities at the Capitol.



## LMC LEARNING & EVENTS

### 2023 Clerks Academy

Sept. 7-8 — St. Paul

Sept. 14-15 — Staples

### 2023 Fall Safety and Loss Control Workshops: Cybersecurity

- Oct. 10 — Sleepy Eye
- Oct. 11 — Spicer
- Oct. 31 — Fergus Falls

### Training Safety Officer (TSO) Program — Fire-Focused

Oct. 10 — Sleepy Eye

Oct. 11 — Spicer

### Peer Support Training

Sept. 26-27 — Duluth

Nov. 1-2 — Brainerd

Nov. 29-30 — New Ulm

### ON THE WEB

Learn more about these and other events at [lmc.org/events](https://lmc.org/events).



The National League of Cities (NLC) 2023 City Summit is happening Nov. 15-18 in Atlanta, Georgia. This is an event where city staff and elected officials learn about the issues affecting local government and expand their professional network. At City Summit 2023, NLC will showcase the impact of local leadership, share best practices, and demonstrate bold actions that these leaders are taking on behalf of their residents. During this national event, you’ll connect with experts as well as your peers from across the country, and network with thought leaders from the public and private sectors. Learn more and register at [citysummit.nlc.org](https://citysummit.nlc.org).



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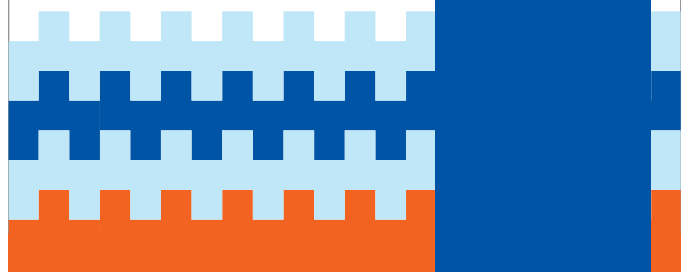
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# What Benefits Has Your City Seen From the Regulation of Short-Term Rentals?



## HOPE FAIRCHILD

ADMINISTRATOR, CLERK-TREASURER  
WALKER (966)

### What prompted the adoption of a short-term rental ordinance in your city?

Walker's short-term rental ordinance was adopted in 2016. As a tourist town situated on the shores of Leech Lake, we are surrounded by many resorts and hotels. The City of Walker was an obvious choice for those looking to start a short-term rental business. The city did not want to hinder business opportunities in the community, but it was important for us to make sure that neighbors of these properties were able to continue to use their properties without nuisance such as higher levels of noise, and an increased need for parking and sanitation facilities.

Each short-term rental must apply for an interim use permit. The applicant must reapply for the permit every two years and the permit is not transferrable to a new owner. To receive a vacation/private home rental permit, the applicant must obtain the appropriate lodging license from the Minnesota Department of Health and also go through an inspection by Walker's building official. The owner must provide proof of liability insurance in the amount of \$1 million. Walker's ordinances also contain house rules and maintenance standards including parking.

### Has it been an issue for city staff since the change?

The city has a three strikes policy regarding substantiated complaints against the property. All complaints are taken seriously and are considered when reviewing a renewal application. Permitting short-term rentals this way does create more work for staff, but we feel that it is worth it to keep residents and guests safe. Residents also appreciate having a way to submit complaints on short-term rental properties that are not following the rules.

The City Council amended vacation/private home rentals at the end of 2022 to include a cap of 21 short-term rentals allowed in city limits. This equates to 5% of residential housing units in Walker. The ordinance amendment was passed due to the steady increase of rentals and the continued lack of long-term housing in our community.

Staff members continue to research what other communities are doing to regulate short-term/vacation rentals. We use sites such as Airbnb and Vrbo to search for unlicensed rentals. We are looking to add language to the ordinance that discourages unlicensed rentals by charging a daily fine.

## BEN GOZOLA

PLANNING DIRECTOR  
NEW BRIGHTON (23,454)

### What prompted the adoption of a short-term rental ordinance in your city?

The City of New Brighton was receiving a significant number of calls regarding events being held at one short-term rental property. Recurring issues were significant enough (gun shots, late night parties, noise, etc.) to warrant City Council action to ensure the city had leverage to end any short-term rental that wasn't being properly managed.

### What requirements are there for residents who want to use a property for short-term rental?

The city prefers taking a lighter-touch approach to new land use regulations when appropriate, so landowners wishing to rent out their home as a short-term rental must simply secure an inexpensive permit from the city. The permit authorizes the desired use, but comes with conditions on proper management and lays out specific consequences for violations.

### Has it been an issue for city staff since the change?

The problem property secured the required permit and has not been a problem since. In general, the city achieved the desired win-win outcome: residents appreciate that the city has leverage to control short-term rentals when problems arise, and permit holders appreciate that the application process is simple and inexpensive.

### What tips would you give other city leaders who may be interested in adopting a short-term rental ordinance?

A simple and inexpensive permitting approach can be just as effective as a complicated and expensive licensing and inspection process. The key is establishing the legal authority to end short-term rental uses when management problems arise.

### What else can you share with our readers?

Educate your residents about the new program through your normal channels (newsletters, social media, etc.), but also be prepared to have a staff member periodically peruse common short-term rental sites such as Airbnb, Vrbo, and Trivago to see if new units are being made available in your city. As new rentals arise, proactively reach out to those landowners to educate them on your permitting or licensing process. 📧





# Keep An Eye on the Economy DURING THE City Budget Planning Process

BY DEBORAH LYNN BLUMBERG

**M**innesota's economy, much like the U.S. economy, has made great strides in recovering from the impacts of COVID-19. Both have returned to pre-pandemic paths of growth, jobs markets have improved, and wages are up. But the speedy recovery just three years after the pandemic began also presents significant risks.

The continued increasing prices of goods and services has set the U.S. Federal Reserve on a persistent mission to cool growth and bring prices down by raising interest rates. The U.S. economy, however, has resisted, holding strong despite 10 consecutive rate hikes from the Fed. Many economists, however, see the U.S. economy finally relenting this year, and they're forecasting a recession later in 2023.

In this challenging, unpredictable environment — as Minnesota cities embark

on their budget planning process — officials need to plan for a potential downturn and a difficult climate of shrinking consumer and business spending.

“These are uncertain economic times, and cities have to be more exacting,” says Mark Ruff, finance director at the League of Minnesota Cities. “Contingency planning becomes that much more important.”

## **Minnesota's economic climate**

According to Minneapolis Federal Reserve Regional Outreach Director Ron Wirtz, Minnesota reflects the national economy well in terms of both trends and the state's overall mix of industries. Still, while economic growth in Minnesota has vastly improved since the worst of the pandemic, it has tended to lag the overall U.S. recovery in both its gross domestic product (GDP) and employment market.

For example, Minnesota's GDP rose 1.3% in the fourth quarter of 2022 versus 2.6% for the U.S., according to the Bureau of Economic Analysis. The most recent data show the U.S. economy grew at a 1.1% rate in the first quarter of 2023. In Minnesota, the corresponding data have yet to be released, though signs suggest Minnesota saw flat or slight growth.

Minnesota's consumer spending has not disappointed, however. “Generally speaking, we've seen very strong consumer spending in Minnesota,” says Wirtz. The most recent figures show Minnesota personal consumption expenditures at some \$277 billion in 2021, up from around \$252 billion in 2020.

Minnesota's employment market is much improved, having returned to its pre-pandemic level. From the depths of the pandemic low, job growth has been steady, Wirtz says. In January 2019,

the state's employed population was at 2,976,000. By February 2023, it rose to 2,983,000.

"We're still seeing strong job postings, and that's a good sign," says Wirtz. "It's a very strong signal for the market. To be out in the market looking for full-time workers is a signal that employers see some optimism in the future."

Wirtz gives frequent talks to business audiences, and he takes the opportunity to survey attendees on a variety of metrics, including labor demand. "Overall, businesses consistently say their businesses are hiring in some capacity," he said.

The Minneapolis Fed's formal survey work consistently shows healthy labor demand from businesses. In a mid-April survey of more than 250 construction companies, a majority of whom were from Minnesota, almost half of respondents said their companies were hoping to add to their total headcount over the coming six months. This, despite the fact respondents also reported that the sector was seeing some signs of slowing.

"Their overall sentiment for hiring is quite positive," Wirtz says. "Employ-

ment markets are still healthy and that's a great sign. Whether that continues depends on inflation, higher interest rates, and all the other things businesses are still dealing with."

That includes potential economic weakness spurred by the banking sector, following significant banking failures like that of Silicon Valley Bank and Signature Bank.

One trend to keep an eye on, Wirtz adds, that's prevalent nationally and in Minnesota, are overall lower rates of labor force participation. It's a development that's driven in part by retiring baby boomers and lower birth rates, with younger generations tending to have fewer children, leading to a declining population of working age people.

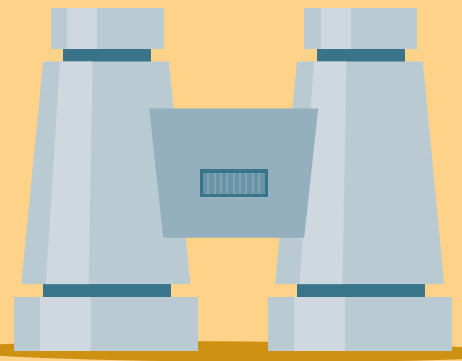
"Minnesota has always had a higher rate of labor force participation," says Wirtz, "but it's been in decline." Recent data show U.S. labor force participation at 62.6% in March 2023, while Minnesota's participation was at 68%. That's down, however, from a recent high of 72% in June 2020 and nearly 76% in spring 2001.

### How an economic downturn could impact city budgets

For Minnesota cities, it's important to remember economic impacts tend to lag for local governments, Ruff says. So, in terms of budgeting for 2024, city officials should remember that even if a slowdown does hit, its effects — including potential real estate market weakness — likely will not materialize until a few years later.

With real estate, "it's often less about the fact that values are going down than it is about which types of property are going down most dramatically," adds Ruff. Is it commercial, owner-occupied homes, or residential rental? Cities should talk with their assessors to learn about changes in their community's values, and run scenarios about likely tax impacts for each group months ahead of setting the 2024 or 2025 budgets. Also talk to the county and the school district to see what their plans are for their tax levy. Coordinating tax levy changes and messaging with other jurisdictions can help ease overall tax burdens.

Minnesota cities in recent years have been fortunate to experience consistent



**"You have to be thinking – can I live without adding a new staff member, buying that new fire truck next year, or getting the new street sweeper? Cities need to agree internally ahead of time on things they're OK cutting."**

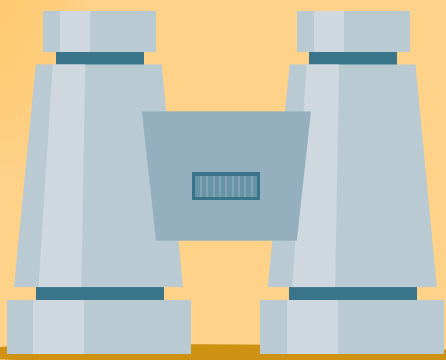
**Mark Ruff**, finance director  
League of Minnesota Cities

construction of single-family homes and apartments, which has meant building permit revenues have been consistent too, Ruff says. But in the current economic climate, "building permit revenues could dry up in a hurry and strain city budgets if corresponding expenses can't be ratcheted back quickly."

"We've had a long period of time with steady growth," adds Ruff, "and that could lull people to sleep a bit." It shouldn't. Officials need to strategize now about how they'd respond to a pull-back in building permits, sales taxes, fees, or other forms of revenue more immediately tied to changing economic conditions. Being cautious about forecasting these revenues in 2024 is a good hedge given today's uncertainty.

Similarly, officials should not rely on increased investment income due to rising interest rates to fill big budget gaps. That's risky, says Ruff, because if a recession comes, rates could fall — maybe even sharply.

*(continued on page 10)*



**"Employment markets are still healthy and that's a great sign. Whether that continues depends on inflation, higher interest rates, and all the other things businesses are still dealing with."**

**Ron Wirtz**, regional outreach director  
Minneapolis Federal Reserve

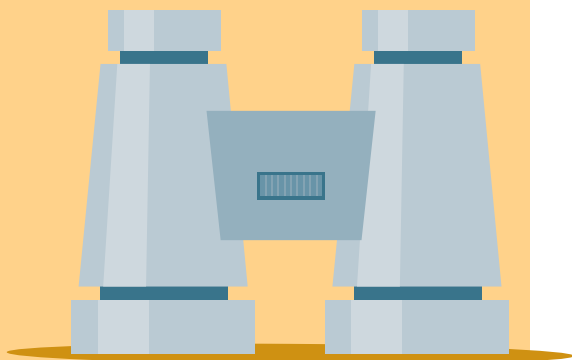
More broadly, city officials need to have contingency plans to identify where they can cut if these revenues unexpectedly drop mid-year, he says.

“You have to be thinking — can I live without adding a new staff member, buying that new fire truck next year, or getting the new street sweeper? Cities need to agree internally ahead of time on things they’re OK cutting.”

### Wages remain high, job market strong

Considering the still strong jobs market in Minnesota, Ruff says cities should be careful when looking at wages as a potential area in which to cut back. “I think people will continue to demand higher levels of compensation,” he says, “and I wouldn’t necessarily count on lower wage increases as being a given if a recession hits.”

Filling open city positions, in particular, could continue to be a challenge, adds Lisa Sova, assistant finance director with the League. “It’s a very challenging market right now as far as attracting and retaining employees because there are so many opportunities,” she says. Cities are struggling to fill open positions more



**“I think people will continue to demand higher levels of compensation, and I wouldn’t necessarily count on lower wage increases as being a given if a recession hits.”**

**Mark Ruff**, finance director  
League of Minnesota Cities

# Three Buckets for City Budget Planning

During times of fiscal stress, it’s critical to step back and think about how city budget expenditures are prioritized, says Mark Ruff, finance director at the League of Minnesota Cities. “A budget is, concurrently, a legal document, a statement of values, and a risk assessment document,” he says. Cities should consider all three lenses.

## 1) A legal document.

- Officials should ask themselves:
- What services are we mandated to provide by the state?
  - What services must we provide based on agreements with public or private entities and also labor agreements?
  - For those services, what are the minimum levels we need to provide?
  - What services could others do better or more efficiently?

In one recent real life example, the mayor of Morris made the tough call to disband the local police department and contract services with the county instead.

“Service levels can be adjusted,” says Ruff. “Budget time is a good opportunity to focus on one or two services where a city may want to increase or decrease service levels.”

## 2) A values document.

A budget is an opportunity to consider, rethink, and refine your community’s values, purpose, and mission and the impact on residents’ daily lives. Questions to ask include:

- How does a budget provide for retaining and supporting city employees?
- How does our budget hold up from an equity perspective?

In a real-world example, the City of Richfield recently adjusted its snow emergency declarations to reduce the financial burden of towing on residents. Minneapolis and St. Paul have also provided space in public parking lots at no or reduced costs for residents during snow emergencies. Other cities look at expenditures from a safety lens — what’s being done to enhance pedestrian and bike safety — or based on how they’re supporting their school system and local community college or businesses.

“No city can do it all,” Ruff says, “so change in fiscal priorities based upon the city’s values is important.”

## 3) A risk document.

When cities look at their budget from a risk perspective, they consider how good they are at estimating or forecasting what’s to come.

Budgeting for risk involves thinking about how much contingency a city has — either in the budget, in cash balances, or in the ability to not spend certain dollars if the economy changes suddenly.

The Government Finance Officers Association (GFOA) has an online tool that can help with quantifying this risk, says Ruff. It can be accessed at [bit.ly/budgetrisk](https://bit.ly/budgetrisk).



than they have in the past, and that may not let up any time soon.

To avoid overburdening current staff, cities “need to look at delivering services that residents expect in different manners,” says Sova. This might include using technology to a higher degree than cities have in the past, streamlining services, looking for synergies to reduce procedures, and doing more with less.

### Planning projects and expenses during unpredictable times

Cities also have to weigh the costs and benefits of continuing with planned capital improvement projects if a recession hits, Ruff says. He cautions, however, against a knee-jerk reaction to halt all projects amid a slowdown.

“Just because there’s a recession, that doesn’t mean there should be no investment whatsoever,” he says. Instead, evaluate situations on a case-by-case basis and get creative. For example, instead of paying cash to complete a major construction project, borrow money and pay off the bond over the next three years.

Don’t try to time the market, though, he says, by waiting for a recession to

come before embarking on a project because you think building and borrowing costs will fall. “We can’t assume construction costs will be cheaper in two years,” he says. “Start your project or borrow the money you need when you and your community are ready for it.”

Sova says cities that still have American Rescue Plan Act relief funds to spend should be conscious of upcoming spend deadlines. Any project to which cities want to apply funds needs to be underway by year-end 2024.

Another helpful exercise for cities, adds Ruff, is to think about where a city may be purchasing its goods or services. Which types of expenditures are more predictable, based on the item — computers, police cars, for example — and how do you procure the items? What’s your relationship with the vendor?

“This can be a different way of prioritizing your spending,” Ruff says. “Relationships and history still matter when it comes to predictability. When you know your budgeted cost is likely to be the same as the actual cost, you may prioritize this expenditure over another item that could be 50% higher when the bids

come in. This gives you time to explore your options.” What’s more, a better way to solve a budget shortfall is to adjust several line items as opposed to one or two. “That requires work ahead of time,” says Ruff.

### Grants can help fill funding gaps

Finally, grants and similar types of funding will matter more in the coming year for cities — especially since most pandemic-related funding has ended.

The League’s Grant Navigator helps cities that find the grant search and application process to be overwhelming, or that lack staff to research, prepare, and submit an application. The pilot program has allocated \$500,000 to assist cities of all sizes in hiring grant writers to help find and write grants for projects. Program applications are reviewed on a rolling basis. “This is a good time to be looking at grants,” Ruff says.

Adds Sova, “Cities always try to find grant money, but it’s time consuming. Now, more than ever, it’s worth putting that effort in to bridge the gaps.” **MC**

Deborah Lynn Blumberg is a freelance writer.

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# REFLECTING ON MORE THAN 11 YEARS OF LEAGUE SERVICE

BY RON JOHNSON

**M**y involvement with the League of Minnesota Cities (LMC) Board of Directors spans more than 11 years, beginning in 2012. My original term ran three years, through 2015, but my involvement didn't end then.

## Back to the Board

After leaving the LMC Board of Directors, I became active in the leadership of the Coalition of Greater Minnesota Cities (CGMC) and eventually became the CGMC president in 2018.

In 2019, I found myself back on the LMC Board as an affiliate member for one year representing the CGMC as past president. It was during

that year when I was approached to consider running for second vice president of the LMC Board.

Shortly thereafter, everything changed due to the pandemic. Our meetings were held remotely and the LMC 2020 Annual Conference was canceled.

My interview for the second vice president position was held remotely, but that didn't diminish the excitement of being elected to the position.

I served my entire year as second vice president remotely, but by the time I had moved

*From the moment D. Love turned the presidency over to me in June 2022, to June 2023 when I passed the gavel to First Vice President Jenny Max, my year as president of the League of Minnesota Cities has been the biggest highlight of my 23 years serving on the Bemidji City Council. Did I LOVE my year as president? You might say, I enjoyed it to the MAX.*

into the first vice president position, we were back to meeting in person.

I became the LMC president in June 2022 at the LMC Annual Conference in Duluth. This was the first time the conference had been held in person since 2019 because of the pandemic.

In September, the Board gathered in Bemidji for a retreat. It was a great opportunity for the new members of the Board to get acquainted, set goals, and for me to show off my hometown. Since Bemidji is "the first city on the Mississippi," a highlight of the retreat was a visit to Itasca State Park and the source of the Mississippi River.

## Representing the League

On Sept. 11, 2022, then LMC Board First Vice President Jenny Max and I had the privilege of representing the League at the Minnesota Twins Armed Forces Appreciation Game at Target Field. As a 10-year veteran of the Army National Guard, I am extremely proud that the League has been recognized for its outstanding support of the National Guard and Reserves. I know firsthand how important that is to employees who are fulfilling their military obligation while working full time.



The fall was very busy as LMC Past President D. Love, First Vice President Jenny Max, Second Vice President Justin Miller, and I each teamed up with LMC staff to visit several cities across the state. These visits continue to be an extremely effective way to build relationships with our member cities and learn about their needs and concerns.

In November, I had the opportunity to represent the League at the National League of Cities Summit in Kansas City. It was a great experience to be able to meet and discuss issues with city leaders from other states.

Opportunities to represent the League continued into the new year, and in February and March, I had the honor of giving opening remarks and participating in a session panel at three LMC Elected Leaders Institutes that took place in Mankato, Plymouth, and Alexandria.

March was also a busy month for connecting with lawmakers at both the state and federal level. On March 9, I had the honor of welcoming more than 200 attendees representing over 100 cities to St. Paul for “City Day on the Hill.” The event is an annual opportunity for local leaders to advocate for their cities, receive updates on the League’s key priorities, and to hear from state policymakers.

Also in March, I had the opportunity to travel to Washington, D.C., for the National League of Cities Congressional City Conference. It was an honor to lead a Minnesota delegation in meetings with our Minnesota members of Congress. A tour of the White House was a special highlight.

**LMC executive director search**


In January, Executive Director Dave Unmacht announced that he would be retiring in May 2022, and I was charged to lead the Board in the search process to find our next director. I’d been involved in the process once before. In 2015 I was on the Board that selected Dave for the role, following the retirement of longtime Executive Director Jim Miller. Now, I was leading the Board that would select Dave’s successor.

The process continued into April and May, which proved to be extremely busy months. In addition to the traditional year-end work, much time was spent conducting a nationwide search to find the next director.

The decision was made May 3, when the LMC Board named Luke Fischer, who has served as LMC deputy director since 2017, as the League’s new executive director. I am happy for Luke and excited for the future of the League. I look forward to working with him as I complete my final year on the LMC Board serving as past president.

**Final reflections**

From the moment D. Love turned the presidency over to me in June 2022, to June 2023 when I passed the gavel to First Vice President Jenny Max, my year as president of the League of Minnesota Cities has been the biggest highlight of my 23 years serving on the Bemidji City Council.

Did I LOVE my year as president? You might say, I enjoyed it to the MAX. 


Ron Johnson is LMC past president and a Bemidji City Council member.



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PHOTO BY MATT WALES

# D. LOVE: ‘Stronger Together’ Is His Legacy to Cities

BY ANDREW TELLIJOHAN

**D.** Love joined the League of Minnesota Cities Insurance Trust (LMCIT) Board of Trustees 12 years ago. When he was elected to serve on the League of Minnesota Cities (LMC) Board of Directors eight years later, he worked to ensure both organizations maintained a tight relationship and communicated regularly.

In 2021, he was elected as the first Black LMC Board president. He was sworn in virtually due to the COVID pandemic, yet participated in countless in-person meetings between LMC officials and city leaders around the state during a topsy-turvy year in which pandemic fears retreated a bit, then returned.

He has worked tirelessly during his tenure, colleagues say, to find more ways the League can serve its member cities and to ensure the strength of bond between the League and LMCIT.

## People remember

Love — who has been involved with Centerville city government since 2002, was elected to the City Council in 2009, and became mayor in 2020 — will leave the LMC Board this year to focus on those duties as well as his job at State Farm and his family, which recently grew to include his granddaughter, Isabelle.

“He’s really genuine. He’s caring. He’s likeable. And he’s renowned for his pens,” says David Unmacht, LMC’s former executive director. “He carries them with him wherever he goes. He gives them out to the waiter, the cab driver, to state legislators and to members of Congress, to police officers. He’s always got a pocket full of pens.”

Every item Love hands out is adorned with the words “Stronger Together,” a belief he espouses in speeches, meetings, and other interactions. And passing out items bearing that slogan gives people a way to remember their interaction, even if they don’t recall every detail.

It’s part of a philosophy Love takes from the works of Maya Angelou, who said that people remember how you made them feel.

“If you’re able to give someone an item that helps them conjure up the interaction, it creates a lasting memory,” he says. “They may not remember what you did or said, but they will remember how they felt when they interacted with you.”

## No agenda

While he had some issues on which he wanted to focus, Love joined the League Board without a specific agenda. He had a desire to serve and be a part of supporting cities around the state.

“I want to approach things to figure out what’s the best way to collaborate and lead through change,” he says.

Love has focused on how the League can better serve its members. One example is an effort to make several internal-facing LMC departments, like finance and technology, more “forward facing” by making those employees’ expertise available for cities to utilize. Another example, he says, is the Grant Navigator, a pilot project through which cities can apply for funding that will help them offset the cost of finding and writing grant applications.

His tenure also overlapped with the aftermath of the death of George Floyd. Love helped to lead important conversations about diversity, equity, and inclusion in the organization — recognizing that cities across the state strive to support residents that have unique needs related to race, gender, age, and economic status. At the same time, he balanced that with a concern and respect for law enforcement and other public safety officials.

He’ll be remembered, says LMCIT Administrator Dan Greensweig, for his compassionate nature when tackling mental health and wellness among public safety workers.

The Insurance Trust now has a retired law enforcement officer working solely on public safety mental health issues, specifically looking at alleviating mental health issues related to on-the-job trauma.

“It’s something he cares about on a personal level, as well as a professional one,” Greensweig says. “He thinks it’s the right thing for us to do as an organization in addition to keeping it financially sustainable.”

## Priorities in order

Unmacht appreciates the work Love did on behalf of LMC, but to a greater extent he admires the way Love carries himself beyond his work.

“There’s a man who has his values in order,” Unmacht says. “He’s a man of faith. He’s a man of family. He’s a man of personal relationships. He cares deeply about the League, and he is very passionate about the work of the League and the Trust.”

His passion and ability to relate to people is impressive, but Unmacht says his positivity and ability to balance is even more so. That was never more visible than in the early days of his presidency when his 21-year-old son suffered a heart attack.

“He’s had a lot of stress and he’s carried all that through with grace and humbleness,” Unmacht says.

Love himself is looking forward to continuing his work in Centerville and to becoming a grandfather for the first time. He admits, however, that it’ll be emotional for him to step away from the Board.

“It’s been one of the most influential and fulfilling things in my life,” he says. “It’s been just incredible, an incredible part of my political career that is something I will be able to talk about and take with me for the rest of my life.”

Andrew Tellijohn is a freelance writer.



# THE LEAGUE THANKS OUTGOING BOARD MEMBERS

The following members of the League of Minnesota Cities (LMC) Board of Directors recently completed their Board terms. The League thanks them for their service!

PHOTO BY MATT WALES



**Craig Clark**

CITY ADMINISTRATOR, CITY OF AUSTIN

I'm happy to join my colleagues who have expressed the utmost respect for the League of Minnesota Cities. I have truly valued my time serving as a Board member. As we each work to make our individual cities stronger, it is equally important for us to collectively gather to ensure our combined

interests are reflected in our actions before the Legislature, and in ways where we are able to learn from one another. The League is where we continue to realize we are greater than the sum of our individual parts by working together. To actively join so many others in this endeavor is among my proudest accomplishments.

PHOTO BY MATT WALES



**Jeff Pilon**

MAYOR, CITY OF NOWTHEN

I am very grateful to have served on the League Board these past four years. Because the Board is made up of elected and appointed officials, from large and small cities — the metro area and Greater Minnesota — we have the unique opportunity to communicate a wide variety of perspectives on issues

facing cities throughout the state.

Board members shared ideas, discussed options, and working with League staff, were able to provide solutions and tailor services to meet the variety of needs facing our member cities. My thanks to the League staff and fellow Board members; it has been my honor to have been a member of this impressive team.



**Rick Schultz**

MAYOR, ST. JOSEPH  
COALITION OF GREATER MINNESOTA CITIES

As mayor of St. Joseph for the past 12 years, the city has relied upon the training, education, and policies furnished by the League. As past president of the Minnesota Mayors Association, I became more involved with its workings and developed a greater understanding of what the League provides. In addition to working with the League through these channels, I also serve as a member of the Coalition of Greater Minnesota Cities Board of Directors. I volunteered to become a member of the LMC Board upon hearing there was an opening for the CGMC representative position. Serving as an LMC Board member was a privilege and honor. The people behind the LMC are indicative of its value and culture, committed to providing the best possible service to its member cities. I worked with staff and member city officials to ensure LMC goals and direction were being met. I am grateful for the opportunity to work with such dedicated leaders.



**Matt Stemwedel**

CITY MANAGER, COON RAPIDS  
METRO CITIES

My experience on the LMC Board as the Metro Cities representative was highly rewarding and positive. It was an honor to serve with a talented group of collaborative Board members to work on the opportunities and challenges all cities face. The LMC staff is top notch and very dedicated to the interests of all cities in Minnesota. We should all be thankful to have what many people believe is the best league association in the country and work to keep it that way. I am so appreciative of my time on the LMC Board and want to thank Metro Cities, my LMC Board colleagues, and the LMC staff for the great experience. **MC**

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# HOW TO ACHIEVE Stable Health Insurance Premiums

**Six tactics** for keeping rates predictable

BY RYAN DONOVAN

**H**ealth care costs inflate approximately 7% annually and there aren't signs of that slowing down anytime soon. While medical inflation rates are largely out of an employer's control, we can make significant impacts to our health plans by focusing on efforts to stabilize health insurance premiums.

Here are six actions you can take to help stabilize health insurance premiums for your city's employees. Your employees will know what to expect and how to budget their personal finances — building trust and appreciation. Your city, too, will be able to put its best foot forward with budgeting for benefits.

## 1 Create a culture of wellness.

Typically, healthier people have fewer claims, which will help keep your premium rates down. Use the wellness resources available from your health plan provider to build a culture of wellness and get employees excited about and engaged in making healthier lifestyle choices.

- ▶ Establish a volunteer wellness committee to plan and implement programs and activities that make sense for your staff. Designate time and a budget, and encourage the committee to work with your health plan's wellness program manager.
- ▶ Incentivize engagement by tracking participation in wellness programs, activities, and events. Reward participants as you're able. Even a homemade traveling trophy can quickly become a coveted prize.
- ▶ Celebrate and highlight wellness engagement and achievements by sharing staff milestones and success stories. Make it a regular agenda item for all-staff meetings or a regular part of all-staff communication.



## 2 Prioritize proactive and preventive care.

Choose a health plan provider that makes it easier for your employees to be proactive about their health. Ideally, your plan includes these preventive care benefits at low-to-no charge:

- ▶ Preventive prescription coverage.
- ▶ Telehealth, as a convenient alternative to office visits and mental health consultations.
- ▶ An employee assistance program (EAP), with access to free or reduced-cost mental health consultations as well as life coach services.
- ▶ Digital coach support, for helping employees manage key medical cost drivers, such as weight/obesity, diabetes, and hypertension.
- ▶ Annual on-site biometric screenings with flu shot opportunities.

## 3 Consider joining a joint-risk self-insured pool.

A government risk pool (aka, a joint-risk self-insured pool) is a type of health plan provider that exists to serve and bring stability to the public sector market. Choose one that can demonstrate a history of financial stability and stable premium rates.

## 4 Increase the number of people enrolled on your plan.

More eligible people on the plan spreads out the claims cost and keeps future premium rates lower. Ideally, it's full-time employees and their dependents that you want on your plan.

- ▶ Are there union groups that are on their own health plan? Can you work with them to bring them on to the city's health plan?
- ▶ Are there small changes you could make to your plan to attract more eligible participants?
- ▶ Encourage participation in the employee-sponsored health plan.

Avoid cash-in-lieu of health benefits as that incentivizes employees to opt out of the plan.


- ▶ Compare and contrast Medicare supplement options for retirees age 65-plus that are part of your plan. The combination of Medicare plus a supplement might provide a better price and coverage than your city-sponsored health plan alone.

## 5 Offer consumer-driven health plans.

Another term for a consumer-driven health plan is a high-deductible health plan (HDHP), which qualifies employees to have a health savings account (HSA). Research shows HDHP claims costs tend to be lower. This is because employees know they'll pay 100% of the care costs until their deductible is met, so they shop around for care and become more selective care consumers.

## 6 Evaluate your strategy annually.

Change is constant in the health insurance world. Your benefits strategy needs to keep up and stay relevant to maintain and grow participation.

- ▶ Every year, look at what your city pays toward employee premiums and contributes to HSAs and adjust accordingly to inflation and potential premium increases.
- ▶ Compare your strategy to benchmark data for similar employers to stay competitive.
- ▶ Avoid big changes to benefits from one year to the next as it can be very disruptive to premiums (and your staff). Instead, plan and implement changes gradually. 

Ryan Donovan is manager of insurance solutions at Sourcewell ([mn.sourcewell.org](http://mn.sourcewell.org)). Contact: [Ryan.Donovan@sourcewell-mn.gov](mailto:Ryan.Donovan@sourcewell-mn.gov). Sourcewell is a member of the League's Business Leadership Council ([lmc.org/sponsors](http://lmc.org/sponsors)).



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**Learn more at**  
[lmc.org/grant-navigator](https://lmc.org/grant-navigator)

# Green Infrastructure: Trees and Their Vital Role in City Sustainability

BY EMILY BALL

**G**reen infrastructure has become a buzzword in urban planning and sustainability — it refers to the framework and benefits cities can harness by building, preserving, or maintaining a resilient natural system. And what is one of the most vital and practical components of green infrastructure? Trees.

## Benefits of robust canopy coverage

Trees play a crucial role in many cities' sustainability goals. Increasing tree canopy cover over time significantly impacts a community's sustainability efforts — from reducing the heat island effect and intercepting storm water, to storing and sequestering carbon, supporting wildlife habitats, and enhancing livability. However, while green infrastructure is increasingly recognized as an essential aspect of sustainability, the great impact of trees is often overlooked.

Understanding the current canopy coverage and making achievable goals for future coverage is crucial for the planning and management of green infrastructure. Cities can use online resources, like the i-Tree Canopy tool by the U.S. Forest Service or the Growing Shade tool hosted by the Metropolitan Council, to understand current canopy coverage and areas to improve.

Understanding tree species diversity is also an essential part of taking inventory and future planning of a resilient community forest. Cities that have a more diverse inventory of tree species limit the risk of being greatly impacted by invasive species and pests like emerald ash borer.

## Best practices for increasing and maintaining coverage

From rapidly developing to fully developed communities, it is important to sync up community forestry and green infrastructure goals with city ordinances, planning processes, and comprehensive planning. Many believe that new housing developments can lower the number of trees in a community, but that isn't always the case. In some instances, new housing developments are created on land that was previously used for farming that had little-to-no canopy coverage.

If a city has a strong developer agreement in place that requires planting after construction, with specifications and standards ensuring trees are properly planted, a greater canopy could be fostered. A community might not discover a trend like that until they perform an i-Tree Canopy analysis and look back over time to find patterns.

A best practice when building housing in wooded areas is to determine which trees are in the best health and condition, then keep their roots protected to the edges of the canopy during construction. A look at the tree species and sizes will

also inform whether they can survive the process. Additionally, trees do better in a cohort of other trees, so developments may try to keep groups of trees near each other and choose to cut down a sole tree on the property where its root zone is likely to be compacted with equipment.

Construction project planning also considers where to place equipment and how to enter and exit the construction site, all focusing on protecting the trees on the developed land. Unless a planning code has performance standards, staff or consultants, and a method to carry out this work with developers, the community's green infrastructure and canopy will be negatively impacted.

## Connecting trees and sustainability planning

Challenges in communities around increasing canopy coverage and quantifying tree species diversity include budget constraints, lack of staff, or conflicting priorities from city leaders or the public. However, cities should measure the success of their sustainability planning on metrics related to species diversity and canopy coverage. This can be achieved by obtaining an accurate inventory of existing trees and current canopy cover, and creating short-, mid-, and long-term goals and benchmarks for each.

Asset management software has made it easier to edit tree inventory data, with workers in the field able to take a picture or add attributes from their phones. More research on the benefits and ecosystem services of trees has also significantly improved the ability to quantify the benefits of proactive forestry management.

## Additional canopy cover factors to consider

One of the biggest challenges facing cities today is the emerald ash borer, a pest causing significant canopy loss and public health risks due to dead, brittle ash trees in the landscape. Cities need to realize this and act immediately to inventory, budget, and educate. Residents need to be educated on the importance of tree coverage and the risks to ash trees. Many do not realize that a tree can take as long as a human lifetime to mature fully, and that an ash tree may be saved and preserved for the community's benefit with periodic injections.

In addition to being a crucial part of green infrastructure, trees can significantly impact social equity. Areas where a majority of the residents are considered low income or identify as Black, Indigenous, or people of color are often affected by limited tree canopy coverage, leading to heat islands and other environmental challenges. Grants to improve tree management and canopy cover are available on an ongoing basis through the Minnesota Department of Natural Resources, which encourages community forestry projects to focus on increasing canopy coverage in areas of environmental justice concern.

A robust forestry management plan has a positive impact on a community's sustainability efforts. Increasing tree diversity and canopy cover over time improves livability and environmental health. Let's not overlook the critical role trees play in creating green infrastructure and achieving sustainability goals. 🌳

Emily Ball is forestry program manager with WSB ([wsbeng.com](http://wsbeng.com)). Contact: [eball@wsbeng.com](mailto:eball@wsbeng.com). WSB is a member of the League's Business Leadership Council ([lmc.org/sponsors](http://lmc.org/sponsors)).

# Empire — Minnesota’s Newest City — Was Years in the Making

BY ANDREW TELLIJOHN

PHOTO BY MONGKOL TENG

**E**mpire Township, a small-but-growing community nestled among the thriving and expanding cities of Farmington, Rosemount, Lakeville, Apple Valley, and Coates, faced an increasingly urgent problem. As its neighbors expanded, Empire risked losing its most attractive land to annexation.

Faced with this threat, the township applied in early 2022 to become Minnesota’s newest city, protecting its borders for future growth.

That conversion became official in February, making it the state’s 855th city.

“There were some developments around the township of Empire that were filling up or about to get sold,” says Mayor Trent Larson, elected on Valentine’s Day to become the city’s first mayor. “The next piece of the property in the equation was in Empire Township. Rather than allowing somebody to come in and annex the property and have another city develop it, we decided to take it into our own hands and do it ourselves.”

## Process took a year, planning took decades

Minnesota townships don’t incorporate as cities very often. The last one to do so was Credit River in 2021. But Empire officials have known this was coming for a long time. The city has lost some developable land to annexation in the past, and, with the communities around them growing and filling up quickly, the clock was ticking.

Though it had held off on actually making the move to enjoy some of the benefits of remaining a township, planning was well underway. Empire has long taken care of its own snow removal, trail and water maintenance, and other services. It had sewer, water, and all the makings of a plan.

“We were running as a city for over 20 years,” Larson says. “We had our own water. We had our own sewer district. We had ordinances, we had personnel in place.”

Empire had long partnered with the Dakota County Sheriff’s Department for law enforcement, but last year paid the department to add a dedicated officer and car. That wasn’t specifically part of the prep for becoming a city, Larson says, but it was the next step in operating like one.

“They’re paid by Dakota County, but we reimburse the county for wages, the vehicle, and all the benefits that go along with that,” he says.



The new Empire City Council, calling the first City Council meeting to order. From left to right: Council Member Marla Vagts, Mayor Trent Larson, Council Member Eric Hanson, and Council Member Danny Rubio (not pictured, Council Member Tom Kaldunski).

Empire Township officially filed a petition for incorporation with the State of Minnesota in February 2022. It spent more than a year working through the process, communicating with residents, and holding public meetings.

“People were pretty supportive,” says Charles Seipel-Teng, the city administrator and clerk who joined the township four years ago. “People had a lot of questions, but we didn’t really have any opposition.”

The neighboring cities of Farmington, Lakeville, Rosemount, and Coates signed on in support of the move, as well. The process culminated with a daylong hearing in front of State Law Judge Jessica Palmer-Denig, who signed an order of incorporation a few weeks later.

“We worked closely with our planner, engineer, our attorney, and our accountants to get all the information together to make a case for incorporation, which we felt was really strong,” Seipel-Teng said.

## Moving forward

Now that it has secured control of its own destiny, what’s next? Empire had a population of just over 3,000, spread across 30 square miles, as of 2018.

It’s an established community with residential housing availability of both townhome complexes and homes with large yards. There’s the Whitetail Woods Regional Park among other parks, walking and riding trails, and ample community events.

PHOTO BY MONGKOL TENG



Attendees of the last Empire Town Board meeting included Consulting Planner Jenni Faulkner, Supervisor Eric Hanson, Chair Terry Holmes, and Supervisor Jamie Elvestad.

There's industry — though one of the first developments expected to occur over the next few years is the conversion of a mining area into some other form of development, likely residential.

There's agriculture activity and, popping up amid the cornfields — there is the Watt Munisotaram, the largest Cambodian Buddhist temple in North America.

"You're driving through corn and bean fields and then, all of a sudden, you see this big temple that looks like something out of Southeast Asia," Seipel-Teng says. "It's kind of cool. They have a couple big celebrations out there every year."

Already a growing city itself, Larson and Seipel-Teng say there are a couple primary spots available for growth in Empire.

As it does develop, it will likely have to add a second water tower in that area, near 70th Street and Highway 3. There is no

firm timeframe for that development to take place.

"Growth will dictate that," Larson says. "We're not going to put it in there and then not have anybody build on it. We're not that type of community. If we're going to put something up there, we're going to have a developer have skin in the game so that when we do that, we're not stuck holding the whole thing."

**So far, so good**

Meanwhile, the long preparation period involved in making the conversion from township to city seems to have paid off. Both

Larson and Seipel-Teng say there have been few surprises so far.

It has taken a bit of adjustment switching from a three-person town board to a five-person mayor and City Council, Seipel-Teng says. Some members of the township board and planning commission were sticking around to see this conversion through and have since retired, so getting new people up to speed has taken some time.

"Getting them up to speed on all of our ordinances and everything that has been going on, the projects we've been working on, it's a lot to learn," he says.

Otherwise, it's largely business as usual. "This was definitely not spur of the moment," Larson says.

Andrew Tellijohn is a freelance writer.

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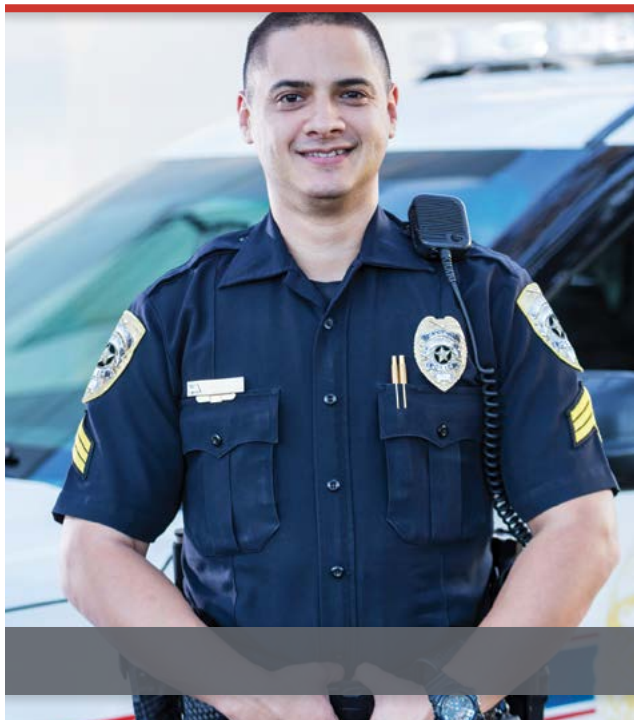
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# Compensating Employees on Workers' Comp Leave

BY JOYCE HOTTINGER AND LISA SOVA

Issues surrounding wages and benefits for an employee who is on leave due to a work-related injury can be complex. Following are three options to address the legal requirements and typical city practices when compensating employees on workers' compensation (WC) leave. City policy or union contracts may dictate the practice a city takes.

## Payment of wages options

**Option 1:** Do nothing and wait for the city's WC carrier to process the claim. Of the three options, this may be the easiest approach in handling work-related injuries from a payroll perspective. However, there is a potential downside of financial hardship to the employee who is waiting for the claim to be processed. Additionally, depending on the circumstances, the claim could be denied and then the city would need to issue back pay (assuming the employee used accrued sick time, vacation, paid time off, or compensatory during the leave).

**Option 2:** Allow an employee to use leave to cover the absence while the city's WC carrier processes the claim. This option avoids financial hardship for the employee while waiting for the claim to be processed. If the claim is denied, no back pay is owed as the employee has been using their accumulated leave hours to cover the absence. However, if the claim is approved, the employee has in effect been overpaid and adjustments are necessary.

The specifics of how the city goes about correcting this overpayment will depend on the applicable payroll system. Any paid time off used to cover hours now compensated through WC needs to be repaid. This can be done one of two ways:

- ▶ If the employee is back to work, this can be as simple as reducing the hours the city pays the employee for work performed and adding those hours back to the employee's leave balance(s) account to offset hours paid

by WC insurance.

- ▶ If the employee isn't back to work, or their imminent return to work is unlikely, then the employee needs to issue a personal check to the city in the amount received from WC for hours paid from the employee's leave. Because WC benefits are not taxable and ineligible wages for Public Employees Retirement Association (PERA), the city will need to correct this in their payroll system.

Another potential complexity with this option arises if the employee uses accumulated leave to cover the WC leave in one calendar year, and then the WC claim is paid in the following calendar year. In this scenario, corrections are made in the year the claim is paid. However, this can prove difficult if the employee isn't returning to work and has no taxable earnings to be offset by the WC payment.

**Option 3:** Allow an employee to use accrued leave to supplement the WC payment, up to one-third of their average gross wages at the time of injury. Minnesota WC law allows a city to provide payment of additional benefits to employees receiving WC benefits. However, the total of the WC payment and any additional payment cannot be greater than the employee's average gross weekly wage at the time of the injury. WC "lost wages" benefits are paid at two-thirds the employee's regular gross average wages on the date of injury, so that leaves one-third of the employee's regular gross average wage available to be paid, and can be taken from accumulated sick leave,



vacation, personal time off, compensatory time, or not charged to any leave category at all but just simply paid by the city. While cities are not required to follow this practice, once implemented it will remain until the policy or contract is changed.

One downside to this option is it provides a disincentive for employees to return to work as compensation may exceed employees' typical net pay.

## Payment of benefits

The WC law does not require cities to continue contributions toward health insurance while an employee is on WC. However, if the WC injury qualifies under the Family and Medical Leave Act (FMLA), the city must continue contributing toward group health benefits during FMLA (up to 12 weeks).

If the city's policy is to continue contributing to insurance benefits for employees out on other types of unpaid leave, it should do so for employees out on WC leave. Otherwise, the city may be open to discrimination claims under WC law. ☑

Joyce Hottinger is assistant human resources director with the League of Minnesota Cities. Contact: [jhottinger@lmc.org](mailto:jhottinger@lmc.org) or (651) 281-1216. Lisa Sovo is assistant finance director with the League of Minnesota Cities. Contact: [lsova@lmc.org](mailto:lsova@lmc.org) or (651) 281-1208.

# Conditional Use Permit Approval Complied With Zoning Ordinance

LAND USE

## Conditional use permit

Baytown Township granted a conditional use permit (CUP) to Derrick Homes, authorizing it to build 101 homes on a 195-acre parcel. A CUP was required because the proposed development



consisted of lots smaller than the minimum lot size allowed under the zoning ordinance, although more than 50% of the parcel would remain as open space. The development was planned with two access roads, one of which was a dead-end cul-de-sac that had been

platted as a right-of-way to connect to a future road. Residents of a nearby neighborhood opposed the development, primarily because of traffic concerns. The town board received input from real estate professionals about the development’s potential impact on nearby homes’ property values, and Derrick Homes presented a traffic study analyzing the development’s potential traffic impacts. After holding four public hearings and a public comment period, the town board voted to approve the CUP. Roger Miller and several other residents who live near the proposed development filed a lawsuit, challenging the township’s CUP decision, claiming it was arbitrary, capricious, or unreasonable. The district court granted summary judgment (court-ordered judgment without a trial) in the township’s favor, and the residents appealed. The Minnesota Court of Appeals affirmed the district court’s decision. The court of appeals concluded that the township’s reasons for approving the CUP complied with its zoning ordinance, and that there was substantial evidence in the record to support the township’s findings set out in the resolution approving the CUP.

*Miller v. Baytown Township*, A22-0672 (Minn. Ct. App. Feb. 26, 2023) (nonprecedential opinion).

FEDERAL PREEMPTION LAW

## Ordinance banning flavored tobacco

“In 2020, the City of Edina passed Ordinance No. 2020-08, which prohibits the sale of flavored tobacco, providing:

“No person shall sell, offer for sale, or otherwise distribute any flavored tobacco products.” R.J. Reynolds Tobacco Company (Reynolds) sued the city, claiming the ordinance is not enforceable because the federal Family Smoking Prevention and Tobacco Control Act (TCA) preempts it. Congress passed the TCA in June 2009. One of its primary goals is to authorize “the Food and Drug Administration to set national standards controlling the manufacture of tobacco products.” To achieve national uniformity while still respecting the states’ police power, the TCA has three sections relating to federal preemption: the preservation clause, the preemption clause, and the savings clause. The interpretation of all three clauses was at issue in this litigation.

**“The U.S. Court of Appeals for the Eighth Circuit affirmed the district court’s decision and ruled that “the Tobacco Control Act does not expressly or impliedly preempt Edina’s prohibitions on selling flavored tobacco.”**

Reynolds claimed that the TCA preempts the ordinance under the preemption clause because the ordinance is an impermissible regulation of tobacco product standards. The federal district court granted the city’s motion to dismiss the lawsuit and ruled that because the ordinance regulates the sales of finished tobacco products, it is saved from preemption under the savings clause. Reynolds appealed the district court’s decision. The U.S. Court of Appeals for the Eighth Circuit affirmed the district court’s decision and ruled that “the Tobacco Control Act does not expressly or impliedly preempt Edina’s prohibitions on selling flavored tobacco.” The court of appeals reasoned that because the TCA is ambiguous and implicates traditional state police powers, it must adopt an interpretation of the savings clause that disfavors federal preemption of the ordinance.

*R.J. Reynolds Tobacco Co. v. City of Edina*, 60 F.4th 1170 (8th Cir. 2023).

EMPLOYMENT LAW

## Minnesota Whistleblower Act

Charles Laliberte sued his former employer, Dollar Tree Inc. (Dollar Tree), claiming that it did not provide him with timely notice of the reason for his termination after he requested it under section 181.933 of the Minnesota Whistleblower Act (MWA). Laliberte argued that Dollar Tree must therefore pay

him a civil penalty as provided for under section 181.935(b) of the MWA. The district court granted summary judgment (court-ordered judgment without a trial) in favor of Dollar Tree, concluding that the civil penalty only applies when an employer violates the MWA's prohibition under section 181.932 against retaliating against an employee who qualifies as a whistleblower. The Minnesota Court of Appeals affirmed the district court's decision and held that under the plain language of the MWA, the civil penalty identified in section 181.935(b) for failing to timely notify an employee of the reasons for the termination of their employment is available only to an employee who is injured by a violation of section 181.932's prohibition on retaliation against whistleblowers.

*Laliberte v. Dollar Tree, Inc.*, N.W.2d (Minn. Ct. App. 2023) (precedential opinion).

**ENVIRONMENTAL LAW**

**Environmental impact statement**

Huber Engineered Woods proposed building a manufacturing facility west of the City of Cohasset. The facility would occupy about 159 acres of agricultural and undeveloped lands 1 mile east of the Leech Lake Indian Reservation. The facility's construction would involve permanently filling or excavating 26 of 31 wetlands at the project site, and its production process would emit air pollutants. The city provided notice of an environmental assessment worksheet (EAW), which analyzed the facility's various types of potential environmental effects. The

EAW concluded that the project would not have the potential for significant environmental effects. The City Council ultimately determined that an environmental impact statement (EIS) (a more detailed environmental analysis) was not required, based on its determination that the facility did not exceed any of the mandatory EIS thresholds and did not have the potential for significant environmental effects. The Leech Lake Band of Ojibwe appealed the

city's decision not to require an EIS. The Minnesota Court of Appeals affirmed the city's decision in part, reversed it in part, and sent the case back to the city for a new EIS decision. The court of appeals concluded that there was substantial evidence to support the city's determinations that the project would not have the potential for significant environmental effects based on air emissions and timber harvesting. But the court of appeals concluded that there was not substantial evidence to support the city's determination that there was no potential for significant environmental effects based on wetland removal. The court of appeals reasoned that an EIS is manda-

*(continued on page 26)*

**“The court of appeals reasoned that an environmental impact statement is mandatory when a project will eliminate a public waters wetland.”**

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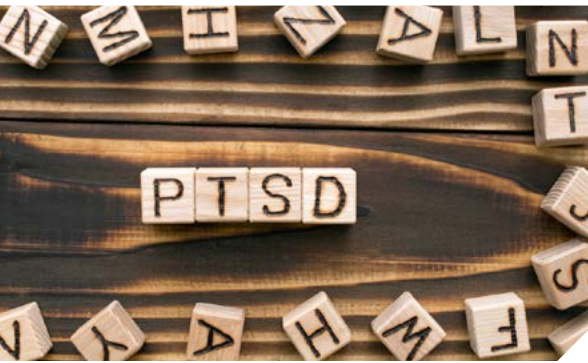
tory when a project will eliminate a public waters wetland, and that a project will eliminate a wetland if it will lose either of its two qualifying characteristics: type or acreage.

*In re City of Cohasset's Decision on the Need for an Environmental Impact Statement for the Proposed Frontier Project*, 985 N.W.2d 370 (Minn. Ct. App. 2023). Note: LMCIT represented the city.

WORKERS' COMPENSATION LAW

Post-traumatic stress disorder

From Sept. 25, 2019, to March 30, 2021, former Mower County Deputy Sheriff Ryan Chrz had a diagnosis of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) by a licensed professional and was there-



fore eligible to receive workers' compensation benefits from Mower County. PTSD is the only "mental impairment" that is currently covered by the Workers' Compensa-

sation Act as an occupational disease. After March 30, 2021, Chrz no longer had a diagnosis of PTSD by a licensed profes-

sional. Chrz argued that he should still be eligible for workers' compensation benefits because he remained disabled from a mental illness and could not perform his normal duties as a law enforcement officer. According to Chrz, if an employee who was diagnosed with PTSD at one time still experiences disablement, he should be entitled to workers' compensation benefits even if he no longer has a diagnosis that meets the statutory definition of an "occupational disease" under the Workers' Compensation Act. The workers' compensation judge agreed with Chrz and awarded him workers' compensation benefits continuing forward from April 1, 2021. The Workers' Compensation Court of Appeal's (WCCA) reversed the workers' compensation judge's decision in part, holding that Chrz was not entitled to workers' compensation benefits after March 30, 2021. The Minnesota Supreme Court affirmed the WCCA's decision and ruled that an employee is not entitled to workers' compensation benefits under Minnesota Statutes, section 176.66, subdivision 1, when the employee formerly had, but no longer has, a diagnosis of PTSD by a licensed professional using the most recent edition of the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, as required by Minnesota Statutes, section 176.011, subdivision 15(d). The Supreme Court reasoned that to hold otherwise would allow an employee's diagnosis of PTSD to remain effectively perpetual. ☑☑

*Chrz v. Mower County*, N.W.2d (Minn. 2023).

Written by Susan Naughton, research attorney with the League of Minnesota Cities. Contact: snaughto@lmc.org or (651) 281-1232.

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# What Is the Process of Codifying City Ordinances?

## Updating City Code

**Q** What is codification? What is the process of codifying city ordinances?

**LMC** Codification is the process that cities use to review, update, and organize ordinances into one book by subject matter so it is accessible and convenient for residents. The city council has authority to codify any general or special laws, ordinances, resolutions, rules, or bylaws in force in the city.

An ordinance adopting the city code must be approved at a meeting of the city council. For statutory cities, an ordinance adopting the city code must be passed by a majority vote of the council. Once the ordinance adopting the code has been passed, the ordinance must be published.

Any codification project should include the following:

- ▶ Identifying conflicting ordinances.
- ▶ Repealing or redrafting inconsistent, unclear, outdated, or unconstitutional ordinance provisions.
- ▶ Developing a system that facilitates access to the city's laws.
- ▶ Creating processes that allow for continuous updates.
- ▶ Indexing and cross-referencing.
- ▶ Reviewing all city ordinances for any omissions.
- ▶ Organizing city ordinances into an easy-to-use reference book known as the city code.

City staff and elected officials can do this process themselves, work with their city attorney, or hire a publisher to do the work. The League of Minnesota Cities (LMC) works with American Legal Publishing to provide this service to cities. Learn more about this service at [lmc.org/codification](https://lmc.org/codification).

Answered by Staff Attorney Aisia Davis: [adavis@lmc.org](mailto:adavis@lmc.org).

## Season-Specific Policies

**Q** What are some HR-related hot topics and trends to keep in mind this summer?

**LMC** *Summer hours.* The move to let workers end work early on Fridays is a growing trend. In fact, some employers have implemented, or are considering, summer Fridays or some version of summer hours to run from Memorial Day to Labor Day. Several cities have been trying out various summer schedules including four, nine-hour days and then closing Fridays around noon.

*Summer safety.* For workers performing jobs outside, the Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA) provided new heat safety directives in April 2022 that cities will want to follow. The League of Minnesota Cities Insurance Trust's (LMCIT) loss control consultants are a wealth of information on this topic and more.

While it can be a challenge to determine the perfect office temperature for indoor workers, especially in the hot months of summer, the OSHA technical manual recommends maintaining a workplace temperature at around 68-76 degrees Fahrenheit. The OSHA technical manual can be viewed at [bit.ly/OSHAManual](https://bit.ly/OSHAManual).

*Summer activities.* Consider incorporating organizational-wide events as part of your employee appreciation and wellness efforts. If your city offers these events, consider promoting your summertime activities to help attract candidates. Capturing the fun of your workplace culture in photos or a story can be an effective recruitment tool to show candidates how your workplace celebrates your teams. Just remember to get a signed release before using photos publicly; see the LMC information memo on data practices at [lmc.org/data-practices](https://lmc.org/data-practices).

Answered by Assistant Human Resources Director Joyce Hottinger: [jhottinger@lmc.org](mailto:jhottinger@lmc.org).

## Emergency Preparedness

**Q** Are we required to have an emergency action plan at our city?

**LMC** Whether it is a complete power outage or a fire at your facility, preparing for the unexpected should be part of your overall safety program. While prevention is the first priority, preparedness may reduce the severity of the event and help maintain your employees' safety. Cities should have a written, well-communicated, and practiced emergency action plan.

In general, OSHA Standard 29 CFR 1910.38, Emergency Action Plans (EAP), requires employers to develop plans to handle fires and other emergencies that may require evacuation of the premises. Such plans must be in writing, kept in the workplace, and be available to employees for review. However, an employer with 10 or fewer employees may communicate the plan orally.

At minimum, the plan must include, but is not limited to, the following:

- ▶ Means of reporting fires and other emergencies.
- ▶ Evacuation procedures and emergency escape route assignments.
- ▶ Procedures for employees who remain to operate critical plant operations before they evacuate.
- ▶ Accounting for all employees after an emergency evacuation has been completed.
- ▶ Rescue and medical duties for employees performing them.
- ▶ Names or job titles of persons who can be contacted.

If your city does not currently have an emergency action plan in place, you can reach out to your LMCIT loss control consultant for templates, resources, and guidance. [lmc.org](https://lmc.org)

Answered by Loss Control Consultant Kate Connell: [kconnell@lmc.org](mailto:kconnell@lmc.org).

# Visuals Are the Message in Effective Communications

BY KAT SIKORSKI

*Note: This is Part One in a two-part series.*

Communications may be only one of the many functions of your job, but it's a critical one. Many articles give the same broad tips for creating effective content: keep text clear and concise; avoid jargon; don't overlook the importance of supporting visuals. Yet, these tips ignore a vital fact.

Visuals are the message. They are what drives your audience to engage with a piece of content. They are the communication

that stays with your audience, long after they've forgotten the lines of text they skimmed or skipped.

## Our brains crave images

As humans, we are built to process visual cues. Many studies over the past 50 years in diverse fields such as neuroscience, linguistics, education, and marketing show this.

- ▶ Edwin Dale discovered in a 1960s study that information presented visually allowed the participants to retain 80% of information after three hours and 65% over three days. Compare that to lectures and reading, where participants retained only 25% of the information after three hours and a bare 10% after three days.
- ▶ In the 1980s, a joint study by 3M and the University of Minnesota found presentations using visuals to be 43% more persuasive and likely to result in action than text-based presentations.
- ▶ The same study found that the human brain processes images 60,000 times faster than text, and visuals improved learning by up to 400%.
- ▶ A Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) study estimates that the brain can recognize even unfamiliar images in as little as 13 milliseconds. To put that in context, we blink at a speed of 100 to 400 milliseconds.

Imagery is a powerful tool. It can evoke emotions, convey complex ideas, and engage an audience on a deeper level. While text can provide greater context and details, our brains process visual information faster and retain visual information longer.

## When visuals and text clash

We could argue that visuals are an important supporting player in content design, but that overlooks a crucial truth. If the supporting visual contradicts its lead content, text, or audio, the message that the audience takes away will be the message the visual communicates.

In the examples on this page and the next, it may seem obvious that these photos are incongruent with the text, but mistakes like this can happen when in a hurry or when resources are limited.

## A brief guide to choosing visuals

Knowing that visuals can make or break your communications, how do we choose visuals that complement our content?

**Know your audience.** Tailor your visuals to resonate with their interests, demographics, cultural background, and overall preferences.

**Consider readability.** Recognizing familiar objects or scenes allows us to connect with the content and understand its context. Choose images that are high resolution or quality, with strong composition, balanced elements, and a clear focal point.



## Annual Oktoberfest Beer Dabbler Expected to Draw Thousands

Grab your lederhosen and beer steins and make your way to the Main Street Pavilion for the annual beer festival. Those 21 or older are welcome to attend, IDs will be required at the gate.

While the image above depicts an Oktoberfest event, it's likely an inaccurate representation of what attendees can expect and could leave some confused as to whether children are allowed to attend.

**Stay authentic.** Look for images that capture genuine emotions, real-life situations, and candid moments. Avoid overly staged or retouched images that can feel artificial.

**Align visuals with your core message.** Take the time to identify the key message or emotion you want to convey, and choose imagery that supports and reinforces it.

**Incorporate visual hierarchy.** Arrange elements in a way that guides the viewer's attention and creates a logical path for the eye to follow.

**The takeaway**

The visuals you choose will always dominate the message your audience takes away from your content. We may spend hours carefully selecting words that convey the right meaning, tone, and nuance. We check for spelling and readability. But our brains don't care. They want visuals.

Part Two in this series will go more in-depth into how our brains create meaning from images, and describe the magic formula for choosing visuals that enhance our intended messages rather than undermine them. 📷

Kat Sikorski is strategic communications coordinator for the City of Minneapolis. Contact: [kat.sikorski@minneapolismn.gov](mailto:kat.sikorski@minneapolismn.gov).

Despite the headline and caption, the message in this image will leave you wondering if the event is actually better suited for adults and less so for children and pets.



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# ROCORI Trail Connects Three Cities After Years of Collaboration

BY HEATHER RULE

The ROCORI Trail project didn't start when the asphalt was paved. It didn't start when grants and other funding came through. It started 18 years ago "with some trail-enthusiastic residents who got together at the café and just had a conversation," said Kevin Mooney, Richmond parks and recreation director, who has been with the department for 19 years.

The residents brought the idea for a trail to leaders of the three cities that it would connect — Rockville, Cold Spring, and Richmond, also known as ROCORI. From there, the ROCORI Trail Construction Board (RTCB) was born, the first funding came through, and they were off and running.

"Or ... not running; this process has taken us forever," Mooney said, with a chuckle. "We were off and crawling at a very slow pace."

Unsurprisingly, a project of this magnitude does take a lot of time. The ROCORI Trail is about 10 miles of asphalt and a multipurpose trail. Going from west to east, Richmond is the first city along the route, with Cold Spring in the middle about 5 miles away, and Rockville approximately another 5 miles east. The trail is wheelchair accessible and can be used for biking, inline skating or walking, and for snowmobiles in the winter.

## The desire for a new route

Now, after nearly two decades in the making, the cities are finally celebrating the project's completion this year.

Before the trail, State Highway 23 (a two-lane highway that has since expanded to four lanes) was the only route connecting the three cities.

There was no way to get from one community to the other without a vehicle, and there was a desire for an alternative route for people to walk or bike, Mooney said.



After years of work, the ROCORI Trail that connects the cities of Rockville, Cold Spring, and Richmond has been completed.

The new route offers other benefits as well. Between Cold Spring and Rockville, the trail goes along the Sauk River providing some scenic views.

"A lot of good views all along. A lot of rolling hills," said Doug Schmitz, Cold Spring City Council member and a RTCB board member since the beginning.

## RTCB leads the way

Once the viability of a trail project became clear, the cities formed a joint powers agreement. Since about 2006, the six-member RTCB met monthly at Rockville City Hall. The board includes two voting members (city staff, council, mayors, or residents) representing each city. The board's chair rotates between the cities annually, with that town's city administrator acting as executive director for the year. Mooney, who's been on the RTCB since the start, is this year's chair.

One of the board's earliest tasks, and a big one, was dealing with a slow-but-active railroad in Paynesville and Rockville. The board worked with BNSF Railway Company as the railroad opted

to abandon the tracks and sell a 100-foot corridor west of Rockville to the RTCB.

"That was how the project actually started, was getting the purchase of that land," Schmitz said.

## Keeping it on track

With the corridor purchased, the ROCORI Trail project could really take shape. In 2009, the first, 1-mile stretch of trail was completed in Rockville. Around 2012, a 3-mile section was completed between Cold Spring and Richmond.

Now, trail travelers could start west in Roscoe, another neighboring town, and go 17 miles all the way to Rockville via two trail systems that are connected, including the Glacial Lakes State Trail. The final phase of the trail started in fall 2022 and finished around Memorial Day 2023.

"It takes a long time to get things accomplished," said Duane Willenbring, Rockville mayor and an original voting member of the RTCB. "How did the ROCORI trail come to be? That was due diligence, a lot of research, selecting the right people, and then have patience."

PHOTO COURTESY CITY OF ROCKVILLE



As Willenbring pointed out, the three cities have “a long history of working collectively and primarily” due to the consolidation of the ROCORI School District.

**Collaboration was key**

With three different councils, three mayors, three different mindsets for each city, Mooney said, “It’s amazing that this group has hung together for 19 years with its main focus being connectivity ... connecting our communities with something healthy like recreation.”

Bringing the cities together via the RTCB involved a lot of cooperation, collaboration, and compromise to see all phases of the project come to fruition. Each city representative makes decisions for their respective community but also for the two other cities, so everything involved a lot of understanding and compromise to reach the common goal of the three-city connection, Mooney said.

Collaboration was a word that Schmitz used, too, to describe the good working relationship between the three cities. He also believes it was that common goal that helped keep things on track.

“That’s the journey, and it’s been very fruitful,” Willenbring said. “It’s been trying at times. But the good outweighed the bad, hundredfold.”

**Funding the project**

In total, the trail project cost about \$7 million, which includes buying the rail corridor from BNSF for about \$1.8 million and then trail construction, engineering, and remaining costs coming in at a little more than \$5 million, according to Mooney. The RTCB also worked with Stearns County as their fiscal agent, with a county supervisor at each of the trail meetings.

The money came from multiple areas at the federal, state, and local levels. A federal transportation alternative program helped fund parts of all three project phases. They also received Legislative-Citizen Commission on Minnesota Resources (LCCMR) money, directed through a bonding bill. Stearns County helped fund the first phase, and all three cities contributed funds as well, according to Mooney.

“But to tell you the truth, we managed to do this without really impacting our



A group gathers to break ground on phase three of the ROCORI Trail project.

community’s tax base too much,” Mooney said. “We shook every tree we could.”

**Residents and tourists hit the trail**

Once the trail was operational, Mooney, who’s lived in the area for 30 years, said he noticed a transformation in Richmond. He saw more people cycling, and he heard from the local hardware store owner that the business sold and fixed

*(continued on page 32)*

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more bicycles than in the past. Richmond also constructed a trail pavilion with a parking lot and bike racks, both of which can be full on a Saturday morning, Mooney said.

Seeing all the walking, roller blading, recreation, and exercise community members get from using the trail is phenomenal, he said. Once the connection with Cold Spring was complete, Mooney saw those residents in Richmond more often, too.

“I think it’s made our community much more active,” he said. “Just out and about and getting some exercise.”

The connectivity of the trail is the most important piece for all three cities. Although the RTCB envisioned the trail would be used by many, seeing the actual number of people on the trail is still pleasantly surprising to Schmitz.

“I didn’t think it would be used as much as it is,” Schmitz said. “Nonstop, you see people walking, roller blading, biking. So, I think just seeing the people out there being able to enjoy this is great feedback for me.”

With only 5 miles between the cities via the trail, the big benefit is that

residents can head to these other cities without getting on the highway. Schmitz sees community members using the trail to bike and stop at Cold Spring offerings such as the splash pad, bakery, or ice cream shop. A lot more people on bikes are “coming and stopping in town now,” Schmitz said.

### On the horizon

In celebration of the trail’s completion, the communities planned a grand opening celebration on June 17, complete with pedal pubs from the Twin Cities. Going forward, the plan is to turn the ROCORI Trail over to the Minnesota DNR to manage and maintain so it will not be the responsibility of the three cities, according to Schmitz.

The trail checks the boxes of safety, recreation, and community connection. Willenbring said he doesn’t know what the full impact of the trail will be, “but hopefully that ripple effect of the tour-



PHOTO COURTESY CITY OF ROCKVILLE

A ribbon-cutting ceremony was held to commemorate the completion of phase two of the ROCORI Trail.

ism it might attract should be beneficial to a lot of us.”

Anyone can hop on their bicycle to go see a movie in Cold Spring, then pedal their way along the trail to Richmond and stop for an ice cream cone, Mooney said, as another example of how the public can use the trail to get around.

“The response that we’ve had on this trail has been phenomenal,” Mooney said. “Any time you drive by, you see people moving in a different way than starting up a combustible engine.

“It’s just such a great amenity for our cities and our school district.” **MC**

Heather Rule is a freelance writer.



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