SEP/OCT 2025

MINNESOTA CITIES

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

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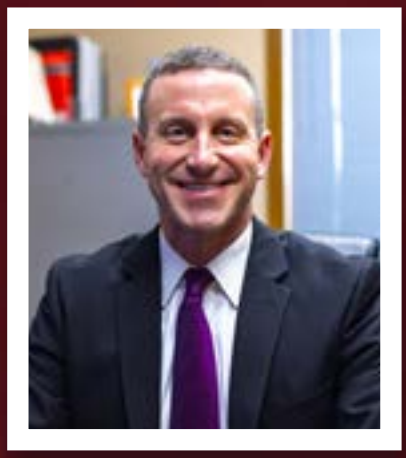
CIRCLE PINES MAYOR
C.C. LUDWIG AWARD



PEYTON MASTERA
DILWORTH CITY ADMINISTRATOR
JAMES F. MILLER LEADERSHIP AWARD

ANNE BURT
WOODBURY MAYOR
EMERGING LEADER AWARD

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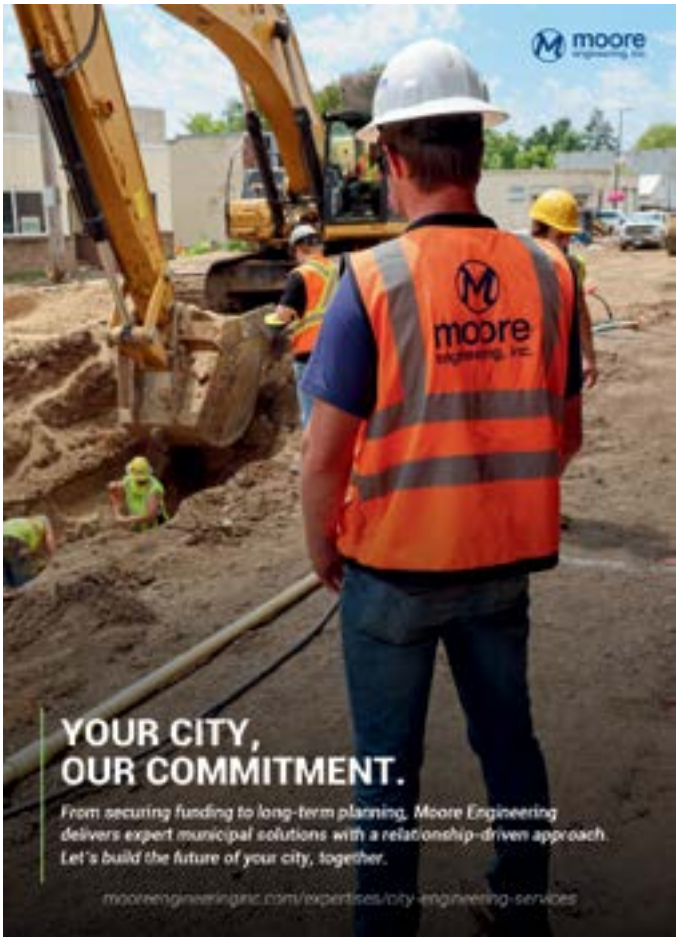

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Leading With Presence in the Face of Division

BY LUKE FISCHER

Following the unthinkable assassination of Speaker Emerita Melissa Hortman, her husband Mark, and their dog Gilbert, on June 14, many of us in public service have wondered how something like this could happen here in Minnesota. Our politics, though impassioned at times, have generally maintained a measure of decency and respect. The murders are an affront to how we operate. I haven't spoken with anyone involved in civic life who doesn't feel some sort of personal violation with this tragedy.

At the beginning of August, I attended a conference with fellow state league executive directors from across the country. In our conversations, it was clear that this tragedy is being felt not just in Minnesota, but nationally, as local leaders wrestle with the idea that political violence is something we now must contemplate. We talked about how we got here — and how we can find our way out.

There was general agreement among the league directors that legislation alone will not alleviate the discord or eliminate the potential for political violence. It will take all of us slowing down and engaging with one another in a more personal, genuine way. It will take better listening.

Through our conversations, I was reminded of David Brooks' most recent book, "How to Know a Person." It offers a thoughtful analysis of the personal process of seeing and connecting with others, and ideas to consider as we try to mend a frayed social framework:

- **Presence and active listening**. It's well known that life rewards those who show up. Local leaders understand this — that's why you attend ribbon cuttings, volunteer at the Lions Club pancake breakfast, and run for office. Showing up is the first step in building good relationships with folks. The next step is active listening, which shows people you're not just there to check a box. Demonstrate active listening skills by taking notes when someone is talking, setting your phone aside, making eye contact, and giving people space to share their stories.

- **Curiosity and thoughtful questions.** The most effective leaders make people feel valued in conversation. One common skill they bring is a deep level of curiosity — a desire to understand why someone thinks, feels, or believes a certain way. You can do this by asking how they came to a certain belief, what experiences shaped their perspective, or how they would approach a shared problem.
- **Vulnerability and empathy**. It can be difficult to build trust from a position of leadership. Whether you're sitting behind the council dais or standing behind the counter at city hall, there's a physical barrier that can mask the deeply human work you do each day. Showing vulnerability and empathy can go a long way toward building trust. It's OK to share why you've struggled with a policy, how a decision has impacted you, or admit that something isn't perfect.
- **Beyond first impressions.** As local leaders, our work is done at the personal level — with friends, neighbors, acquaintances, and a lot of people you likely know something about. How often have you felt certain of an individual's thoughts or opinions, only to find out later you were wrong? Too often, we rely on first impressions and don't take time to go deeper. Listening to understand, not just to respond, can help avoid this trap.

There's no magic wand to resolve the political tensions and pressures facing those in public service. Instead, we have the next best alternative: about 4,500 Minnesota city elected leaders, and even more city staff, engaged in this work every day. You know what it means to ensure people are heard, to give the public a voice, and to debate respectfully in the spirit of moving your communities forward.

In a heartfelt call for action following the assassination of their parents, Sophie and Colin Hortman urged:

"Our parents lived their lives with immense dedication to their fellow humans. This tragedy must become a moment for us to come together. Hold your loved ones a little closer. Love your neighbors. Treat each other with kindness and respect. The best way to honor our parents' memory is to do something, whether big or small, to make our community just a little better for someone else."

That's something I believe we can all agree to do. MC

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

National State of the Cities Report

America's cities remain strong in 2025, even as local leaders face rising costs, workforce shortages, and decreased federal support. The National League of Cities' 2025 State of the Cities report highlights mayors' top priorities this year: economic development, infrastructure, budgeting, housing, and public health and safety.

Mayors are focusing on attracting businesses, investing in workforce development, and revitalizing downtowns. At the same time, they're grappling with aging infrastructure, housing shortages, and the end of major federal funding programs like ARPA. Mental health, substance use, and cybersecurity also remain top concerns.

Despite these challenges, the report shows local leaders are innovating and adapting — finding creative solutions and calling for stronger federal-local partnerships to sustain momentum.

Download the full report at **nlc.org/resource/state-of-the-cities-2025**.

Updated Budget Guide Now Available

As cities begin finalizing their 2026 budgets, it's a good time to double-check for any new laws or updates that could affect your city's levy or financial planning.

The League of Minnesota Cities' Budget Guide for Cities is your go-to resource for understanding recent changes in state and federal law that impact budgeting decisions. The guide includes key figures for minimum wage, cost-of-living adjustments, local government aid (LGA), PERA, payroll withholding, and more.

Updated annually after the legislative session, the guide helps city leaders stay informed and plan with confidence.

View the guide at **lmc.org/budgetguide**.

New Dock and Kayak Launch Improves Lake Access at Detroit Lakes City Beach

A new floating dock and accessible kayak launch was installed this summer at Detroit Lakes City Beach, thanks to the efforts of the Lakeland Disabled American Veterans (DAV) chapter.

As reported by the *Detroit Lakes Tribune*, the City Council approved the $101,933 purchase

in April, with funding entirely covered by the local DAV chapter. The group raised the money through donations and fundraising events, with the city handling the purchase on its behalf.

The dock was placed near Lakeside Tavern and Brewery, chosen for its proximity to existing handicap parking. Additional accessible parking spots are expected to be added during the upcoming West Lake Drive street project.

DAV Commander Jason Bristlin said the project aimed to make lake access easier for anyone with mobility challenges.

City Council Member Matt Boeke praised the effort, saying it benefits not just Detroit Lakes residents but the broader community.

The DAV has also funded improvements to the fishing pier and is exploring a future project to add a handicap-accessible swimming area.

Wadena Marks Tornado Anniversary With Citywide Safety Upgrades

Fifteen years after an EF4 tornado devastated parts of Wadena, the city has completed a major upgrade to its emergency warning system. According to the *Wadena Pioneer Journal*, five new outdoor warning sirens have been installed across the city, dramatically improving coverage for residents. Previously, Wadena relied on just two sirens.

The effort was led by Police Chief and Emergency Manager Naomi Plautz and funded by a $50,000 grant from Sourcewell, along with contributions from local businesses and community groups. City utilities staff handled installation.

The sirens are part of a larger system that includes CodeRED, a public notification tool that alerts residents via phone, text, or email during emergencies. The upgrades are especially important, as parts of the area fall into a National Weather Service radar dead zone.

In addition to the sirens, Wadena has a Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) tornado shelter at the Wadena-Deer Creek Senior High School. Regular monthly siren tests are planned to keep residents familiar with the system. The improvements reflect the city's ongoing commitment to safety and preparedness, 15 years after one of the most destructive days in Minnesota's weather history.

Elk River Tries Sunfish To Tackle Fly Problem

The City of Elk River has found a creative, eco-friendly way to deal with a persistent midge fly problem at its wastewater treatment plant — by adding sunfish. According to *KARE 11*, the city placed around 300 sunfish in one of its three water clarifiers to feed on fly larvae, which had become a major nuisance for staff.

The idea came after staff noticed goldfish in their lab eagerly eating midge larvae. Wanting to stay chemical-free and use a native species, they worked with the Minnesota Pollution Control Agency to test the use of sunfish, which are native to the Mississippi River.

The fish have only been in place for a short time, but the team already sees a difference and plans to monitor results over the coming months to measure effectiveness. If successful, the sunfish solution could offer a sustainable way to reduce pests during peak summer months.

LMC LEARNING & EVENTS

ON THE WEB
Learn more about these and other events at **lmc.org/events**.

Fall Safety and Loss Control Workshops: Pathways to Sustainable Wellness
Sept. 24 — Online
Oct. 1 — Cottage Grove
Oct. 8 — Online

Fall Forums
Oct. 20-24 — Online

Fall Safety and Loss Control Workshops: Peer Support Training
Oct. 21-22 — Willmar
Oct. 29-30 — Bemidji
Nov. 4-5 — Edina

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How Often Does Your City Council Meet, and How Are Meetings Structured?

KARY TILLMANN

CLERK/TREASURER

ZIMMERMAN POPULATION (6,762)

The Zimmerman City Council meets three times each month, with formal business meetings held on the first and third Mondays, and a more informal workshop session on the second Monday. This schedule balances structured decision making with opportunities for open discussion and long-term planning.

Formal meetings are where the Council hears department reports, takes official action on ordinances, resolutions, contracts, and addresses other city matters. The workshop sessions, called Committee of the Whole meetings, provide space for in-depth conversations without the pressure of immediate votes.

Staff participation and support

The city administrator and clerk/treasurer attend every meeting, with other city and contracted staff participating as needed, particularly when agenda items relate to their departments or areas of expertise. Staff involvement ensures that the mayor and Council have access to information needed to make well-informed decisions.

Focus on transparency and preparation

Our current Council has placed a high value on transparency, which is one of the benefits of our schedule. It also improves Council preparedness, and supports greater collaboration among staff, elected officials, and residents. Workshop sessions have become especially valuable for exploring ideas and addressing challenges before they reach the formal agenda.

For the most part, staff and the Council find this schedule effective. However, one ongoing challenge is encouraging consistent public attendance at any of the Council's meetings.

Zimmerman has followed this meeting structure for over two decades. This format was adopted as the city began to grow and needs became more complex, requiring more time for review and collaboration. Separating discussion from action has allowed the Council to be both efficient and deliberate in its decision-making process. We believe it helps create a more thoughtful process while also building stronger trust in our community.

WENDY ZYLKA

CITY CLERK

LITTLE FALLS (POPULATION 9,095)

The Little Falls City Council consists of eight members: two representatives from each of the city's three wards, one at-large member, and the mayor. Unlike in many cities, it is the Council president — not the mayor — who presides over meetings.

Schedule and participation

As defined in the city code, regular Council meetings are held on the first and third Mondays of each month and are typically preceded by a special work session one hour earlier.

The city administrator, deputy clerk, police chief, and public works director/city engineer attend all regular and special work session meetings. Additional staff members participate as needed, depending on agenda items. These work sessions provide an important opportunity to review agenda items in detail, ask questions, and request more information, allowing for better informed discussions. Council members also use this time to discuss resident concerns and collaborate with staff, which often sparks new ideas or highlights issues that merit further attention.

Evolution of the work session format

When I began in 1992, the City Council already held special work sessions. At that time, meetings occurred every Monday, with work sessions scheduled about two hours before and sometimes continuing afterward. These sessions covered a wide range of topics, from committee reports to engineering updates and road projects. Over time, and with the adoption of a consent agenda, we streamlined the process into its current form — more focused, but equally effective.

In addition to our regular and special meetings, the City Council holds annual strategic planning and budget work sessions. The strategic planning session is a one-day event. The morning focuses on high-level goals, priorities, and long-term vision through discussions among the Council, city administrator, and city clerk. In the afternoon, department heads join to review upcoming capital requests and provide insight into operational needs.

This structured, collaborative approach has been invaluable in helping the City Council and staff work efficiently together to meet the needs of our community. MC

MINNESOTA CITY LEADERS RECOGNIZED FOR DEDICATION, RESULTS

BY ANDREW TELLIJOHN

PHOTO BY MATT WALES

DAVE BARTHOLOMAY
CIRCLE PINES MAYOR
C.C. LUDWIG AWARD

PHOTO BY MATT WALES

PEYTON MASTERA
DILWORTH CITY ADMINISTRATOR
JAMES F. MILLER LEADERSHIP AWARD

PHOTO BY MATT WALES

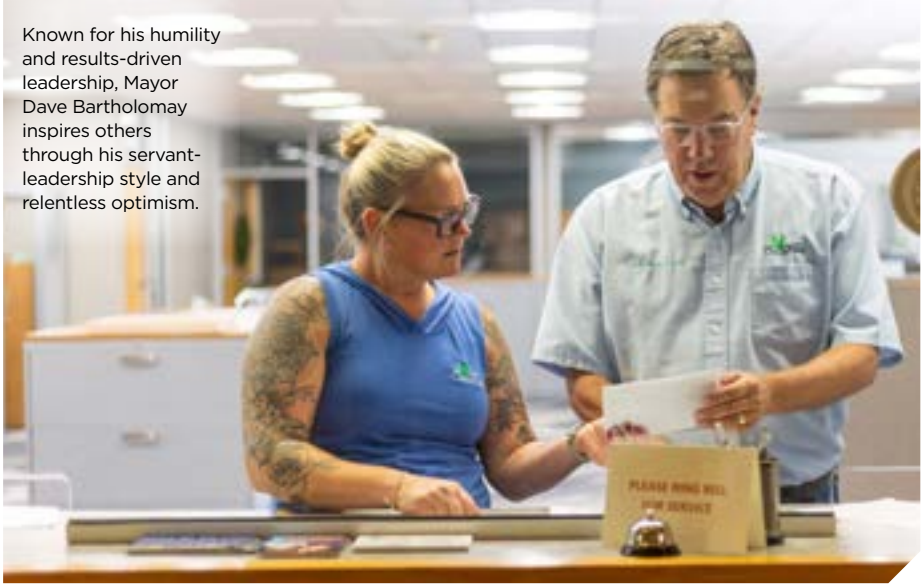
ANNE BURT
WOODBURY MAYOR
EMERGING LEADER AWARD

The League of Minnesota Cities (LMC) presented its top honors at its 2025 Annual Conference, recognizing three public officials for their exceptional contributions to local government.

THE C.C. LUDWIG AWARD honors elected city officials, the **JAMES F. MILLER LEADERSHIP AWARD** recognizes appointed officials, and the **EMERGING LEADER AWARD** celebrates city leaders with fewer than eight years of experience.

This year's winners are Circle Pines Mayor Dave Bartholomay, Dilworth City Administrator Peyton Mastera, and Woodbury Mayor Anne Burt.

To learn more about these award winners, watch the videos at **lmc.org/awards25**.



Known for his humility and results-driven leadership, Mayor Dave Bartholomay inspires others through his servant-leadership style and relentless optimism.

PHOTO BY MATT WALES

DAVE BARTHOLOMAY

CIRCLE PINES MAYOR

C.C. LUDWIG AWARD WINNER

When Dave Bartholomay first joined the Circle Pines City Council in 2001, the city was involved in public controversy over a proposed townhome development. At his first meeting, several speakers lined up to share their concerns, and Bartholomay gave what he thought were sharp, effective responses.

Then a mentor pulled him aside with a reality check.

The man told Bartholomay he may be the smartest person in the room, but that he didn't need to show it. He urged Bartholomay to find a different way to communicate with the public, so residents felt heard. He thought about the stinging rebuke and realized it was correct.

"We see leaders that are potentially very well intentioned, but they're tearing apart their community," Bartholomay said. "There's a better way to do it, a better way to listen and work with people. You've got to learn where they are coming from, learn their perspective, be a better listener — that just absolutely changed my life."

From that point on, he shifted his focus from winning arguments to building trust and making progress, much to the benefit of both Circle Pines, and to other leaders who have sought his counsel in dealing with difficult issues.

"I've slipped off the high road a few times," he said. "But for the most part that's how I try to live my life now."

Rebuilding the city

By the time Bartholomay joined the City Council, the streets of Circle Pines were in significant disrepair. He pushed for improvements early on but made limited progress. It wasn't until he became mayor that the planning process took off. It took 15 years from beginning to end, but the project got done.

"He had the foresight," said Patrick Antonen, Circle Pines city administrator. "The roads all had potholes. What was worse than anything was below the streets. We needed to get the sewers fixed."

The process started in 2005 with a feasibility study. From there, the city completed a major road project every other year between 2008 and 2022.

"Now, every single road, sewer, water main, gas main, and storm sewer is virtually brand new," Antonen said, adding that though the public didn't love the sizable assessment that came along with the project, it was well communicated. "We overcommunicated on these street projects. Dave loves communicating with the public."

Bartholomay also helped keep the Anoka County Library in the city and advocated for a major renovation a few years later. He's proud of how well Circle Pines supports its staff, how safe and welcoming the city has remained through the years, and how the city has built strong ties with the Centennial School District. He was inducted into the district's Hall of Fame in 2019. Though he never attended class at Centennial High School, he has been a leader in multiple efforts to increase school funding and has supported the mentorship program.

"I really believe cities need to be more supportive of their school districts, to cover their backs," he said. "That's one of my proudest points."

A mentor across Minnesota

As much as Bartholomay loves Circle Pines, he has eagerly shared his experience with other leaders across the state. More than 30 current and former city administrators and managers signed a letter supporting his nomination for LMC's C.C. Ludwig Award.

He's been active in the North Metro Mayors Association and previously worked at the state's Office of Collaboration and Dispute Resolution, helping cities navigate conflict.

Peter Lindstrom, a Metropolitan Council member who was mayor of Falcon Heights during the fatal police shooting of Philando Castile, credits Bartholomay with helping his city navigate that crisis. He took the time to guide the city through several difficult community conversations aimed at restoring calm and trust.

"If you crack open the dictionary and look up servant leadership, there should be a picture of Mayor Dave," Lindstrom said. "He models humility, he models integrity, and he has a deep commitment to serving others. He inspires others to do the same."

And he's relentlessly optimistic and a great guy.

"He brings joy to the work," Lindstrom added. "But he's not just a back-slapping mayor. He is a get-it-done kind of guy. He wants to see results, even if it takes a long time to get them."

Looking ahead

After nearly a quarter century leading the city, Bartholomay is not seeking reelection. As his tenure nears a close, he's making a final push to fund improvements for the city's parks and trails system through bond sales. And he's looking forward to having more time to utilize those parks and trails — though Antonen is already lamenting the change.

"They don't make them like they used to," he said. "He's definitely going to be missed. He did a lot of good things for the city."

(*continued on page 10*)

PHOTO BY MATT WALES

City officials say Administrator Peyton Mastera is great at encouraging staff to develop new skills and is deeply involved in the community.

PEYTON MASTERA

DILWORTH CITY ADMINISTRATOR

JAMES F. MILLER LEADERSHIP AWARD WINNER

Back in 2014, Peyton Mastera, a Kentucky native, was ready for a new challenge. He found an opening in Dilworth, and took a chance on the small, quiet city.

"I just made a determination it was time to take the next step in my professional career," he said.

It turned out to be the right move. Mastera's social, energetic, and detail-oriented approach aligned well with Dilworth and its goal to play a stronger role in the Fargo-Moorhead region.

"I'm a very out-there person," he said. "You can find me. Whether it be at press conferences, ribbon cuttings, whatever it may be, the city has entrusted me with that power to go out and represent the city."

His efforts led to his recent selection for LMC's James F. Miller Leadership Award.

Delivering results

Since arriving in Dilworth, Mastera has earned a reputation for getting things done, delivering on projects that have strengthened the city's infrastructure, services, and sense of community.

His first accomplishment was overseeing the long-awaited 7th Street NE reconstruction project, which had been a rural roadway with no curb and open ditches. His creativity and "get-it-done" attitude moved the project from Dilworth's long-standing "to-do" list to its "done" list, giving the city a safe, modern corridor connecting historic neighborhoods, city facilities, and new developments.

"That road had been on our radar for as long as I've been mayor," Mayor Chad Olson said. "Peyton came in, figured it out and got it done, just like he always does."

The project fit into the broader vision Mastera has helped shape for the city's east side, including the Rail District — a growing mixed-use commercial area designed to promote community, walkability, and vibrant public spaces.

Mastera also secured federal and state funding for a state-of-the-art fire department — an investment in public safety that will serve the city for generations — and led efforts to build momentum and gain state authorization for a Local Option Sales Tax to fund a new community center.

"He's relentless. He'll leave no stone unturned," Olson said. "These aren't just ideas sitting on a shelf, they're projects that are happening because Peyton knows how to move the needle. Words cannot encapsulate all he has brought to the city."

Connecting the region

City officials say Mastera is great at encouraging staff to develop new skills and is deeply involved in the community.

"He's not only behind the scenes," said Police Chief Hunter Rawson. "He is a member of the community who is very vested in the community."

He's also helped build strong regional partnerships.

"I really worked at building those partnerships across all the cities up here and making Dilworth a present voice at the table," Mastera said. "I think one of the things I'm most proud of now, when this metro area is discussed, we're not an afterthought."

Dan Mahli, city manager of neighboring Moorhead, praised Mastera's collaborative spirit on development issues and willingness to take on challenges.

"We're kind of the noisy neighbor, the one that stays up late on a Thursday night and leaves crap in the yard, keeps you up," Mahli quipped. "He's still friendly the next day."

Mastera said his success comes from enjoying both people and process. He recalled how in college, class registration at the time meant using pencil and paper — rather than computers — and meticulously mapping out the classes and times that worked. He looked forward not only to registering for his own classes but also helping his friends do so.

"It's just some weird, technical thing with organizational details, numbers, and verbiage," he said. "I've always gotten a kick out of doing that."

It's that attention to detail, he said, that feeds his love for another oft-unloved part of his job: labor relations.

"When I tell people labor negotiations are one of the more fun aspects of my job, my colleagues believe I'm lying," he said. "But it's true."

Widespread recognition

He's sharing these skills beyond Dilworth's borders, as well. As president of the Minnesota City/County Managers Association, Mastera helped finish a strategic plan that has been under discussion for several years. Mahli said his humor and work ethic made a big difference.

"This unusually strong work ethic makes him a joy to work with," he said. "He brings fresh eyes. He's got a commitment to having many voices and ideas and perspectives at the table."

Mastera also has built a statewide reputation. When Dilworth officials visit the Minnesota State Capitol or Washington, D.C., elected officials know him by name and reputation.

"The man just exudes the right thing," Olson said. "Integrity, honesty, loyalty, dependability. If you have an opportunity to work with Peyton even once you can see the best of all of the qualities you want to have in a person leading your city."

ANNE BURT
WOODBURY MAYOR
EMERGING LEADER AWARD

PHOTO BY MATT WALES

Under Mayor Anne Burt's leadership, Woodbury has sustained thoughtful growth, and thriving businesses while maintaining high resident satisfaction.

When a Woodbury public safety officer used his own money — and borrowed from his daughter's closet — to help a student who was skipping school on account of having only one outfit, Mayor Anne Burt took notice.

She personally helped establish a fund through the Woodbury Community Foundation to assist officers in supporting residents in a hands-on way without having to use their own resources.

"It's so heartwarming that he's got that compassion to understand this is a crisis," she said, adding that the fund has since grown significantly through community donations. "It shouldn't come out of their own pockets."

That's just one example among many cited by those who nominated Burt for LMC's Emerging Leader Award.

Tackling PFAS contamination

Burt's impact goes well beyond compassionate gestures. As she campaigned for her first term as mayor, the state and 3M reached an $850 million settlement over chemicals in the area's drinking water, with $700 million of that dedicated to addressing per- and polyfluoroalkyl chemicals (PFAS) contamination in groundwater.

The city is using much of its settlement funds on the construction of a new $330 million permanent water treatment facility — its largest capital project ever.

It has involved installing 17 miles of pipe underground to move water from 20 contaminated wells to one single treatment location. The project will be completed in 2028. Under terms of the settlement, 3M provided separate funding toward the installation and upkeep of a temporary water treatment system.

Burt has a background in chemistry and nearly 40 years of experience in the water treatment industry, which helped address the crisis.

"It was serendipitous but very instrumental, because on the campaign trail, it was of high concern to most people in our community and I was able to speak to it, provide reassurance, and let them know what the plan is," she said. "We're so pleased to be in the stage we are now."

Guiding responsible growth

Burt credits current and former city staff and elected officials for the success of several city projects, along with the growing business community, diversifying population and housing types, and for high resident satisfaction.

"We've grown in a very planned out, thoughtful manner over many decades," she said. "I can't take credit for all of it. When I ran for office in 2018 the first time, my goal at the time was really just to keep Woodbury moving in a positive direction."

But Burt deserves significant credit for helping make Woodbury's businesses thrive, said Laurie Staiger, president of the Woodbury Area Chamber of Commerce. Under her leadership the city has earned accolades from the Government Finance Officers Association, Money Magazine, and GreenStep Cities.

"She really champions for them," Staiger said. "We hear time and time again that this is how it should be done. And that doesn't happen without strong leadership from your mayor."

Always learning, always leading

Former City Administrator Clint Gridley praised Burt's enthusiasm and curiosity.

"She loves information, she cares deeply about what she does, she's a people person," he said. "Those characteristics bring a natural enthusiasm, and you want to go with that enthusiasm."

"She really wants a hands-on approach," adds Staiger. "She wants to hear the voice of the business community."

"I am always learning, always absorbing information," Burt said. "My natural inclination is to ask a lot of questions."

And she's willing to share what she learns with others, sitting on several boards, including the local chamber, the Woodbury Racial Equity Collaborative, and the Woodbury Lions Club. She also serves as co-chair of the Regional Council of Mayors. Executive Director Caren Dewar said Burt regularly brings in top-tier speakers on emerging issues like clean water, AI, and education.

"She really is a good connector," Dewar said. "She's just really a strong, wise, grounded person. I trust her, she trusts me, it's a great working relationship."

Looking to the future

Burt isn't planning to seek higher office but does plan one more run for mayor. There's too much in progress to leave now, she said.

The water treatment facility is on the way, the community center — Central Park — is nearly completed, and there's a public safety facility expansion coming soon. Additionally, the city will soon undertake a comprehensive plan to determine how best to develop the last 20-25% of its land.

"I want to see that come to fruition," she said. "A lot of things are keeping me engaged and looking forward to one more term." MC

Andrew Tellijohn is a freelance writer.

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HELPING HANDS: Setting City Boards and Commissions Up for Success

BY SUZY FRISCH

Municipal boards and commissions can be a city government's most helpful resource or a persistent challenge. These citizen bodies often help city leaders and staff make informed decisions and train residents for future roles in government. But they can also struggle when they lack a clear mission or when members aren't given the tools to participate effectively.

Cities big and small have the potential to gain a great deal from their advisory groups. The key is investing time to ensure that these groups have enough members and that participants are well-trained and given clear directions, said Amber Eisenschenk, managing counsel for research with the League of Minnesota Cities.

"When commissions, committees, and boards are working well, they have great goals. Achieving them can help the city get a lot more work done," Eisenschenk said. "Councils get more perspectives on a community's interests and needs and take them into account when they make decisions. These groups can be a positive way to get the community more involved in government operations."

Some commissions have more power than others, like an economic development authority, while others are purely advisory. Typically, smaller cities might have two to five boards, while larger municipalities often have dozens or more. Regardless, these panels open doors for residents to lead and share feedback, building trust between cities and their communities.

As Eisenschenk notes, these groups don't operate on their own. They need dedicated staff time and support. Fortunately, supporting them well doesn't have to be overwhelming. Focusing on a few critical areas can help cities get the most from their boards and commissions.

Set clear goals and objectives

City leaders should determine want kind of guidance they want from a board or commission and define its scope. The group's mission, responsibilities, and relationship to the city council should be documented.

"Not having clear goals can be a challenge," Eisenschenk said. "Some boards and commissions have always been there, so it's known. Others aren't really sure what their charge is."

She recommends that cities evaluate all their existing panels. "Look at whether they are helpful and providing good insight into city operations, and what they could be doing better. Have a conversation about what might be consolidated or realigned or have different goals, and make sure the goals are clear."

If a board has run its course and accomplished its objectives, there's nothing wrong with decommissioning it. "The tendency is to keep everything ever created. There probably was a great reason to start it," Eisenschenk said. "If the council decides that a committee has met its goals, communicate that to committee members, thank them for their service, and perhaps have a conversation about whether they are interested in doing something else."

Get members ready to serve

Once citizens join a board or commission, it's vital to prepare them for their roles. Do a session of onboarding to go over the panel's objectives, relevant data practices, Open Meetings Law requirements, and parliamentary procedure. Eisenschenk recommends offering this training annually as a refresher for all members.

Cities may also find it helpful to host regular training sessions for members, either annually or quarterly, to cover specific topics in more detail. Presiding officers should also be trained in how to guide respectful conversations and provided tools they can use for managing meetings if they become heated, she said.

Set expectations

Clear expectations help resident members contribute meaningfully and act appropriately in their roles. Cities should outline clear expectations around attendance, participation, preparation, and decorum.

(*continued on page 14*)

"Councils get more perspectives on a community's interests and needs and take them into account when they make decisions. These groups can be a positive way to get the community more involved in government operations."

Amber Eisenschenk | Managing counsel for research
League of Minnesota Cities

"It's important for them to be able to reach the goals that the council is going for," Eisenschenk said. "Making sure they understand their powers and limits is important to avoid frustration."

Communicate clearly and consistently

A lack of communication is a common point of frustration for commission members. Commission members can become frustrated if they feel disconnected from the city council or unsure of their purpose. Assigning a staff or council liaison can help bridge the gap.

"That is the biggest gripe we hear from advisory board members — the lack of communication. They aren't sure what they are supposed to be doing as far as their goals or the work they hope to deliver," Eisenschenk said. "They want to make sure they are being included in the process and that the work they are doing is being recognized."

Bring in new voices

Many cities benefit from experienced board and commission members. But it's also important to continue to invite new participants with fresh perspectives. Some local governments have gotten creative in how they advertise openings.

They might hold commission or council meetings at a school, faith-based location, or community center and encourage audience members to get involved. They also can boost participation by holding remote meetings — thanks to an expanded state law that allows public bodies to participate from anywhere as long as one member is in the normal meeting room.

"Cities can get stuck in a rut with the same people volunteering for everything," Eisenschenk said. "These are great people, but we want to make sure we're getting even more people involved in the process."

A highly engaged population

Red Wing has a long history of resident involvement in boards, committees, and commissions. In recent years, the city has strengthened its effectiveness by creating a solid infrastructure to support them, said City Clerk Melissa Hill.

Today, Red Wing's 11 boards — covering areas like housing, historic preservation, arts and culture, library services, and sustainability — include nearly 100 resident participants.

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"Red Wing has always had a strong culture of citizen involvement in lots and lots of areas. We're a thriving arts community that's driven by volunteers," Hill said. "People in Red Wing tend to be very politically aware and engaged. For us, engaging citizens has been crucial in making policy that citizens agree with."

Every group meets monthly, alternating between workshop sessions and formal decision-making meetings. A designated city staff member and a City Council member attend, with the council member serving as an adviser and information resource. The councilor also helps communicate the board's work to the full City Council, serving as liaison and sharing information like what the commission is working on, what decisions it's made, and pending issues or concerns.

Another critical move involved adding two new positions to centralize core board and committee duties instead of spreading responsibilities among their assigned staff. In 2018, Red Wing created an administrative support manager role, which Hill was the first to hold.

"People in Red Wing tend to be very politically aware and engaged. For us, engaging citizens has been crucial in making policy that citizens agree with."

Melissa Hill | City clerk | Red Wing

This staff member publishes meeting notices, recruits members, coordinates onboarding, and manages communications, including through the city's public access channel. The city later added a public information and engagement officer to take a broader, policy-level view of board operations.

"That has made a significant improvement by looking at old policies that weren't serving us well," Hill said.

Red Wing also takes a flexible approach to structuring its boards. In recent years, it reduced its number of boards from 14 to 11 to streamline operations. The city retired its youth commission, which struggled with membership during the pandemic, and reorganized its airport commission into a committee, since federal regulations limit its role.

To have a strong system of advisory boards, Hill emphasizes the importance of training. Participants gain an understanding of their mission and how being on a municipal commission differs from other kinds of boards. That way, they know how to best serve the City Council and Red Wing overall.

"Onboarding is key," she adds. "If you're going to have the boards and dedicate staff, then dedicate the staff time to run them well." MC

Suzy Frisch is a freelance writer.

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Beyond the Inventory: Next Steps in the Journey to Lead-Free Water

BY KATIE KINSEY, SIMON MCCORMACK, AND KEVIN YOUNG

A major milestone was reached on Oct. 16, 2024, when the deadline passed requiring drinking water systems to provide an initial inventory of lead service lines (LSL) in their communities. A lead service line is a pipe made of lead that connects a building's plumbing to the main water line, typically located in the street. The Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) notes that lead was a common material for these lines in homes built before the 1980s due to its durability and flexibility. However, lead can leach into drinking water from these pipes, posing health risks, especially to children.

Water systems nationwide rose to the challenge of mapping their lead infrastructure. Now, the focus shifts from identification to action. The EPA's final Lead and Copper Rule Improvements (LCRI) is more than just another regulatory update — it's a roadmap to cleaner, safer drinking water and spells out how to identify and replace lead pipes to protect people from lead exposure in water.

Make plans to comply

With the LSL inventories in hand, water systems will need to shift their focus to meeting the requirements of the LCRI. Staying on track with compliance deadlines will take proactive planning, including updating drinking water sampling protocols to confirm the accuracy of LSL inventories.

Compliance by Nov. 1, 2027

By this date, water systems must have several key changes in place under LCRI. These include:

- **Lower lead action level:** The action level will drop from 15 µg/L to 10 µg/L. Systems that previously met standards may now need to take action, such as optimizing corrosion control or replacing lead service lines.
- **Updated sampling protocols:** Utilities must collect both first-liter and fifth-liter drinking water samples for sites with lead service lines and use the higher result. This helps better identify risk, especially at sites with lead, galvanized lines downstream of lead, or premise plumbing made of lead. Review the EPA's LCRI fact sheet to learn more about lead action levels and sampling at **bit.ly/LCRI_factsheet**.
- **Inventory verification:** Initial lead service line inventories must be updated to verify all known and unknown service lines.
- **Service line replacement plan:** Systems must prepare a detailed plan to replace lead, galvanized requiring replacement, and unknown lines.
- **Outreach to schools and child care centers:** Community water systems must notify elementary schools and licensed child care facilities about sampling eligibility and share the EPA's "3Ts" guidance — training, testing, and taking action.

Beyond pipes: Protecting people

The following LCRI requirements will strengthen protections and enhance communication:

- **Certified filters for partial replacements**: Certified point-of-use filters must be provided during partial LSL replacements to reduce lead exposure risks.
- **24-hour consumer notifications:** Any disturbance to lead service lines requires notifying customers within 24 hours, along with steps to reduce exposure.
- **Improved consumer confidence reports:** Reports must include clearer language, service line replacement details, and guidance for reducing lead exposure.
- **Education after exceedance:** If a system exceeds the action level, educational materials must be sent to every service address — not just billing customers — with targeted messaging for vulnerable populations.
- **Sampling offers:** Community water systems must offer water sampling to homes that exceed the action level or are served by lead, galvanized requiring replacement, or unknown service lines.

Key future deadlines

Several key deadlines are on the horizon as the LCRI moves from planning to long-term implementation:

- **Jan. 1, 2028**: Water systems with lead or galvanized requiring replacement lines must begin six-month monitoring unless they've already met LCRI protocols (including the new lower action level).
- **Jan. 30, 2029:** Annual service line inventory updates begin.
- **October 2032:** Schools and child care facilities must complete lead sampling and conduct follow-up testing as needed. Water systems are responsible for providing sampling guidance and ensuring timely results and remediation recommendations.
- **Dec. 31, 2034:** Water systems must verify the accuracy of all previously identified nonlead service lines through historical record reviews, inspections, and water sampling. Any unverified or incorrect classifications must be addressed.
- **Dec. 31, 2037:** All lead and qualifying galvanized service lines must be fully replaced.

Why it matters

Lead exposure can impact everything from cognitive development in kids to cardiovascular health in adults. With these improvements, the EPA isn't just enforcing rules — it's investing in the long-term health and future of our communities.

This next chapter is about more than compliance, it's about delivering safer water, building trust, and creating healthier futures. Stay tuned, stay hydrated, and stay lead-free.

Learn more about the EPA's Lead and Copper Rule Improvements at **bit.ly/LCRI_rule.**

Katie Kinsey, Simon McCormack, and Kevin Young are registered professional engineers at SEH (**sehinc.com**). SEH is a member of the League's Business Leadership Council (**lmc.org/sponsors**).

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Putting Community at the Center of City Innovation

Piloting community-centered solutions to move your city forward

BY MELISSA KJOLSING

Cities across Minnesota are facing increasingly complex challenges, from rising mental health needs and housing shortages to workforce recruitment struggles and infrastructure funding gaps. To move forward, cities need more than traditional solutions. They need fresh approaches rooted in local knowledge — and piloting, or a small-scale test that implements a new solution, offers a promising path.

Yet, effective innovation isn't something that can be imported wholesale. It's cultivated locally, rooted in the unique knowledge, experiences, and needs of each community. Piloting is a key strategy to finding right-fit answers, allowing cities to test adaptable solutions that respond to real-world needs.

Building a culture of piloting in local government

Testing ideas that might not succeed is tough — especially in a resource-limited environment where failure can feel costly. Yet without the freedom to fail fast and learn quickly, progress stalls. To spark innovation, city leaders must foster a culture where experimentation is safe, collaboration is encouraged, and learning — even from failure — is valued. Building this kind of culture takes time and trust, but it's essential for long-term resilience.

Here are some key principles and practices cities can follow to successfully pilot community-centered solutions:

- **Focus on action.** Keep the work centered on forward movement, consistently taking next steps to learn and demonstrate progress.
- **Encourage continuous improvement across departments.** Foster a culture of problem solving and risk tolerance. Much of this work involves learning and adapting. This comes naturally to some and is challenging for others. Model how this can work, and establish a regular rhythm of working with residents to identify and cocreate solutions.
- **Start with real local needs**. Gather insights through listening sessions, surveys, or town halls. Ensure representation from diverse voices, especially those most impacted by the issue.
- **Codesign the solution**. Involve residents and stakeholders in shaping the approach. Use simple prototypes or concept testing to validate ideas early.
- **Set clear goals and measures.** Define success in partnership with the community. Use both quantitative data and lived-experience feedback to evaluate impact.
- **Keep it small, focused, simple, and flexible.** Pilot on a manageable scale with room to adapt. Choose a specific challenge or population group to serve.
- **Communicate openly.** Share the "why," "what," and "what's next" of the pilot clearly and regularly. Celebrate learning — even the moments that didn't go as planned.
- **Build the right partnerships.** Collaborate with local organizations, schools, universities, or tech providers open to experimentation. Look for shared values, not just resources.
- **Plan for what comes next.** Document learnings and community feedback. Outline paths to scale, replicate, or sunset the pilot depending on outcomes.

Piloting can serve as a low-risk, high-learning method, enabling cities to experiment with solutions in collaboration with their communities before scaling up.

What it looks like in action: Minnesota cities piloting innovation

Several Minnesota cities have embraced piloting to address local challenges:

- **New Ulm:** Through the Heart of New Ulm project, the community launched nationally recognized pilots focused on improving heart health — including workplace wellness, community screenings, and healthy food access. By aligning local health care providers, public health officials, businesses, and residents, New Ulm created a scalable model for rural heart health transformation that emphasizes prevention and community-wide engagement.
- **St. Cloud:** In May 2025, central Minnesota was selected to pilot an AI-powered road safety tool aimed at reducing serious traffic accidents during the high-risk summer months. This initiative leverages data analytics to identify areas with the greatest risk of fatal or serious injury accidents, allowing for targeted interventions. The program is part of a broader effort to enhance road safety through technology-driven solutions.
- **Central Minnesota:** In the coming months, local government leaders in the central Minnesota counties of Cass, Crow Wing, Morrison, Todd, and Wadena will pilot technology solutions that address the region's critical shortage of volunteer first responders. These pilots will explore innovations that expand access to training, reduce burnout, streamline dispatch operations, and support responder mental health.

These are just a few examples of how piloting can foster innovative solutions that resonate with community needs.

The future is pilot-powered

Minnesota's cities — large and small — have the vision, talent, and local wisdom to lead transformative change. By embracing piloting as a strategy, communities can shape solutions that are not only effective but deeply rooted in equity and trust. The future of civic innovation is local, and it's powered by pilots. MC

Melissa Kjolsing is managing director of AscendRural, a program created by Sourcewell (**sourcewell.org**). Sourcewell is a member of the League's Business Leadership Council (**lmc.org/sponsors**).

Mapleton Invests in Child Care House To Support Local Families

BY HEATHER RULE

When people think about a city's infrastructure, they often think of roads, parks, water and sewer systems, and police and fire stations. But there's another essential need that's often overlooked: child care.

"We'll build roads, and we'll build parks and playgrounds ... but we haven't really been on that page as far as looking at day care," said Mapleton Mayor Jeff Annis.

That changed when Annis, a lifelong resident of Mapleton, became mayor in January 2023 and saw developing a child care option as a key opportunity for community growth. He noticed many families traveling outside the city to find care. As the city looked to attract more families and businesses, the lack of child care made those prospects "a tough sell," Annis said.

"We weren't able to grow the way we'd like to. Whether it's housing, jobs or child care, we as a community will not grow until we have those three things in place and moving all in the right direction," he added.

Identifying the right fit

To address the shortage, the city partnered with the Southern Minnesota Initiative Foundation (SMIF) to assess local needs and explore potential solutions.

"I think anyone you talk to within small communities will say it's always an issue — having enough day care slots available for kids," said James Gordon, market president of Pioneer Bank and the Mapleton Economic Development Authority (EDA) chair.

The city considered various options, such as evaluating available spaces that could be converted to create a child care center. But those models came with significant costs and operational challenges.

The generic answer to a child care shortage problem is usually "let's build a center," said Jeff Andrews, president and founder of Business of Child Care, but the math behind that doesn't always work.

A more flexible solution

Ultimately, the city landed on a creative alternative: building a "Child Care House" from Business of Child Care.

Instead of a larger child care center, this facility is essentially "a house that's day care ready," Annis said. It's an opportunity to address the need with new child care spaces in the community while allowing for some flexibility with the building in case it doesn't go as planned, according to Gordon.

Located a few blocks from the new K-12 school and main city park, the 800-square-foot Child Care House began construction in early August. Once completed, it will accommodate eight to 12 children in alignment with child care licensing rules.

"The nice thing about this whole concept of a Child Care House is ... if it no longer needs to be, or can't be a Child Care House, we can then put it back out into the market as a one-bedroom house," Annis said.

PHOTO PROVIDED BY BUSINESS OF CHILD CARE

A rendering of the Child Care House being constructed in Mapleton. Instead of a larger child care center, this facility is essentially a house that's day care ready,

The Mapleton EDA owns the property and will lease the home to a selected provider. A committee selected the operator in late July through a facilitated process, who will run the business from the house. The facility will be outfitted with appliances, furniture, learning materials, and an outdoor playground.

Funded largely by grants, including a significant contribution from the Minnesota Department of Employment and Economic Development (DEED) and a T-Mobile Hometown Grant, the total cost is about $300,000. That's a fraction of the estimated $3 million it would cost to build a traditional center, Annis noted.

Gordon noted that the custom funding roadmap was created by the team working on behalf of Business of Child Care. He added that the EDA collaborated with grant writers throughout the process, and the Mapleton City Council and staff were supportive partners along the way.

Economic and community impact

Gordon emphasized that the project's affordability is a major asset.

"It's been pretty exciting to think that we might have a solution that doesn't necessarily put a huge burden on our own community," he said.

The versatility of the house also makes it a model for other small cities. Annis noted that only a few states currently allow this kind of facility. The house supports local economic growth and helps families avoid long commutes for child care, such as driving

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30 miles to Mankato to drop off kids and then return to Mapleton for work.

"When you have day care options available, you're more attractive to people moving to your community," Gordon said. "If you have no day care available for a young family, they'll probably look elsewhere."

Community feedback has been positive, Annis said, especially in response to the project's fiscal responsibility and the new child care option it will provide.

"Local parents have expressed how exciting it's going to be to have a place like this," Gordon added. "The one thing that we didn't anticipate ... just the excitement that we've seen from other small communities in the state of Minnesota."

Tailored to Mapleton

Annis and Gordon emphasized that a Child Care House is the right fit for Mapleton — not a one-size-fits-all solution. The city can make this work and have a cash flow with the potential to create another Child Care House to "strategically put these in where it makes sense" both practically and financially, Annis said.

"A child care center in maybe a bigger community or a different community may work out," Annis said. "But for us, just because of the way Mapleton is structured right now, it just didn't work. But the Child Care House does."

"So, there's no right answer or wrong answer. It's what works for each community."

Mayor Annis has shared the concept in roundtable discussions across the state, encouraging other city leaders with similar child care shortages to assess their unique needs and explore alternative solutions. Gordon stressed the importance of early planning, understanding community needs, engaging stakeholders, and identifying funding sources.

PHOTO PROVIDED BY BUSINESS OF CHILD CARE

The Child Care House was funded largely by grants, including a significant contribution from DEED and through a T-Mobile Hometown Grant.

Andrews encourages communities to "start by localizing," without coming into it attempting to solve the entire problem of a child care shortage. Even adding one provider can make a big difference — helping 10 children, their families, and their employers.

"That's a much more consumable, achievable target than saying, 'gosh, we need $5 million to solve that,'" Andrews said.

A lasting investment

City leaders juggle a long list of priorities — from roads to fire trucks to municipal liquor stores. Andrews says adding a Child Care House is a wise investment.

"Just keep in mind this is one that really does keep giving back," Andrews said. "Not just in year one, but over time. And when you've got folks that can keep their kids closer to home, they can also keep pursuing their goals in life." MC

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Land Use Decisions: Creating a Record on the Clock

BY JED BURKETT

Land use regulation can be one of the more challenging aspects of city governance. Local officials must make difficult decisions about development, which can lead to unhappy residents no matter the outcome. Sometimes, those decisions lead to litigation. When that happens, a court will review the city's record (the information available at the time of the decision) to determine if it supports the city's actions. Often, cities must compile these decision-making records while the clock is ticking toward a statutory deadline known as the 60-day rule.

What's a record?

The record of a decision broadly includes all information available to the city at the time it made its decision about development. This may include relevant statutes and ordinance standards, as well as the facts, analysis, discussions, and deliberations. The record typically begins with an application for a particular planning or zoning approval and may include staff reports, memos, studies, or technical reviews. It culminates in the city's decision, often made at a public meeting.

What is the 60-day rule?

The 60-day rule is a timing law found in Minnesota Statutes, section 15.99. Enacted by the Legislature in 1995, the rule is designed to prevent government agencies from unnecessarily delaying development requests. Under the statute, a city must approve or deny a written zoning request within 60 days of receiving it. The city may extend this period by an additional 60 days, but only if it does so in writing before the initial 60-day deadline expires. To go beyond those 120 days, a city generally must have written consent from the applicant.

If a city fails to approve or deny a request within the statutory time period, the request is automatically approved, which can be a significant consequence. For this reason, it is crucial that cities carefully scrutinize applications as they come in to ensure all required materials are included and begin processing them promptly. The law allows cities 15 business days to review an application for completeness and notify the applicant in writing if anything is missing. This notice of incompleteness ends the 60-day clock, and a new clock will start when the applicant reapplies with the required information.

Public hearings

Holding a public hearing is an important step in developing the record. The Municipal Planning Act (Minnesota Statutes Chapter 462) generally requires public hearings before adopting or amending a comprehensive plan or a zoning ordinance — including rezonings — and before granting conditional or interim use permits or preliminary plat approval.

Public hearings should include a complete disclosure of what is being proposed, and a fair and open assessment of the issues raised. The public should be able to:

- Hear and see all the information.
- Ask relevant questions.
- Provide additional information.
- Express support or opposition.

For a smooth public hearing process, the city council should adopt written policies and procedures for conducting public hearings.

Role of neighborhood opinion

Neighborhood opposition can complicate the evaluation of a land use application. Courts have held that public opinion alone is not a valid basis for a city's decision. When reviewing comments, it is helpful to distinguish between the quantity, and the quality, of the comments. For example, the council can rely on well-supported testimony that includes relevant facts. In contrast, emotional or unsupported opposition should not serve as the basis for denial.

Written statement

After a public hearing, the city should adopt written findings to support its decision. The 60-day rule requires that reasons for a denial be provided in writing. These written statements typically take the form of a resolution known as findings of fact. The written statement should:

- Identify the relevant legal criteria, such as statutory standards or code provisions.
- Explain the facts of the specific application.
- Apply those facts to the legal standards.

This document should provide the court with everything needed to uphold the city's decision. MC

Jed Burkett is a land use loss control attorney with the League of Minnesota Cities Insurance Trust. Contact: jburkett@lmc.org or (651) 281-1247.

Court Rules Retirement Presumption Not Automatic in Workers' Compensation Claims

WORKERS' COMPENSATION

Presumption of retirement

Simonson v. Douglas County, 19 N.W.3d 447 (Minn. 2025)

The facts: Dawn Simonson suffered a lower back injury in 1996, at the age of 40, while working as a histologist for Douglas County. In 1999, the parties settled her workers' compensation claims, and Simonson was deemed permanently and totally disabled retroactive to the date of her injury. In 2023, after she turned 67, the county discontinued her monthly $1,282.52 benefit based on the statutory presumption of retirement. Simonson's only other source of income was $815 in monthly Social Security retirement benefits.

The type of case: Simonson filed a claim petition asserting that she was still entitled to permanent total disability (PTD) benefits on the basis that she could rebut the retirement presumption.

The issues: The Minnesota Supreme Court clarified the proper test in determining whether a retirement presumption has been rebutted (disproved by evidence or argument) in a PTD case.

The court's ruling: The Minnesota Supreme Court remanded the case back to the district court and ruled that when assessing whether the retirement presumption has been rebutted under Minnesota law, workers' compensation courts must analyze whether the employee would have retired at that age regardless of the disability. The burden falls on the employee to prove this by a preponderance of the evidence, which is to demonstrate that their claim is more likely true than not true. Evidence may include:

- The availability of the type of work the employee was performing.
- The presence or adequacy of a pension plan or other retirement arrangements.
- The employee's age and work history.
- The employee's willingness to forgo Social Security benefits if suitable work were available.

No single factor determines the outcome, rather judges should consider the strength of each factor and assess how they interact with each other in a difficult and sensitive balancing process.

What this means for cities: When discontinuing disability benefits based on the retirement presumption, cities should be prepared for a case-specific inquiry. Employees can rebut the presumption with evidence, and each situation will require careful evaluation.

SECTION 1983

Excessive force

Barnes v. Felix, 145 S. Ct. 1353 (2025)

The facts: Officer Roberto Felix, Jr., of Houston, Texas, pulled over Ashtian Barnes for suspected toll violations. Felix ordered Barnes to exit the vehicle, but Barnes began to drive away. As the car started moving, Felix jumped onto the doorsill and fired two shots into the vehicle. Barnes was fatally hit but managed to stop the car. About five seconds passed between when the vehicle began to move and when it came to a stop. Two seconds passed between Felix stepping on the doorsill and the moment he fired the first shot.

The type of case: Barnes' mother sued the officer, alleging that he violated Barnes's Fourth Amendment right against excessive force.

The issues: The District Court granted summary judgment (a decision made by a court without a full trial) for the officer, applying the "moment-of-threat" rule. The Court of Appeals affirmed, explaining that the rule requires asking only whether an officer was "in danger at the moment of the threat that resulted in [his] use of deadly force." Under the rule, events leading up to the shooting are irrelevant. The U.S. Supreme Court reviewed whether courts may apply the moment-of-threat rule in resolving Fourth Amendment excessive-force claims.

> Officers should be aware that **excessive use-of-force cases will be evaluated based on all the circumstances of a situation**.

The court's ruling: The Supreme Court ruled that the moment-of-threat rule improperly limits the required "totality of the circumstances" analysis that should be used in excessive-force claims. The court noted that the appropriate test examines whether the force was justified from "the perspective of a reasonable officer on the scene," taking into account both individual and government interests. The court ruled that the totality-of-the-circumstances test is not time restricted to the precise moment the shooting occurred. However, it did not address whether an officer's own role in creating a dangerous situation factors into the reasonableness analysis.

What this means for cities: Officers should be aware that excessive use-of-force cases will be evaluated based on all the

circumstances of a situation. There is no clear and objective legal rule for determining when force becomes excessive.

MINNESOTA DATA PRACTICES

Release of active criminal investigative data

Alpha News v. City of Detroit Lakes, 20 N.W.3d 627 (Minn. App. 2025)

The facts: Alpha News sought police body-worn and dash camera footage related to an ongoing criminal investigation of former Minnesota state Sen. Nicole Mitchell, who was a sitting senator at the time of the incident. Mitchell, who has since resigned after being convicted of first-degree burglary, was the subject of the requested data, which are classified as confidential or protected nonpublic under Minnesota Statutes, section 13.82, subdivision 7. According to Alpha News, information in the criminal complaint conflicted with public statements made by Mitchell and her attorney in the days following her arrest. Alpha News submitted a formal request for the footage to the Detroit Lakes Police Department. The department denied the request.

T**he type of case:** Under Minnesota Statutes, section 13.82, subdivision 7, a court may release protected investigative data if the public benefit outweighs any harm to the public, the city, or the person identified in the data. In its complaint, Alpha News stated the "camera footage ... could corroborate or refute the criminal complaint and/or public statements by Sen. Mitchell," and that the public benefit in knowing the truth was substantial. The city took no position on whether the data should be released but asked the district court to articulate its reasoning if it authorized release, to avoid being overwhelmed by similar requests in the future. The district denied Alpha News' motion for the release of the data, ruling the rights of an accused during an active criminal case outweighed the public's interest in accessing the footage before trial.

The issues: The Minnesota Court of Appeals considered how to interpret "benefit ... of the public" under the Minnesota Government Data Practices Act when determining whether to release active investigative data.

The court's ruling: In reviewing whether the district court properly denied Alpha News' request, the Court of Appeals defined the phrase "benefit ... to the public" to mean "that which has a helpful or useful effect on the community or people as a whole, or that which otherwise promotes the well-being of the community or people as a whole." It ruled that under this definition, the body-camera footage would benefit the public and it was unclear whether the district court had properly weighed that benefit against potential harm. The Court of Appeals, sent the case back to the district court to analyze the data using the new benefit to the public definition.

What this means for cities: Cities should continue to treat investigative data as nonpublic but should keep in mind that the courts will take a broad view of public benefit when deciding to release such data.

Written by Kyle Hartnett, assistant research manager with the League of Minnesota Cities. Contact: khartnett@lmc.org or (651) 215-4084.

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What Is the Process for Filling a Council Vacancy?

Filling Vacancies

What is the process for filling a council vacancy?

LMC City council seats may become vacant for a variety of reasons, but once vacant, the seat must be filled as soon as possible. Here's an overview of the process:

- Upon notification of vacancy, the remaining council members must pass a resolution to declare the seat vacant.
- Once declared, the council must consider interested and qualified residents and appoint an eligible person to fill the vacancy. Cities may advertise the opening, require an application, or request letters of interest. However, appointments may also be made informally based on individuals the council already knows to be interested in the position. If the council (or a quorum or committee of the council) conducts the interviews, the Open Meeting Law applies.
- Most vacancies are filled by appointment until the next regular city election. A special election is required if the city has an ordinance mandating it, or if more than two years remain in the term and the vacancy occurs before the filing period opened for the next council election begins.

Learn more in the Filling a Council Vacancy online course in MemberLearn at **lmc.org/council-vacancy-course**. Model resolutions are available at **lmc.org/specialelections**.

Answered by Law Clerk Tara Niebeling: tniebeling@lmc.org.

Employee Benefits

Minnesota Paid Leave starts Jan. 1, 2026. What can our city do now to prepare?

LMC To help your city get ready for Minnesota Paid Leave, here are five steps you can take now:

- Submit quarterly wage detail reports. Wage reporting started October 2024. If you have not done so already, submit your city's wage detail report through Minnesota Unemployment Insurance. Learn more at **bit.ly/MN-reporting-wages**.
- Review your city budget and determine premium cost sharing. For nonunion employees, cities must pay at least 50% of the total premium and may deduct the remainder from employee wages. For union-represented employees, many labor experts indicate cities must negotiate a 50-50 employer-employee premium split. Use the state's premium calculator tool at **bit.ly/DEED-premium-calculator** to help estimate premium costs.
- Evaluate options for city leave policies. Determine whether to allow employees to supplement Minnesota Paid Leave benefits with city-provided leave. Remember, cities cannot require employees to exhaust city leave before applying for paid leave benefits, nor can they require employees "top off" paid leave benefits with city leave.
- Develop a plan for communicating Minnesota Paid Leave to employees. The Minnesota Department of Employment and Economic Development (DEED) will provide a model employee notice of rights. Cities must share this notice with employees by Dec. 1, 2025.
- Stay informed. Visit the Minnesota Paid Leave website and League's paid leave FAQ page for updates and resources at **mn.gov/deed/paidleave a**nd **lmc.org/paidleave-FAQs**.

Answered by HR Member Consultant Elise Heifort: eheifort@lmc.org.

Loss Control

Are near misses important to track?

LMC Yes, tracking near misses is an essential part of injury prevention and safety awareness. A near miss is an unplanned event that could have resulted in injury, illness, or property damage, but did not. These close-call incidents are valuable when looking at trends.

For example, imagine a week goes by where multiple employees slip on an icy parking lot but are not injured, yet none of the incidents are reported. Then, one employee falls and sustains a serious injury. Had the earlier near misses been reported, the hazard may have been addressed and the injury prevented.

Tracking near misses allows cities to identify and resolve safety concerns before they lead to more serious incidents. It also promotes a proactive safety culture by demonstrating the city's commitment to taking action before someone gets hurt. Near misses serve as an early warning system.

The League of Minnesota Cities Insurance Trust's loss control field consultants can work with your city to identify trends and implement preventive measures based on near-miss data. Reach out to your loss control consultant for more information, or contact Loss Control Field Manager Kate Connell at kconnell@lmc.org to get your consultant's contact information.

Answered by Loss Control Field Manager Kate Connell: kconnell@lmc.org. MC

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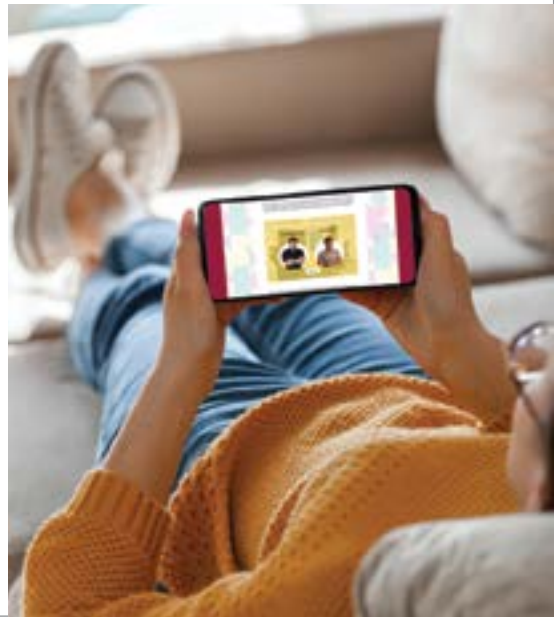

Minnetrista's Commitment to Transparency: The Annual State of the City Address

BY ALLIE POLSFUSS

In local government, every decision directly impacts the lives of our residents. That's why the Minnetrista City Council makes transparency and accessibility a top priority. It's not just about meeting administrative goals — it's about reflecting the values and needs of the constituents we serve and the community as a whole. One of the most significant ways the City Council puts this into practice is through its annual State of the City Address.

Sharing progress and goals

The State of the City Address is more than a formal presentation and update. It's a communication bridge between city government and residents. Delivered by the mayor, this address highlights where Minnetrista stands today, what we've accomplished over the past year, and where we're headed next. It's also a chance to acknowledge challenges, outline priorities, and most importantly, invite residents to engage in conversations about the future.

The tradition began in 2016, when we proudly hosted the event at City Hall. These early addresses helped establish an open line of communication between residents and their local government. However, like many community gatherings, we had to pause the event in 2020 due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

A new location and format

When the address returned in 2023, it was met with enthusiasm, marking a significant step toward re-engaging our community in person. Burl Oaks Golf Club offered to host the event, giving it a fresh setting. Attendees now enjoy a social hour with light refreshments before the presentation, encouraging conversation and community connection.

The new location has been well received. Attendance is up, and feedback from residents shows strong support for the location and format. These changes have helped make the event more accessible and enjoyable, and have reinforced how small adjustments can go a long way in encouraging public participation.

Strategic planning sets the course

The preparation for the State of the City Address is a thoughtful process, designed to ensure that the information presented is strategic, relevant, and accurately reflects the city's direction.

Each February, the City Council holds a strategic planning session to review progress and set goals for the next two to three years. Following this review, the Council identifies five or six strategic priorities that serve as the guiding framework for the mayor's address.

To prepare, the mayor and key city staff also rehearse the address. The "Mock State of the City Address" helps refine the message, identify any gaps in information, ensures clarity, and prepares the team to confidently respond to common questions.

PHOTO COURTESY OF CITY OF MINNETRISTA

2025 priorities

The priorities selected for the 2025 State of the City Address included:

- Public infrastructure: Recognizing the foundational importance of our roads, water, and sewer systems.
- Public safety: Supporting services and programs that keep residents safe.
- Community planning: Guiding smart, sustainable growth and land use.
- Community connectivity and engagement: Fostering stronger bonds within our neighborhoods and encouraging active citizen participation.
- Budgeting: Demonstrating fiscal responsibility and strategic allocation of resources.

Each of these priorities reflects the Council's commitment to long-term stability and responsive service.

A tool for engagement

The State of the City Address isn't just about sharing information — it's part of a broader commitment to keep residents informed and involved. We've seen firsthand how meaningful communication can help strengthen trust and collaboration between residents and city leadership.

Minnetrista's approach to the State of the City is one example of how community engagement can evolve and grow stronger over time. By making space for conversation and showing our work along the way, we're helping to build a more connected and informed community. MC

Allie Polsfuss is the former Minnetrista assistant city administrator.

Growing Together: Wyoming's Community Garden Expands Access and Connection

BY DEBORAH LYNN BLUMBERG

For 16 years, residents of the City of Wyoming formed friendships, built healthy eating habits, and cut their grocery costs growing their own fruits and vegetables in a community garden on the grounds of M Health Fairview Lakes Medical Center.

The garden's 14 plots — managed by M Health Fairview — drew patients and staff from the medical center, residents of the adjacent Meadows on Fairview assisted living center, and others in the community seeking an affordable and accessible space to grow their own food. But the centrally located garden — the only community garden in Wyoming, and one of only four in all of Chisago County — had its share of challenges.

For years, the medical center had a long waitlist of people who were eager to grow their own squash, tomatoes, and sunflowers but lacked access to land.

"We simply did not have garden beds to offer," said Emily Carpenter, community partnerships manager with M Health Fairview Community Advancement. At one point, she turned away more than a dozen interested gardeners. In addition, the plots weren't accessible for people who use a wheelchair or have mobility issues that make bending and crouching difficult.

Costs for new beds, tools, and other equipment needed for new gardeners, who pay a $25 annual fee, quickly added up. With limited resources, the medical center couldn't tackle an expansion and renovation alone. So, Carpenter and her team turned to the city for support.

Ultimately, the City of Wyoming secured state funding and collaborated with M Health Fairview Lakes Medical Center to expand and improve the garden's accessibility. The project earned the city a 2025 League of Minnesota Cities City of Excellence Award.

PHOTO COURTESY OF M HEALTH FAIRVIEW

The City of Wyoming partnered with M Health Fairview Lakes Medical Center and secured funding to expand the community garden, creating an accessible space that brings residents of all ages and backgrounds together.

A private-public partnership takes root

Conversations about community garden expansion between M Health Fairview and Wyoming City Administrator Robb Linwood began in 2023.

"It's something that we at the medical center have talked about for a long time," Carpenter said. "Our health system's mission is to heal, discover, and educate for longer, healthier lives, and the community garden really lives that mission out. We understand the vital role that access to nutritious food plays in people's overall health. And the community garden supports social connection, too." The garden helps to reduce barriers and advance access to healthy and nutritious food, she added.

The project aligned well with an overarching goal of the Council's, to help residents age happily and healthfully. With the nearest other community gardens located 15 to 20 minutes away in North Branch and Lindstrom, expanding the local garden was a logical step.

The expansion would also better serve residents of the nearby Heims Lake Villas, a growing 55-plus community.

Linwood proposed applying for an Age-Friendly Minnesota Community Grant from the Minnesota Department of Human Services. The City Council approved the plan, and the city secured more than $19,000. An additional $2,999 came from Chisago County Statewide Health Improvement Partnership (SHIP), a community-led initiative focused on building healthier communities in the state.

In addition to covering construction costs, funding also went toward purchasing new materials and shared tools for gardeners after Carpenter surveyed current gardeners about their garden wishlist. She purchased a second rototiller to break up and turn over soil, a new lawn mower after the previous one fizzled out, digital water timers, shovels, rakes, and gloves. Other costs the grant money will cover include ongoing garden maintenance and periodic classes for gardeners

on topics such as soil health, plant care, and harvesting techniques.

Building for access and engagement

Construction began in spring 2024, with support from city planning commission staff, their families, and other community members.

Wyoming Zoning Administrator/Building Official Fred Weck designed the layout and helped lead the build. Over nine hours, volunteers graded and leveled the site, installed two brand new raised beds and four ground-level beds, filled them with soil, and enclosed the area with 60 feet of fencing. The garden now includes 20 beds and serves 32 gardeners, up from 14.

One of the newly added plots is used by Rise, which provides enrichment programs for adults with developmental disabilities. This is the program's first year growing its own produce, said Jamie Farley, activity coordinator at Rise.

"We planted things we plan to use in our cooking groups in-center — zucchini, squash, cucumber, broccoli, cauliflower, tomatoes, and various herbs," she said. "It has definitely been a learning experience so far, and we are already planning what we might do differently next year."

Farley added that the garden gives Rise greater flexibility and efficiency than their previous produce arrangement. "Previously we had collected produce from a local CSA [Community Supported Agriculture] program, but many of the things we got posed some challenges for cooking and weren't well liked. Unfortunately, much of it went to waste," she said. "The community garden space allows us to customize exactly what we get and how much we can harvest."

A garden that grows community

Today, residents age 18 and older gather at the garden to plant, water, and harvest produce and flowers. "Weekends are always buzzing at the garden," Carpenter said. "That's become a natural time for connection. It's been really amazing to see the community that's been built."

The garden includes shared apple and pear trees, and raspberry bushes. Gardeners collaborate on weeding, harvesting, and even donating extra produce to Family Pathways, a North Branch-based nonprofit that distributes food to local families in need.

"The garden is not just about tending to your food," Linwood said. "There's so much more. It draws residents of all ages and backgrounds. It really is about a shared space and about building social connection."

Carpenter notes that gardeners are especially grateful for a way to grow their own food as grocery prices rise. "They've told me, 'If I can save a little by growing my own food, I'm going to do that.'"

She credits the city's support from planning through promotion: "I can't begin to describe just how appreciative we are. They've been incredible partners from start to finish."

Wyoming Assistant City Administrator Grant MacFarlane calls the renovated community garden "a great added amenity" for city residents. "Anytime you can introduce a new amenity to the community, it's a huge draw for people," he said. "The expanded garden is being utilized a ton; it's been really great."

Next steps, and lessons for other cities

Given the project's success, there's already talk of future expansion, especially to add more raised beds. "If M Health Fairview Lakes Medical Center can find the space," MacFarlane said, "then we're certainly willing to go through the process again."

He believes that, while Wyoming's community garden project and partnership is unique, it's one that other cities and communities can learn from. To access funding, cities should lean on community-led initiatives like SHIP, he said.

"These organizations offering grants want you to succeed," said MacFarlane. "Don't be afraid to at least try." Also, tap into city staff members' skills and expertise, he added.

Linwood added that the project is a model for how local governments can collaborate with nonprofits and health care providers. "Don't be afraid to reach out," he said. "Sometimes we get siloed in our work, but when we lean on each other's strengths, we can make a real impact in our community."

Deborah Lynn Blumberg is a freelance writer.

PHOTO COURTESY OF M HEALTH FAIRVIEW

The garden expansion project aligned with the City Council's goal of helping residents age happily and healthfully.

PHOTO COURTESY OF M HEALTH FAIRVIEW

ON THE WEB

Access a video of this Wyoming initiative at **lmc.org/Wyoming**.

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