



SE MN Together: A Report from the Field, Evaluating Our Results

Executive Summary

SE MN Together was organized by a volunteer group as an experiment in cooperative action in addressing our region's workforce shortage. We worked to engage, encourage, and activate the southeast region through conversation and collaboration with the goal of developing action plans. In February 2015, SMIF (the Southern Minnesota Initiative Foundation) awarded SE MN Together an \$80,000 Community Growth Initiative grant that required matching in-kind and cash contributions from sponsors. Learning to work together as a region and determining what framework will enable that to happen in the future was a core objective of the SE MN Together project.

The project's four goals were to:

1. align and coordinate workforce solutions;
2. positively grow workforce capacity;
3. actively engage smaller communities; and,
4. learn how to plan and collaborate regionally.

Project Model and Methods

By hosting three community conversations in different areas of the region, as well as a community economic design team process, SE MN Together developed a framework for working together as a region on workforce and other issues related to economic development.

Key elements of the project model included the following:

- Use of sub-regional planning committees to create and recruit participation for the three community conversations. This provided credibility, increased community awareness, and helped generate enthusiasm for the project.
- Creating a venue/forum for information sharing. Bringing people together extended personal and professional networks, and allowed for cross-regional action to develop.
- Conversations designed to allow participants to communicate across sectors and select specific issues, challenges, and actions most relevant to them.
- Focus on action with tangible results. The explicit aim was to move participants beyond identification of issues and needs to creating action plans that could be implemented.
- Use of Social Media, including YouTube, Facebook, and other virtual networks to promote the project, increase awareness, and recruit participation.

Results

In total, over 300 people participated, most attending one of the three community meetings, and two communities participated in the economic design process. The best-represented industry sectors were business, education, human resources professionals, non-profits, and government. Ten themes emerged from the conversations.

Themes

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| ▪ Cultural Diversity | ▪ School-Business Partnerships, |
| ▪ Welcoming Communities | Apprenticeships/Internships/Mentorships, |
| ▪ Transportation | Career Pathways |
| ▪ Marketing Communities and the Region | ▪ Early Childhood Education and Childcare |
| ▪ Employer Incentives | ▪ Rural Broadband Access |
| ▪ Housing | ▪ Regional Framework |

Action Plans

While initial action planning teams covered a diverse range of topics from rural broadband access to regional branding to community childcare solutions, six plans emerged from the process and applied for seed funding to move forward:

1. **SE MN Regional Transit**, developing a regional transit resource using Google Transit;
2. **Regional Video Project**, where high school students create videos highlighting their communities and a final SE MN Regional video is produced as a final product. (Partner: Journey to Growth);
3. **SE MN Housing Initiative**, by conducting a regional housing summit, and using a train-the-trainer model, attendees will subsequently hold local community housing summits to address specific local needs related to housing and the workforce;
4. **Diversity and Resource Net** – creating a diversity resource inventory by gathering information on what resources currently exist in our region.
5. **Career Sampler Grant**, providing funding for transportation from schools to worksites so students can learn more about career progression, training requirements, and opportunities within specific companies;
6. **Internships Housing Network** – creating a network of families willing to house interns along with a network of employers willing to help pay for that housing; and,

Projects 1-4 above have been awarded \$5000 each from SMIF.

Additionally, the 'Career Pathways' group is working independently. A Regional Career Pathways Coordinator has been hired, and regular meetings of the Regional Career Pathways Taskforce will take place during the summer of 2016, with a report of workforce system strengths, gaps and opportunities due to the legislature and the public at large in 2017.

Another action planning group is working on a regional marketing plan under the Journey to Growth banner. The Journey to Growth marketing initiative gained participants and insights through the conversations.

In addition to action plans, numerous related projects, activities, and collaborations have formed and been enhanced through participation in the SE MN Together project, including a stronger relationship between SE MN Together and Journey to Growth, and enhanced cross-regional collaboration and information sharing on workforce-related issues.

Framework for Addressing Regional Issues

As a result of the community meeting and economic design team processes, we have developed components of a framework for working together to address other regional issues:

1. Continue collaboration and conversation as a region;
2. Provide a mechanism for continued support and communication of progress and outcomes;
3. Use local planning teams;
4. Conduct intentional and consistent outreach to smaller communities;
5. Designate staff for regional planning and action efforts; and,
6. Continue to collaborate, but not merge, with other economic development initiatives such as Journey to Growth and Destination Medical Center.

A particular focus of the SE MN Together project was the inclusion and engagement of smaller communities in the region. To make it easier for those communities to participate in future planning efforts, we recommend the following:

- Use technology to enable access to conversations and planning processes (e.g., webinars, conference calls, automated electronic communication, etc.);
- Create additional connections to community leaders, local employers and the agriculture sector;
- Leverage resources to maximize impact;
- Frame the discussion as mutual benefit rather than competition; and,
- Provide seed funding.