



center for rural policy and development

Seeking Solutions for Greater Minnesota's Future

Finding the Voice of Rural Minnesota

Executive Summary

Rural Minnesota—the parts of the state outside the Twin Cities metro and the larger regional cities—has lost its influence in policy discussions that occur in both the private and public sectors. On this point, there is near unanimous opinion among influential Minnesotans who participated in a study sponsored by the Center for Rural Policy and Development (CRPD).

What is less clear is how rural Minnesota can regain an effective voice and how organizations like the Center can better define and elevate issues and solutions that are critical to the region's future.

These challenges were at the heart of an assessment sponsored by CRPD. The Center is a non-partisan, not-for-profit policy research organization. It works with academic and non-academic researchers throughout the state to design and conduct research with the goal of providing policy makers with an unbiased evaluation of issues from a rural perspective. CRPD is based in St. Peter.

The study included interviews and a survey of people actively involved in public policy in general and in issues affecting rural Minnesota specifically, plus a review of news media. The results of the study identified several points of agreement among respondents:

- Rural Minnesota has lost influence in state affairs as the population declines and ages. A major concern is that issues of greatest importance

by **TOM HORNER**
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The Center for Rural Policy and Development, based in St. Peter, Minn., is a private, not-for-profit policy research organization dedicated to benefiting Minnesota by providing its policy makers with an unbiased evaluation of issues from a rural perspective.

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to rural Minnesota don't have a "home" in the public policy arena. There is no state agency dedicated to a comprehensive policy agenda for rural Minnesota; rural legislative caucuses have been inconsistent and not very effective; and the statewide organizations with the greatest influence focus more and more of their attention on the Twin Cities and regional communities.

- Other changes are eroding rural Minnesota's influence. For example, the declining population has resulted in a smaller legislative delegation representing rural Minnesota. In addition, many of the longest-serving rural legislators have retired, further eroding rural Minnesota's voice.
- The widely held perception is that rural Minnesota is becoming much more fragmented in its advocacy. There are few unifying voices. Rural Minnesota doesn't unite under the umbrella of organizations representing agriculture as it once did. Meanwhile, statewide organizations are following the flow of money and members to the Twin Cities and regional centers—placing much more emphasis on non-rural agendas.
- Rural Minnesota's voice is also affected by the on-going transition in Minnesota's economy. The industries important to rural Minnesota—farming, timber, mining, and manufacturing—while still a large part of the state's economy, are employing fewer and fewer people.
- Rural communities often end up competing aggressively with each other rather than joining forces to compete as a region. Local chambers of commerce are recognized as important voices in rural Minnesota. However, they are under increasing pressure to deliver for their own communities. The incentives important to a chamber of commerce—retaining members and a local financial base—place greater emphasis on bringing a handful of jobs to a small community than on joining forces to compete for a regional win.
- There is consensus that creating a single, unifying voice for rural Minnesota isn't likely or even possible. Instead, rural Minnesota will benefit from several things: more strategic collaboration that leverages the resources that do distinguish rural Minnesota; a focused agenda supported by research that has value to policy makers; and more focus on educating private and public policy makers on the benefit of a strong rural Minnesota and the policies that will be needed to achieve that goal.

Methodology

The research for this report was conducted by Horner Strategies, LLC, as part of a larger communications assessment of CRPD.

This report is based on qualitative research. While the data are not based on scientifically valid samples of rural Minnesota populations, they do paint a consistent picture of the issues challenging rural Minnesota.

Information for this project was gathered in the following ways:

- In-depth interviews were conducted from late August through early October 2012. Approximately 50 interviews were completed by author Tom Horner with each interview taking 30 to 60 minutes. Interviews were conducted of current and former legislators, members of the news media, and selected rural Minnesota business, civic, and policy influencers. The interviews were conducted in confidence to assure candor.
- An online survey was developed based on the information gained through the interviews and other assessments. The survey was distributed to approximately 1,000 people with influence in rural Minnesota; the response rate was slightly higher than 12 percent.
- A review of the news media was conducted. The primary focus of the research was CRPD and its

presence in news stories. This review provided insight and mostly substantiation of the findings of the interviews and survey.

The Changing Face of Rural Minnesota

In 2010, CRPD's *Rural Minnesota Journal* compiled messages from diverse policy analysts to the next governor of the state. A consistent theme ran through the articles—rural Minnesota leaders, communities and organizations will rely on innovation to address the region's challenges, but state government must be a strong partner.

"For decades, Minnesotans have taken for granted that regardless of where we lived or traveled in this state, we could expect to receive essentially the same level of basic local government services," wrote Jim Miller, executive director of the League of Minnesota Cities. "That has been changing in recent years as the state's budget dilemma has grown and funding for programs such as local government aid were consequently reduced. The result is a growing disparity in the ability of Minnesota's 854 cities to provide similar services. While not exclusively a function of geography, many communities in Greater Minnesota are among the most adversely affected.

"This has not been the result of an overt policy shift.... This outcome might even be described as an unintended consequence since most of the attention has been on solving the budget problem and not so much on understanding the consequences of those decisions.... Hopefully, our new state leaders will make difficult budget decisions having first answered such important public policy questions as: Do we want to sustain a vibrant rural Minnesota, and what are the consequences if we don't?" said Miller.

"Hopefully, our new state leaders will make difficult budget decisions having first answered such important public policy questions as: Do we want to sustain a vibrant rural Minnesota, and what are the consequences if we don't?"

In a nutshell, Miller's question summarizes the challenge for all Minnesotans, not just on questions of public policy, but on the decisions made in the private sector that have significant implications for different regions of the state.

Miller and the other authors of the 2010 letter to the governor highlight the need to use a magnifying glass more often than a telescope when defining Minnesota. Statistics too often characterize a very diverse state as a monolithic entity:

- Citing a statewide poverty rate of nearly 11 percent (2009) ignores the reality that outside of the 11-county Twin Cities region, nearly half of the counties have higher poverty rates than the statewide average.
- Minnesota's median household income of a bit more than \$57,200 (2006-10 average) is a result mostly of higher incomes in the population centers—the Twin Cities and regional communities—and lower household incomes throughout the rest of the state. In the four corners of Minnesota—Kittson, Rock, Houston, and Cook counties—median household income averages about \$48,275 or more than 18 percent lower than the state average. And these are far from the four poorest counties.
- Overall, about 15 percent of Minnesota children under age 18 live in poverty. But 13 counties from central Minnesota to the Canadian border top 20 percent, with some counties having a poverty rate among children of more than 30 percent, according to the 2012 County Health Rankings and Roadmap sponsored by the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation.
- Even the state's politics are divided by geography. There may be no better recent example

than the 2012 vote on the constitutional amendment defining marriage. Statewide, slightly more than 47 percent voted “Yes” on the amendment, sending the amendment down to a sizable defeat. In fact, though, the “No” votes were a majority in only 12 of Minnesota’s 87 counties. Voters in the state’s other 75 counties favored the amendment, often by large majorities. In fact, in at least 24 of the 75 counties, the amendment was supported by two-thirds or more of the electorate.

- Mining, timber, agriculture, and associated manufacturing—the bedrocks of rural Minnesota—have shrunk from 19 percent of the economy in 1963 to about 6.5 percent today. Meanwhile, the service-producing sectors—including retail, banking, and financial services, among others—have mushroomed, particularly in regional centers. These sectors today account for 80 percent of Minnesota’s economy, according to data compiled for the Governor’s 21st Century Tax Reform Commission, which issued its report in 2009.
- Among the facts that most distort the reality of Minnesota are those dealing with population. The data tell us that by 2020 there will be more Minnesotans age 65 and older than school-age children.

Every one of the seven Twin Cities metro counties has an over-65 population that is below the statewide average of 13.1 percent (2011). In Greater Minnesota, it’s a different story. Many counties have populations in which one in five residents or more are over the age of 65. Look at Aitkin County, 125 miles or so north of the Twin Cities. There, more than 27 percent of the population is over age 65.

Aitkin County, though, is one of the fortunate Greater Minnesota counties. At least its popula-

tion, drawn to the area by Mille Lacs and other lakes, grew at a fairly healthy 5.9 percent in the last decade. Consider the counties that are being hit with a double whammy of populations that are shrinking and aging. Nineteen counties have a median age of at least 45 and half of Minnesota’s 87 counties are losing population. Traverse County is a good example. It lost almost 14 percent of its population in the last decade. Today, nearly 26 percent of the population—almost twice the state average—is 65 or older.

The experts interviewed for this report were quick to point out that these and other trends only define the challenges facing rural Minnesota; they don’t limit the opportunities for innovative solutions.

The Challenges

The Minnesota policy experts and influencers who participated in the survey were asked to identify the greatest challenge rural Minnesota will face over the next decade in advocating for its public policy and economic development agendas. Among the responses:

The changing population

Woven throughout the research is the concern over rural Minnesota’s declining population and the aging of those who still choose to live in the region. The challenge is reflected in the “brain drain,” the concern that communities will lose their vitality, and in the inability of communities to meet the needs of a much older population.

“The opportunity for young people to come and re-charge the communities.”

“The continued migration to larger metro areas in pursuit of the better job positions, opportunities.”

“Replacing the loss of the Baby Boomers with a trained work force.”

“The inverse relationship between population and social/commercial resources.”

“The declining and aging populations that make the current model of service delivery unaffordable.”

The rural-metro (sometimes broken) connection

The theme of a “One Minnesota” was echoed throughout the research, with several people in interviews saying that rural Minnesota’s effectiveness depends on educating Twin Citians on why an economically healthy rural Minnesota is good for the rest of the state. At the same time, there is concern that rural Minnesota—its values and lifestyles—could be overwhelmed by the interests and agendas of the Twin Cities metro area.

“Minnesota leaders need to think of the state as a whole, rather than the Twin Cities and Greater Minnesota. Each depends on each other for a strong economy.”

“Explaining to urban and suburban constituencies why the rural voice matters, why and how we are different, and why we have different needs that should be supported.”

“The disconnect that urban people have to the rural economy and the fact that many aspects of the rural economy are essential to making their urban lifestyles work.”

“Not being treated fairly... Good businesses will come and actually help congestion in the metro.”

“Sustaining the values and traditions of ‘rural life’ as we have come to know and love here in Minnesota.”

“Twin Cities metro ideologies being imposed on all of Minnesota.”

“The continued trend of statewide officials to be ‘metro-centric.’”

The lack of cooperation

Many of the respondents to the survey who offered a suggestion for the greatest challenge facing rural Minnesota cited competition (or the lack of cooperation).

“Getting support across regional boundaries.”

“The ability of political groups to work together to provide financial support to solve problems of rural Minnesota.”

“Creating common bonds and interconnectivity with all rural citizens.”

“Self-protectionism. Here in the NE, one town won’t hire someone from another town from down the road for one reason or another. There needs to be assistance in helping these small communities change on a different level, and that will not come from within their city or town limits.”

The role of government

A strong sentiment of limited government runs through the research and especially in the survey. While respondents see the need for some public investments, rural Minnesota relying on government as a solution to the region’s challenges is more frequently cited as an obstacle than a benefit.

“The false belief that government will solve [rural Minnesota’s] problems. Governments are broke. People need to accept the fact that they need to solve their problems locally.”

“Overcoming overpriced government at all levels, excess regulations, financing for private sector, school funding, past and present.”

“Overcoming the misunderstanding of [rural Minnesota’s] own population and professionals on how prosperity is created and sustained.”

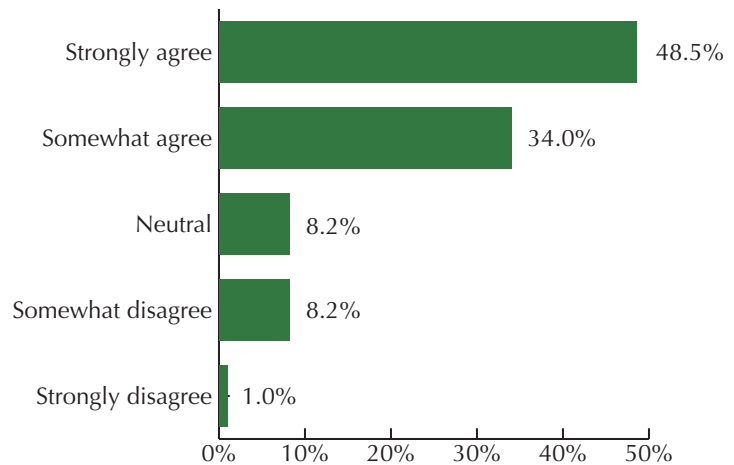


Figure 1: Do you agree or disagree: Rural Minnesota as a region is losing influence on public policy and economic development issues.

“High tax rates for business.”

“To have a strong voice in government policy. Stay away from too much government control. The rules and regulations and paperwork will kill rural America.”

“Liberal politicians.”

Rural Minnesota’s Declining Influence

Few of the participants in the research challenge the consensus that rural Minnesota has lost influence in statewide policy and political decisions (Figure 1). More than eight out of ten participants in a survey of influencers and policy analysts agree with the statement that rural Minnesota has lost influence on policy and economic development issues. (A reminder: This survey provides useful insights and perceptions only. It is not drawn from a scientifically valid sample.)

Opinions on the underlying causes are more diffuse than the headline, though.

The most common reason cited for rural Minnesota’s decline in influence is the decline in population. Respondents to the survey were asked to rank nine trends/issues on a scale measuring which was least harmful to rural Minnesota’s influence to which was most harmful (Table 1). The area’s declining population (cited as the most harmful by 24.7 percent) was rated as the most significant trend affecting rural Minnesota’s influence. A related issue, the aging population, is also seen as a key factor.

Factors beyond the changes in population, though, are also seen as having a significant impact on the influence of rural Minnesota. The responses in Table 1 reflect the diversity of opinion. It also underscores a strong sense among research participants that statewide organizations are ignoring rural Minnesota. The overall score for declining population ranked it as having the greatest impact, but population only narrowly beat out the number two issue. In looking at just the top two scores—an 8 or 9 in importance—respondents indicated that statewide organizations increasingly focusing on the Twin Cities is seen as slightly more harmful than even rural Minnesota’s declining population.

Among the interview candidates, this number two issue shows up in a variety of ways. For example, many saw it reflected in politics. Among the comments was this one from the leader of a quasi-governmental agency: “There always have been different facets of Greater Minnesota, but there used to be a natural coalition between rural Minnesota and the core of urban Twin Cities that went beyond the DFL. Citizens who lived in these areas had similar lifestyles, wages, struggles, etc. Metro legislators had to deliver services, delivering many of the same needs that were important to rural Minnesota. That coalition doesn’t exist anymore.”

The theme of a fragmented rural Minnesota, in which multiple interests overwhelm a single,

Table 1: Thinking about existing or potential trends, please rank the following from 1 (least important) to 9 (most important) in the order you think *is* or *could* most seriously harm rural Minnesota’s influence.

Ranking:	Least important									Avg. Impact
	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	
Declining population	3.4%	2.3%	5.7%	3.4%	8%	11.4%	23.9%	17%	25%	6.75
Statewide organizations ignore rural MN	6.7%	4.5%	5.6%	5.6%	5.6%	13.5%	15.7%	20.2%	22.5%	6.38
Aging population	5.6%	7.9%	4.5%	10.1%	9.0%	16.9%	18%	20.2%	7.9%	5.8
Legislators with ideological ties stronger than geographical ties	9.1%	4.5%	9.1%	10.2%	6.8%	11.4%	19.3%	18.2%	11.4%	5.72
Rural MN local and regional interests too fragmented	4.5%	5.6%	5.6%	12.4%	18%	11.2%	21.3%	9%	12.4%	5.72
Lack of a single voice	10.2%	9.1%	6.8%	11.4%	13.6%	6.8%	17%	11.4%	13.6%	5.36
Rural MN interests are too competitive	6.7%	9%	7.9%	11.2%	12.4%	22.5%	13.5%	11.2%	5.6%	5.25
Loss of legislative seniority	14.9%	4.6%	11.5%	5.7%	12.6%	20.7%	11.5%	12.6%	5.7%	5.02

compelling voice, is one that research participants frequently cited. “The truth is that [rural Minnesota is] much more fragmented than it used to be. We never had to explain to the Legislature rural issues in the past,” said a leader of one rural Minnesota organization. “Now we do, and we don’t have a single voice who can deliver the message because they all are delivering their own messages.”

A research participant from academia agreed: “The voices in rural Minnesota may be good today—even better than before—but they are good at more narrow interests. That’s part of the fracturing that is going on. What’s missing are the voices that can unify and amplify.”

While some raised the question of whether it was possible for rural Minnesota to be represented by one voice, most said that on some issues it was an imperative. “Can one organization be a rural Minnesota voice? We don’t have any choice,” said a non-profit leader. “We have to figure out how to do that. Minnesota is a very diverse state; we in rural Minnesota have to figure out how to be relevant to the entire state.”

Many participants in the research said that while rural Minnesota faces many challenges, they

don’t guarantee declining influence for the region. Said one long-time observer of rural Minnesota politics and policies, “It’s hard to say the decline of the rural population and other trends haven’t had a role in the decline of the rural voice. But that doesn’t explain it all. Sometimes squeaky wheels that are the smallest are the most effective. An example is the Tea Party. Small but loud voices can be amplifiers.”

A concern expressed by many is that rural Minnesota has lost its voice in state government. “Minnesota never has had an office of rural policy or rural development,” said one observer from academia. “Other states—Texas, Illinois, Pennsylvania—have significant government agencies focused on their rural communities.”

He and others pointed out that while there have been rural legislative caucuses, they tend to be ineffective or highly partisan. Rural Minnesota has had advocates within state agencies—including the Minnesota Department of Employment and Economic Development—but there is no single advocate within state government.

This absence, said many, is becoming more glaring. Statewide organizations that were once focused on rural Minnesota (including Minnesota

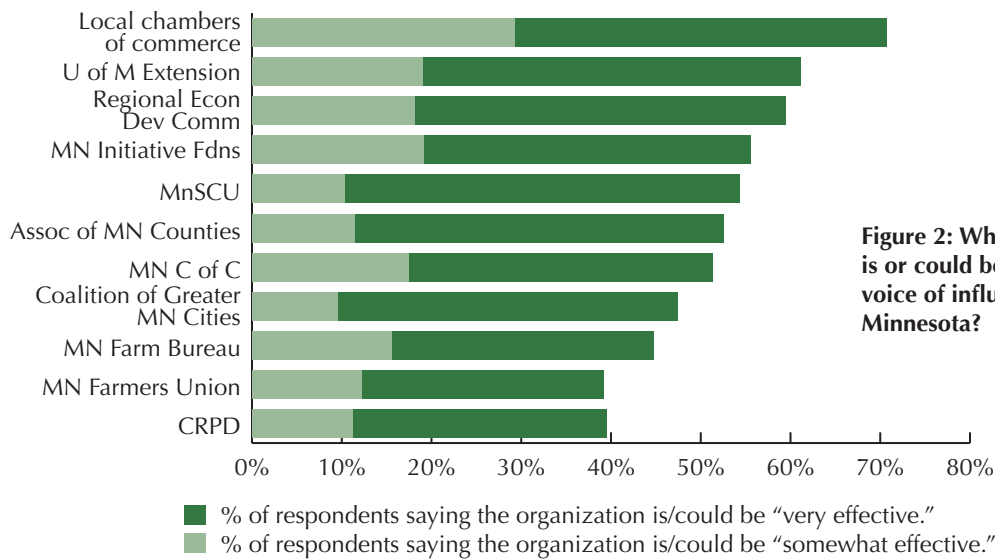


Figure 2: Which organization is or could be a respected voice of influence for rural Minnesota?

Rural Partners, a 10-year-old organization that largely has become limited to being a clearing-house for information about programs, meetings and grants) or that once included rural Minnesota in their agendas (for example, the Minnesota Association of Commerce and Industry, which has morphed into today’s Minnesota Chamber of Commerce) are losing their stature or losing their interest in issues outside of the Twin Cities.

Economic Organizations Gaining Stature

Organizations focused on economic development are perceived by survey respondents to be the most effective voices of influence for rural Minnesota. When asked to rank the effectiveness of 11 organizations, 71 percent of respondents said local chambers were “very effective” or “somewhat effective” (Figure 2). Only two other organizations—University of Minnesota Extension Services and regional economic development commissions—were at or near 60 percent in the combined score.

One of the other striking findings is that even among the participants in this research—people selected because of their knowledge of rural Minnesota and public policy—many of the organizations are unfamiliar. For example, nearly half of the respondents (47.4 percent) had no opinion or a neutral opinion on the Center for Rural Policy and Development. Other organizations with high levels of unfamiliarity (percentage of no opinion or neutral opinion) are Minnesota Farm Bureau, 45.7 percent;

Minnesota Farmers Union, 45.2 percent; and the Minnesota Initiative Foundations, 35.7 percent.

Relatively few people—only 13.8 percent—are unfamiliar or neutral on local chambers of commerce. It is interesting to note that while local chambers rank highest as potentially the most effective organizations, they also have the highest percentage of people saying they are “very ineffective” at 6.9 percent. Similarly, the Minnesota Chamber of Commerce is well known and regarded by more than half the respondents as effective, but it is also seen by more than one in five—22.6 percent—as “somewhat ineffective” or “very ineffective,” the highest ranking among the 11 organizations.

When participants were asked to identify the *one* organization they thought could be most effective, the results underscored the loss of influence by Minnesota’s traditional rural voices, including the Farm Bureau and the Farmers Union. Both organizations were cited by fewer than 4 percent of survey respondents as the organization that could be most effective.

While local chambers of commerce were singled out by nearly 22 percent of respondents (Figure 3) as the most effective organizations, the results do show some surprises. The Center for Rural Policy and Development, for example, scored well when respondents were asked to identify a *single* effective voice, suggesting that those who know the organization believe it can have a significant role in representing an agenda for rural Minnesota.

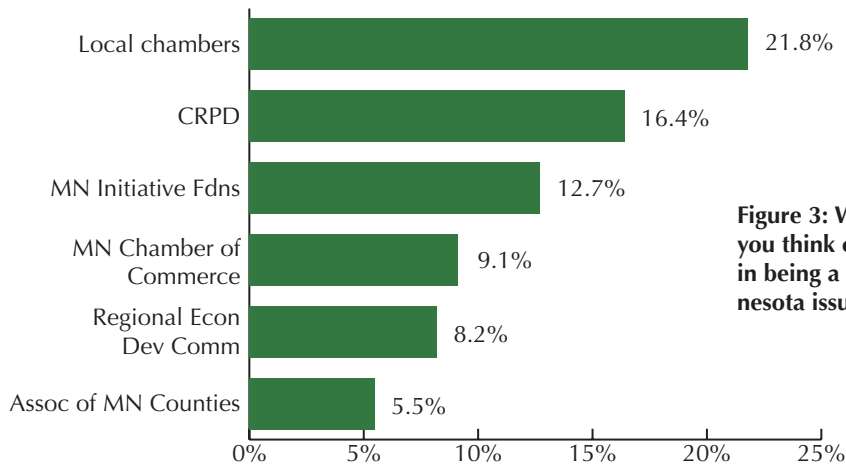


Figure 3: Which *one* organization do you think could be the most effective in being a strong voice for rural Minnesota issues?

The Minnesota Initiative Foundations ranked third among the organizations that potentially could be the most effective voices. Like CRPD, the MIFs also have a high percentage of people who are neutral or have no opinion (35.7 percent). Among those interviewed, the consensus is that the MIFs are most effective in their role as conveners, bringing together people to focus on specific issues of regional concern or opportunity. Generally, they are viewed as being important organizations within their respective regions, but aren't viewed as having statewide influence—in part because of their inherent design. The MIFs were created in the 1980s to respond to the farm crisis of that era. The six MIFs were created to leverage the resources and assets of their respective regions, a point they reinforce in their own description of their work: “[E]ach foundation is independent and serves its region with unique grants, business loans, leadership programs, and donor services.”

While the MIFs are generally well regarded, some interview respondents believe they have become too cautious. This view is reflected in the comment from an influencer interview: “The MIFs, they’re generally suffering. They have been institutionalized. Could they speak regionally? Maybe. Do I see them doing that, no, because of the institutionalization of them. That’s happened in part because of their funding base, in part because of their traditional mission. It’s a combination of things.”

Competition Replacing Collaboration

There is a strong sense that competition too often is replacing collaboration among rural Minnesota interests, sometimes to the long-term detriment of rural Minnesota’s interests: “Where we are lacking, many rural communities still are competing one with another. We need to replace that competition with rural collaboration. We need to re-shape our cultural thinking. Communities layer on regional, regional layer on state. Our competition is more global,” said one interviewee.

Another person said this: “We still compete for limited resource dollars, for example, on bonding. Competition makes one stronger. But where we lose is when we convey to ourselves and others how the metro won, how Duluth won. We fail when we view who lost rather than everyone wins. This is a critical shift in thinking that has to occur.”

A public affairs expert argued that collaboration should extend to metro-area partnerships: “Tie [rural Minnesota and the Twin Cities metro area] together. Build on shared principles. The challenges may be different, but economic development is economic development. I think there are opportunities to build partnerships with metro-focused groups, including the Minnesota Business Partnership, but we need to give metro groups a reason to care.”

Competition among rural interests extends to politicians and government. “I go to the Association of Minnesota Counties meetings and see the divi-

sion among counties. The dues are paid by metro, but the votes are among rural counties, so it's a stand-off. Division among counties isn't [Democrat versus Republican], but rural, metro, suburban," said a county official. "Even rural legislators are becoming more ideological, less rural. Partisanship is starting to trump rural interests.

Creating a single rural voice to counter the competition isn't the goal, in the view of many. Instead, more effective voices—individually and in partnerships—are needed on critical issues. "Rural Minnesota has many voices, as it should. But these voices are not as effective as they should be, nor are they effectively coordinating. What if some of the key players like Extension, CRPD, the MIFs, Blandin, and others sat down a couple times a year to kick around strategy and message? It wouldn't need to be a grand and formal effort. Some type of conversation would be better than [what happens] currently," said a non-profit executive.

Collaboration enhances the influence of rural Minnesota organizations, according to many research participants. A city official offered this view:

"Knowing that the new normal is a resource-constrained environment, one needs to focus on partnerships and 'friend raising.' Expanding the spheres of influence is critical to being successful. Strong and resilient voices in the legislature focusing on the re-occurring themes and messages of Greater Minnesota are critical. Ag, environmental regulations, a balanced approach to funding bonding projects are just three of the themes that should be focused on and could be done more effectively with partnerships."

These conversations could help define a common agenda and marshal resources more effectively. "The challenge for rural Minnesota is to figure out how to bring fragmented interests together and see the whole," said one interview subject. "We

end up spending our resources—time and money—on the margins, on the 5 percent of the issues on which we disagree. We need conveners who see what we have in common, not focusing on the issues that divide us."

Creating an Effective Voice for Rural Minnesota

Research participants offered a host of solutions. Many of them, though, focused on common elements:

- Good research
- A credible voice backed by partners
- Innovative solutions

Among the solutions offered by survey participants, the most important component of creating an effective voice for rural Minnesota is an organization with a presence across the state (Figure 4). Closely following in importance are the need for trusted research and the ability to convene influential individuals and organizations to define and support issues.

Some research participants are pessimistic. Said one survey respondent: "I don't think any of this matters. The population and money are centered in the Twin Cities." Said another, "With dwindling government investment, the pressure will be immense to make investments where they get the most 'bang for the buck,' meaning investments will tend to go toward areas of population density. Rural community colleges will suffer, infrastructure such as roads and broadband will lag behind regional/urban hubs, state school funding formulas will not favor small districts, etc."

Many research participants don't see a single rural Minnesota voice as possible or even desirable. Rural Minnesota should be represented by different

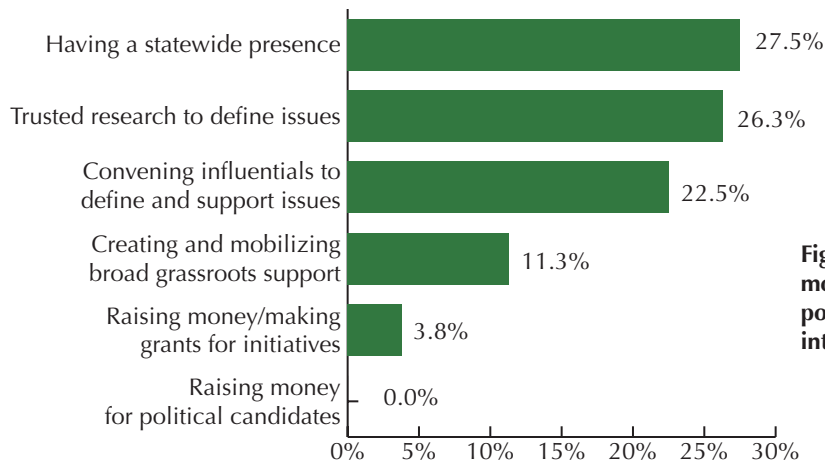


Figure 4: Which *one* of the following is most important for promoting the public policy and economic development interests of rural Minnesota?

advocates. What is missing, according to many, is strategic collaboration—a coming together of effective organizations to identify and deliver common messages and strategies where interests converge.

“We need a handful—maybe one, two, or three—go-to organizations that are sophisticated, do good work. And we need lots of smaller organizations that are able to navigate the fragmented world of rural Minnesota. Beyond the [Center for Rural Policy and Development], what rural entities are there? Blandin to a degree. Extension Services, but a rural voice isn’t its calling card. We have government. But then the list starts to trail off,” said one policy analyst.

Many of those participating in the research see opportunity and success in thoughtful and credible research. Said one survey participant, “We need trusted research gathered and advocated in non-partisan ways. Avoid unproductive power grabs and create a ‘win-win.’”

Other solutions were also cited:

- Metro interests need to be educated on rural Minnesota, why investments there benefit the entire state, and what the priorities are. “Few [metro residents] know the drivers of the ‘other Minnesota’ outside the realm of the metro,” said one respondent. “News and information is stunted. People know what they see most.”
- In an era of tight public resources, rural Minnesota needs to provide solutions to effectively compete for government funding. A key is thoughtful strategies that are supported consistently and persistently:

“There has to be a credible plan, but anything put forward as public policy needs broad support or it is doomed to ‘fund-it-and-forget-it’ kiss of death.”

- In addition to being innovative, there is a need to leverage rural resources. Said one interview subject: “All these [rural-focused] organizations need to figure out how we can support each other, how we can leverage each other’s strengths and tools.” Said another, “The challenge is to get people to think outside of box. An example is industrial development. Many towns have their own economic development director, but because of budgets, they hire people who are mediocre, then fight for smaller budgets. If we got together, we could hire better people, leverage all resources in region.”

The Last Word

Despite the concern over rural Minnesota’s declining influence and fragmented voice, there remains a sentiment of hope and possibility that Minnesota can function as a whole. As one research participant put it:

“What always has given me hope is that even the strongest metro advocates want rural Minnesota to succeed. There is a lot of goodwill in principle; the trick is to harness that into action, into development, into good policy for rural Minnesota.”



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