

## The Road Not Taken

Gail Miller

---

### *The Road Not Taken*

*Two roads diverged in a yellow wood,  
And sorry I could not travel both  
And be one traveler, long I stood  
And looked down one as far as I could  
To where it bent in the undergrowth;*

*Then took the other, as just as fair,  
And having perhaps the better claim,  
Because it was grassy and wanted wear;  
Though as for that, the passing there  
Had worn them really about the same,*

*And both that morning equally lay  
In leaves no step had trodden black.  
Oh, I kept the first for another day!  
Yet knowing how way leads on to way,  
I doubted if I should ever come back.*

*I shall be telling this with a sigh  
Somewhere ages and ages hence:  
Two roads diverged in a wood, and I —  
I took the one less traveled by,  
And that has made all the difference.*

— Robert Frost

Minnesota statehood was established in the middle of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, followed by a detailed U.S. land survey resulting in the definition of county boundary lines. One by one, counties held elections and were declared organized by the Minnesota legislature.

The newly elected officials filled the roles of commissioner, sheriff, treasurer, coroner, recorder, and judge to conduct business on behalf of the recently established counties. The number of elected county officials and staff has risen and fallen over the years to meet the ever-changing needs and demands on local government, and the services provided by local government have evolved and grown over the past 150 years. Early elected officials protected property rights, kept the peace, collected taxes, investigated deaths, and tried court cases. While many of these early established services are provided today, a new array of services has been added to local government's responsibilities: roads and bridges, caring for youth and adults with mental health needs, caring for citizens who are down and out and in need of work or a place to live, attending to public health and safety demands, and the list goes on.

Changing demographics and economics along with an increased demand on local government to provide services are forcing local officials to reflect on and plan for the future of county government. In this paper I will be discussing the work of just such a group of local leaders. I will explore future trends in the state's economic condition and projected population trends, I will be considering the suggestions of experts in the area of change, strategic planning, and leadership development and how these ideas can assist leaders traveling down this road to meet the future, and I will be covering some of the successful projects that have been implemented in counties throughout the state, describing the work these leaders have been engaged in, including a newly formed collaborative group, The Big Three.

Minnesota counties, townships, cities, and school districts will not be walking into the future alone on The Road Not Taken. The Association of Minnesota Counties (AMC), with a membership consisting of county commissioners, took the first steps to form a collective group to walk into the future prepared. This group, formed in 2004, is named the Minnesota County Futures Task Force. Several factors led up to the formation of this task force, including the results of a study conducted by the Himle-Horner group to assess critical issues facing county government in Minnesota, the effects of the Minnesota 2003 budget shortfall, demographic changes in the state's population and outdated service delivery systems. The collective group of task force members does not formally represent groups of commissioners, recorders, county attorneys, or administrators. Instead, the members were asked to serve on the task force to bring their personal and professional experiences to encourage diversity of thought around county government. The Minnesota County

Futures Task Force held its first meeting in June of 2004 with an initial membership of 33 government officials and staff. A majority of the group were county commissioners, along with county administrators and coordinators, a social service director, a recorder, a public health director, an auditor-treasurer and a sheriff. Due to retirements, staffing changes and election outcomes, the makeup of the Futures Task Force changed in 2006 and is currently made up of 42 members with just a little over half of the members being county commissioners. The rest of the membership represents various departments, including Information Technology, Environmental Services, Public Health, Highway Department, Land Records, County Attorney, Solid Waste, Administration, Community Services, and Corrections.

The early work of the task force resulted in the development of a mission, purpose, and goals. The **mission** of this task force is to “**Discover and Promote Opportunities for Dynamic Change.**”

The **purpose** of this group is three fold:

- **Envision** opportunities for change
- **Motivate** change agendas and agents
- **Monitor** change activities

The **goals** of the group are:

- **Create a Culture** that fosters positive change in county government and in communities.
- **Nurture Partnerships** among local governments and local government associations to promote effective and efficient service delivery systems for Minnesota communities.
- **Enhance Relationships** between counties and state agencies to improve service delivery and outcomes.

The Futures Task Force created a **Work Plan Map** (Figure 1) to determine the areas of focus for the group’s future work efforts. The work plan map has three major focus areas including: **The Center for Excellence in Local Government, Initiatives and Special Projects, and Local Government Association, Collaboration and Cooperation**. The first focus area, Center for Excellence, is designed to identify easily accessible resources for county and local government officials; the second focus area, Initiatives and Special Projects, is planned to explore and disseminate research pertinent to county and local government; and the third focus area, Local Government Association, Collaboration and Cooperation, is

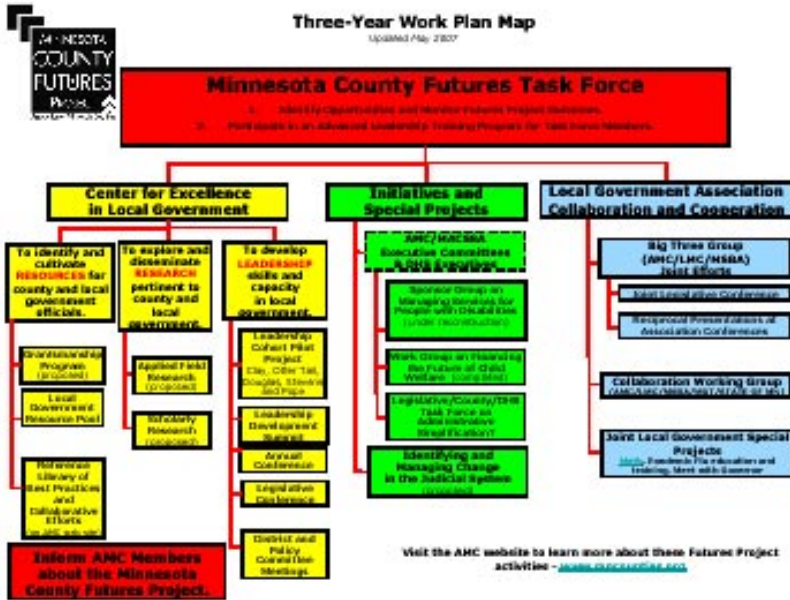


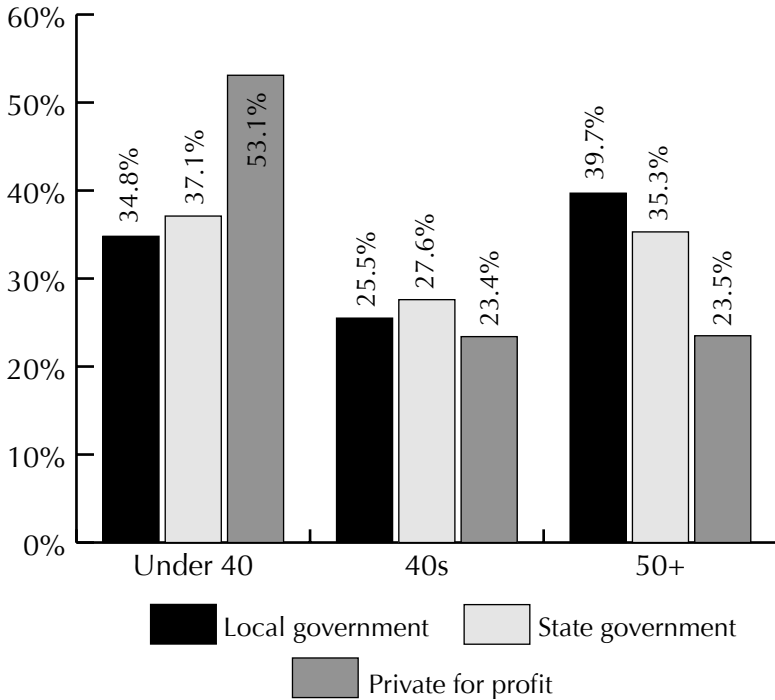
Figure 1: Minnesota County Futures Task Force work plan.

intended to develop leadership skills and to build capacity in local government.

**Future Trends**

**Current Minnesota Economic Trends:** To help the Futures Task Force members gain a better understanding of the current trends facing Minnesota, members have been studying the state’s economic outlook and demographic makeup. According to a 2005 report prepared by Tom Stinson, State Economist, and Tom Gillaspay, State Demographer, Minnesota has been very successful with economic growth exceeding the national average, a population growth rate that exceeds the Frost Belt, and a ranking with the leaders on many social and economic indicators. But while Minnesota has experienced growth, we will be facing a bumpy road ahead with a population that is aging. The first of the baby boomers will turn 65 in 2011, and this growing age group will affect the demand for delivery of government services.

Another important factor for the Futures Task Force to consider is that Minnesota’s work force is aging, including the government sector. Minnesota government has fewer young workers and more old workers than the private sector. In 2004, the percentage of



*U.S. Census, 2004 American Community Survey*

**Figure 2:** *Minnesota government has fewer young workers and more old workers than the private sector.*

people under 40 working in the private sector was 53.1, another 34.8% working in local government, and 37.1% working in state government positions. For the same time period, the percentage of people age 50 and over working in the private sector was 23.5%, 39.7% were working in local government, and 35.3% were working in state government positions.

The time is now for Minnesota leaders to consider what role the education system from K-12 and higher will play as state and local governments face staffing shortages. The traditional population mixes in schools are changing. Minnesota high school graduation ratios are changing with lower graduation rates among students of color.

Overall, health care costs having been rising annually resulting in an increased share of personal income. The current projection is

18% and the trend is projected to continue on the same path upward to over 20% of personal income. Medicaid spending is expected to double the current rate by 2013 and state revenues may not keep up with this expense.

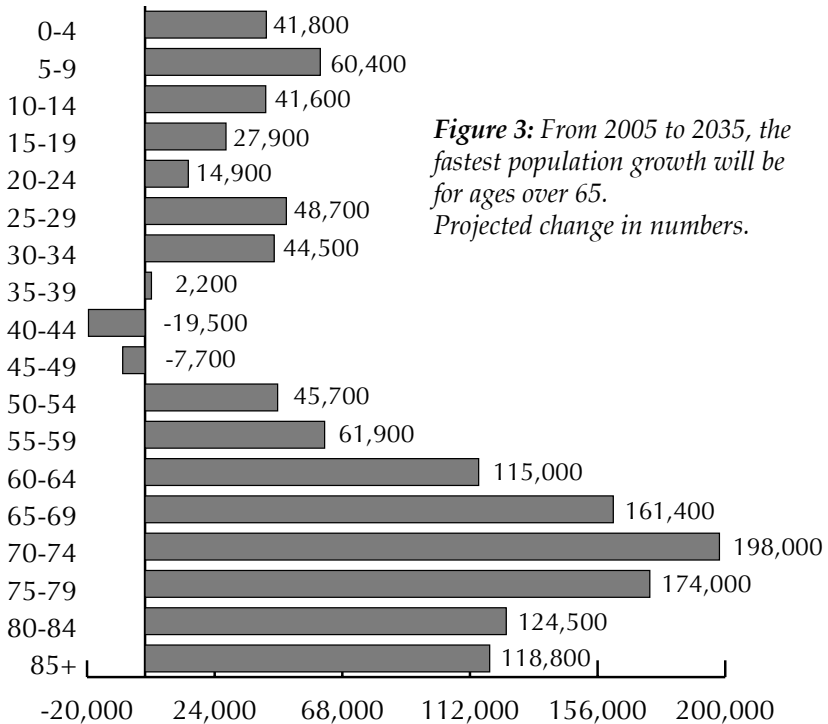
The share of personal income that goes to state and local government has declined slightly over the last fifteen years. As the boomer population reaches retirement, less of their disposable income will go toward state government in the form of taxes.

The Futures Task Force members will need to pay attention to the changing economic trends while planning for the work force of tomorrow. The following insights should be considered in the planning process:

- Fewer younger Minnesotans are entering the government workforce.
- There is increasing competition with the private sector for government positions.
- Minnesota will need to consider attracting workers from outside of the state.
- Existing workers need to be retained.
- More emphasis needs to be placed on productivity.
- Health care costs will increase.
- Government priorities are shifting to issues of aging and health.
- The state tax base will be affected as the baby boomer population reaches retirement age.

***Projected Minnesota Future Population:*** As recently as June of 2007, Martha McMurry of the Minnesota State Demographic Center, reporting on regional population trends in Minnesota, projected that the state's population will grow to 5,709,700 by 2015 and to 6,446,300 by 2035. The population trends will be due to a natural increase (more births than deaths) and by net in-migration (more people moving into the state than moving out). The Twin Cities suburbs and the Rochester and St. Cloud regions are projected to see substantial growth over the next 30 years. The north central Minnesota lakes area is also expected to have significant growth. Declining and slow growth is projected in much of western Minnesota and in the core counties of the Twin Cities.

The number of children under age 15 is projected to grow slightly over the next 25 years. There will be 9% more children in 2015 than there are now. School enrollments have been declining over the past few years, but the education administrators in many



**Figure 3:** From 2005 to 2035, the fastest population growth will be for ages over 65. Projected change in numbers.

Minnesota State Demographic Center; numbers are rounded.

locations can plan for stabilization if not an increase in student populations. Most of the gain will be realized in the metro suburbs as these areas are attracting young families. The largest increases are projected to occur in Scott and Wright counties. The child population is expected to decline in Ramsey County and show little change in Hennepin County. A slow growth of the child population will mostly likely occur in the southwestern and northeastern regions of the state. After 2015, the statewide child population is projected to stabilize with variations. The child populations will continue to grow in the suburban areas, while many rural areas will show considerable declines.

The young adult age group between the ages of 15 and 24 will fall and then rise after 2015. The projections point to a 6% growth in young adults in 2035. The 25-to-44 age group is not projected to change much, estimated to grow only about 4% between 2005 and 2015 and then remain steady.

The number of Minnesotans between the ages of 45 and 64 is expected to grow by 19% in the next ten years. This age group will

account for almost half of the total population growth. The gains are expected to occur in Scott, Sherburne, Carver, Chisago, Wright, Hennepin, Dakota, and Anoka counties. After 2015, the baby boomers will be moving out of this age set and will be replaced by a smaller generation.

The number of baby boomers age 65 and over is expected to double between now and 2035, from 623,200 in 2005 to 1.4 million in 2035. In contrast, the population under age 65 will grow only 10%. More than half the population growth in the next 30 years will be attributable to gains in the older population. The age composition will change as the older age group grows faster than the younger age group. In 2005, roughly 12% of the population was 65 or older; this will increase to 14% by 2015, and by 2035 22% of the state's population will be 65 or older.

The largest gains in the elderly population are projected to take place in the metro counties of Hennepin, Dakota, Anoka, and Washington. Even though there will be a significant increase in the older population, the rural counties are expected to see a decline in the number of elderly due to out-migration.

This second report points to regions of the state that will be greatly impacted by a changing population mix. The projected trends in this report need to be shared with counties, cities, and schools. The projected population data should be carefully considered as organizations develop or update their visions and long-term strategies. Some regions in Minnesota have been losing population and will continue to, while other areas will be growing in population. The population growth mixes will not be identical, as the report points to some areas growing in a younger age group while others are predicted to grow in an older age group. These varying population trends will also mean varying needs and service delivery demands on local and state government and the school system. Those counties located in regions facing a decline in population will need to carefully evaluate the services provided and determine what service level will be acceptable and affordable. Counties located in regions that are expected to realize a growth in population will need to plan ahead to expand services at a rate that will be acceptable.

## **Waves of Change**

The changes that are impacting Minnesota counties go beyond economic and population trends. There are changes occurring at a higher level and are best described in the writings of futurist Alvin Toffler. In his 1980 book *The Third Wave*, Toffler looks at the history of man and explains major social changes through "wave fronts."



Toffler marks the first major wave of change as the Agriculture Wave. Humans had been subsisting as hunters and gatherers, living in small migratory groups. As people began to grow crops, their lives changed. This first wave era began around 8000 B.C. and dominated the earth until around 1650 A.D. During this era much of the earth's population operated with land as the basis for the economy, life, culture, family structure, and even politics.

The second wave front began to roll in between 1650 and 1750 A.D. and is labeled the Industrial Wave, or Industrial Revolution. The industrial wave first began to take over England and then spread to the United States. Toffler explains that this wave moved much more rapidly across countries than the first wave. One of the primary principles of the Industrial Revolution is standardization. Not only were manufactured products standardized, but so were many other aspects of daily life. In business, pay scales, hiring practices, lunch hours, holidays, and even grievance procedures were standardized. Mass media disseminated standardized images so that millions of people read the same ads, heard the same news and the same short stories. School grading policies, admission procedures, and accreditation rules were standardized.

According to Toffler, the third wave began to roll into the United States in the 1950s with the introduction of the computer and other new technologies. Technology has changed people's daily routines, from reading the news on their laptops to checking their day's appointments on a handheld electronic device. Work has changed from building widgets on the factory floor to handling information all day long.

At the time Toffler wrote the book, the problems he saw for the future included a need for renewable energy sources and less reliance on fossil fuels, addressing the needs of students and school systems, taking better care of our environment, addressing the delivery of health care, and the delivery of government services. The Third Wave is rolling in with great gusto and the Futures Task Force is leading and learning how to meet this wave. Toffler suggests, "Our approach, in what follows, therefore, will be to look for those streams of change that are shaking our lives, to reveal the underground connections among them, not simply because each of these is important in itself, but because of the way these streams of change run together to form even larger, deeper, swifter rivers of change that, in turn, flow into something still larger: the Third Wave."

Changing economics and population makeup is going to force counties to develop new methods for delivery of services. Government has been riding the technology wave for some time

now, but as technology continues to evolve, so must government's utilization of it. Most counties have websites that are informational, but the counties' customers want to take their Internet business a step further. County customers want to be able to interact with the county websites and pay for services online, 24x7. Interactive websites may be just the mode of delivery to help counties that are losing population. These interactive websites could be developed jointly with several counties participating in the venture. The shared development of an interactive website should be more cost effective for the counties and an easier solution for the customer, especially if the customer conducts business in more than one county. The implementation and adaptation of technological advances will be a necessity in maintaining the vitality of the services provided by county government.

## **Revisit Reinventing Government**

*For centuries we were taught to worship our ancestors and to be true to our traditions, and it was good that we did so. But now, given the novelty and quantity of the challenges rushing at us from the future, we need to do something we have never had to do before, and which I fear we may not be able to do now: we must worship our descendents; we must love our grandchildren more than we love ourselves.*

— Jim Dator, University of Hawaii futurist

Another resource the Futures Task Force needs to tap into is the work of David Osborne and Ted Gaebler. In 1992, Osborne and Gaebler wrote the book *Reinventing Government*, which suggests taking a new entrepreneurial approach to government. Osborne and Gaebler discuss the concept that government should be run like a business. However, as they point out, government and business are two different institutions. Government is motivated to provide services based on public demand and need and obtains money from taxpayers. Business is motivated by profit and obtains money from customers. Thus the public focuses on the cost of government services and tries to control how money is spent. All of this contributes to public sector employees looking at risks and rewards very differently than private-sector employees.

Government is democratic and open and moves slowly, whereas private-sector managers can make quick decisions and move nimbly behind closed doors to make a profit. Government must deliver services to everyone equally, often done on a sliding fee scale matching an individual's ability to pay. Therefore, government

cannot achieve the same delivery of services and financial efficiencies as the private sector.

However, government could consider Osborne and Gaebler's proposals for changing government: "We must turn bureaucratic institutions into entrepreneurial institutions, ready to kill off obsolete initiatives, willing to do more with less, eager to absorb new ideas." They go on to suggest we don't need more government or less government, we need better government. Another term they use is better governance, and they provide a definition for it. "Governance is the process by which we collectively solve our problems and meet our society's needs. Government is the instrument we use. This instrument is outdated, and the process of reinvention has begun."

Osborne and Gaebler describe many possible solutions to reinventing government. One strategy they suggest is anticipatory government, defined as two fundamental ideas: using an ounce of prevention rather than a pound of cure; and doing everything possible to build foresight into decision-making. A process suggested when conducting strategic planning as part of anticipatory government includes:

- Analysis of the situation, both internal and external.
- Diagnosis, or identification, of the key issues facing the organization.
- Definition of the organization's fundamental mission.
- Articulation of the organization's basic goals.
- Creation of a vision: what success looks like.
- Development of a strategy to realize the vision and goals.
- Development of a timetable for that strategy.
- Measurement and evaluation of results.

The anticipatory government concept suggests entrepreneurial governments consider changing budget systems, creating regional governments, and reforming the electoral system. It is suggested that budgeting projections be completed not for the current practice of one to two years, but rather five or ten years ahead. Budgeting for five to ten years ahead is not a 100-percent accurate process, since challenges that lie ahead as expenses and revenues drop or rise cannot always be predicted, but these financial projections can help policy makers evaluate new programs and the associated long-range budget implications. In discussing regional governments, Osborne and Gaebler cite Minnesota as an example of a true regional government model with the Metropolitan Council. The Minnesota legislature created the council and empowered this group to review

and suspend local government projects. The Met Council has worked through issues and solutions to solid waste, a regional park system, freeway routing, and mass transit. And in terms of reforming the electoral system, such reforms range from term limits to campaign finance reform to the formation and work of civic leadership coalitions.

## **Developing Leaders**

*We are in an unprecedented time of human choice. The most important work of leaders is to manage and place themselves. You must answer the questions: Who am I? What are my values? What am I good at? What do I need to learn? And Where do I fit?*

— Peter Drucker, Drucker Foundation Conference

Reinventing government will require that a strong leadership base be developed in every region of the state. One of the Futures Task Force's programs is the Leadership Cohort Pilot Program, formed through the partnership efforts of AMC, the Blandin Foundation, and the University of Minnesota Extension Services. This leadership academy is designed to assist county personnel to further develop and expand their leadership skills and capacity. The first cohort program included four- to six-member teams from five counties participating in eight one-day classes throughout the fall of 2006 and the winter of 2007. The class topics included: The Business of County Government, Understanding Leadership, Visioning, Understanding Community Change, Stakeholder/Constituent Expectations of Government, Developing an Effective Leadership Support Network, Systems Thinking, Critical Thinking Skills to Successfully Address Complex Issues, Managing Conflict, Building and Sustaining Successful Teams/Managing Group Dynamics, Effective Facilitation, Public Participation Strategies, Effective Communication, and Moving from Vision to Action. The Leadership Cohort Pilot Program has been very successful and will be rolled out again during the 2007-2008 calendar year for several new county teams.

The Leadership Cohort Program will benefit counties as they move into the future, helping them shape a shared vision. Peter M. Senge said this on shared vision:<sup>1</sup> "A shared vision is not an idea. It is, rather, a force in people's hearts, a force of impressive power. It may be inspired by an idea, but once it goes further — if it is compelling enough to acquire the support of more than one person — then it is no longer an abstraction. People begin to see it as if it exists. Few, if any, forces in human affairs are as powerful as

shared vision.” The vision or the goal that an organization and its employees are working toward is the glue that holds them together. When people have a shared vision, they are connected. A shared vision is a vision that people have accepted and are truly committed to. Many county employees have a strong, dedicated work ethic. Staff with a strong, dedicated work ethic and a shared vision make a powerful group of people. Counties and their communities need to be able to create shared visions as they move forward into the future. Visioning then plays an integral role in shaping the organizations’ culture.

The cohort program will help counties to cultivate a healthier organizational culture among county leadership and personnel. Organizational culture can be defined as the customs and habits of a unified group of employees in a work environment affected at times by the perceptions, thoughts, and beliefs of the employees. Margaret Wheatley discusses her view on organizational culture by relating to fractals first discovered by Michael Barnsley in the “Chaos Game”<sup>2</sup>. A fractal is a type of repeating pattern first found in nature, such as the leaf of a fern and its repeating leaf pattern. Wheatley suggests that all organizations are fractal in nature, deeply patterned with self-similar behaviors evident everywhere. People in organizations exhibit similar behaviors at all staffing levels. She has observed tendencies recurring from secrecy to openness or from name-calling to thoughtfulness. These recurring patterns of behavior are the culture of the organization. Wheatley suggests as customers, we can detect how employees are treated by their managers by noticing how the employees treat us. Wheatley was trained to spot the dominant issues of a client by noticing how the client interacted with her. Organizations demonstrating a strong commitment to their values make good use of the fractal creation process. According to Wheatley, when observing the behavior of employees, one can tell what the organization values and how it chooses to work. You can see, hear, and feel the employees and the organization’s values. These similarities are not achieved by standards and rules but through the simple principles all employees are accountable for in an atmosphere of freedom. Expressing expectations and allowing employees the freedom to implement them in their work form the culture of the organization.

### **Best Practices**

A fundamental component of the Futures Task Force is sharing successful projects implemented in counties throughout the state.

***Stearns County CJCC:*** Once such recent project shared with the task force was a presentation on the Stearns County Criminal Justice Coordinating Committee. Stearns County built a new jail facility in 1987 with a capacity of 90 beds. In 1997 the county added on to the jail, increasing the capacity to 148 beds, and by 2003 the capacity was increased to 167 jail beds by using double bunking. At this point their jail population was above what they could house in their current facility. Stearns County's Jail Facility Plan, created in 1995, projected in a worst-case scenario that the jail population would reach 159 by 2015. The County leaders turned to the National Institute of Corrections (NIC) in 2003 for assistance in handling the rising jail population problem.

By working with the NIC, Stearns County learned that while the county's population had increased by 18%, admissions to the jail were up by 127% and the average daily jail population was up 208%. In contrast NIC found that while crime was flat, arrests were down, and the crime-prone age group (18-24) was a smaller portion of the general population, the demand for jail beds was up dramatically. A key learning from the NIC experts was, "The demand for jail beds is much more heavily influenced by changes in justice policies and practices." NIC recommended that Stearns County form a Criminal Justice Coordinating Committee.

Stearns County leaders took the advice of NIC. The membership of the committee includes representation from the Sheriff's department, the Court System, County Attorney, County Public Health, County Administration, St. Cloud Police Department, County Community Corrections Department, St. Cloud City Attorney, and County Commissioners. Together this committee has changed the approaches taken toward sentencing and the overall jail population, including: better management of inmate classifications, a closer examination of sentencing options such as community service work through sentence to serve, the use of electronic monitoring that saves on days in jail, exploring options other than jail sanctions for probation violations, and decreasing time in the system by moving people through faster, which cuts back on jail time. The accomplishments and commitment of this committee have been recognized by NIC as a role model for other jurisdictions to follow.

***Scott County SCALE:*** Scott County created a unique coalition of local government units to encourage greater efficiencies and leadership in public service. The coalition is the Scott County Association for Leadership and Efficiency (SCALE) and it promotes enhanced communication, collaboration of services, and sharing of

resources. The membership includes the mayors and administrators from cities within Scott County, school superintendents, township officers, representatives of the Mdewakanton Sioux Community, the county administrator and county board chair. SCALE members meet monthly to discuss ways in which local governments already are collaborating, covering programs in law enforcement and public safety, parks and recreation, transportation, community development and general government.

The group has been discussing the development of a public safety training facility, policies for capital equipment sharing, joint purchasing, and countywide employee training. The Association has been very advantageous to the community as public officials work cooperatively to deliver services with limited revenues due to reductions in state aid and a slow economy.

### **Task Force Work**

***The Big Three Group:*** The executive directors from the League of Minnesota Cities and the Minnesota School Board Association have participated in panel discussions for the Futures Task Force. The presentations have led to a deeper understanding of the issues and challenges facing the three organizations — cities, schools, and counties — and has resulted in the formation of a working group known as The Big Three Group. The membership of this Big Three Group is comprised of executive staff and board members from the League, the School Board, and the County associations. The Big Three Group meets on a regular basis and discusses current issues and challenges facing the larger membership as a whole.

The group has received information on the Blandin Broadband initiative and was encouraged to support public and private investments in building rural broadband capacity. Blandin asked the Big Three Group to help provide venues to educate people on broadband and its impact. The Big Three Group will also be assisting community leaders in the creation of a common vision and response to a possible pandemic flu incident in their communities.

The Big Three Group has also collaborated on Legislative issues and continues to work on this effort as a team. Their efforts resulted in the first ever Joint Legislative Conference, held in late March of 2007 for the entire membership of Minnesota Cities, School Boards, and Counties associations. The conference was well received by the three organizations' members and attendance was outstanding. The conference attendees not only learned about the legislative issues facing them, but they then had an opportunity to meet with their local legislators one on one to discuss these issues. The Big Three

Group is now working on plans for next year's joint legislative conference. The Big Three Group is committed to improving the working relationships between the legislators and their membership.

The Big Three Group is also considering the formation of a joint member task force that could explore ways to share and collaborate with one another. Examples of collaborative efforts could be sharing staff and resources, sharing I.T. staff, computers, and human resource functions.

**DHS Initiative:** One of the goals of the Minnesota Futures Task Force is to enhance relationships between counties and state agencies to improve service delivery and outcomes. The Managing Change Task Force was formed to serve as a leadership group on managing change in the Department of Human Services (DHS) system. The task force was convened at the invitation of the Commissioner of Human Services and included members representing DHS, county commissioners, county human services directors, and county administration, meeting from June of 2005 through April of 2006. The work of this task force resulted indirectly or directly in the following initiatives:

- Minnesota Association of Social Service Administrators (MACSSA) Future of Human Services white paper and AMC principles language around human services
- Formation of a Child Welfare (child safety and protection) Task Force and subsequent report and legislative language
- Formation of a DHS County Disabilities Sponsor Group
- Development of a DHS work plan
- Minnesota Association of Social Service Administrators (MACSSA) Center for Excellence Proposal

Due to changes in leadership, the Managing Change Task Force has been discontinued, but the dialogue on human services issues needs to continue between the counties and DHS. Goals need to be clarified by DHS for the state and for the counties, and a focus needs to be directed toward the consumer and the communities that support them.

**Living Laboratory:** A recent suggestion that was generated from the Futures Task Force was to create a "Living Laboratory." In this plan, the Task Force would approach the University of Minnesota's Social Sciences department to engage in a collaborative research project, which would involve students and staff assisting a pilot county in



the development of a new model for a particular service delivery. With the county acting as a test environment, students, professors and staff would collect and analyze data and information to assist in improving upon the model. This real-time living laboratory would support counties in developing innovative service delivery models without having to reinvent the wheel. Successful projects would be rolled out to counties with a blueprint to follow as the model is replicated.

## **Conclusion**

The leaders of Minnesota counties cannot turn their backs on the future and continue to conduct business as they have over the past 150 years. The experts in our state have projected major economic and population shifts in the very near future. Our entire state is riding the Third Wave of technology, and the time has come to reinvent government in Minnesota. Counties currently operate within boundary lines that were surveyed and laid out in 1858. Leadership is needed to create a safe environment that will be conducive to change.

The Minnesota Futures Task Force is a collective group of county leaders providing the direction needed to assist communities as they walk into the future. This walk into the future will be accomplished as communities consisting of counties, cities, and schools join together and create a shared vision. The next step may involve working with state agencies, legislators, and the Governor to pass legislation or change existing laws to make the visions possible. Then the visions will need to be communicated, tested, evaluated, and implemented. When a vision is successfully implemented, it should be celebrated and shared with other entities trying to reach the same or similar vision. If a vision doesn't work out, then the lessons learned also need to be shared with local governments.

Counties, cities, and schools need to ride the Technology Wave to assist their organizations to improve service delivery to their constituents. These groups need to form partnerships with one another and with the private sector to implement technology solutions that will meet their constituents' needs. The use of technology will be a means to assist counties, cities, and schools reach their visions.

In the book *Results Based Leadership* by Ulrich, Zenger, and Smallwood, concepts are identified that organizations should consider when working toward a vision:

- Leaders should emphasize the future and not dwell on the past.
- Look at the possibilities and not the constraints.
- Reach customers outside through the employees inside.
- Encourage risk taking and discourage political protecting.
- Reward collective, not individual, successes, but maintain individual accountabilities and keep heroes visible.
- Look for alternatives before seeking closure.
- Ensure a high level of personal freedom and trust.
- Encourage debate before consensus.

County commissioners and staff must participate in the Leadership Cohort Program. This program will help county leaders build leadership capacity and cultivate a healthier organizational culture that is vital as leaders and their employees meet the future. County leadership doesn't just happen, it must be developed through a process such as the one provided by the Leadership Cohort Program. When leaders develop a good strong base in leadership skills, critical thinking, team building, and visioning, they are better prepared to adapt to an ever-changing environment. The future of local government is dependent on excellent leadership skills and the ability to develop and implement strategic plans.

The local leaders of today and tomorrow must be willing to develop shared visions as they weigh in on the plans for the future of our communities. Counties, townships, cities, and school districts must cooperate and collaborate as they face future changes and demands. Local leaders will need to expand beyond the current boundaries and not limit their thinking to the way it has always been done. This group will need to take a few risks as they try innovative solutions to meet the needs of customers and local citizens. Local leaders and personnel will be able to look to the Minnesota County Futures Task Force for assistance as they transition together into the future. The work of planning for the future of Minnesota has been set into motion so that none of these organizations should be unprepared and take the path less traveled.

**For nothing will remain the unchanged. The future is fluid, not frozen. It is constructed by our shifting and changing, daily decisions, and each event influences all others.**

— *Toffler*

## References

- Association of Minnesota Counties. (2007). Minnesota County Futures Task Force. Retrieved June 30, 2007 from [http://www.mncounties.org/Special\\_Projects/Futures](http://www.mncounties.org/Special_Projects/Futures).
- Frost, R. (1969). *The poetry of Robert Frost*. New York: Henry Holt and Company.
- Gaebler T., Osborne D. (1992). *Reinventing government*. Massachusetts: Addison-Wesley Publishing Inc.
- Minnesota Department of Administration. (2007) . Minnesota population projections 2005 – 2035. Retrieved July 10, 2007 from <http://www.demography.state.mn.us/documents/MinnesotaPopulationProjections20052035.pdf>
- Senge, P.M. (1994). *The fifth discipline: the art and practice of the learning organization*. New York: Doubleday.
- Toffler, A. (1980). *The third wave*. New York: William Morrow and Company Inc.
- Wheatley, M. (1999). *Leadership and the new science: discovering order in a chaotic world*. (2<sup>nd</sup> ed.) California: Berrett-Koehler Publishers Inc.
- Unger D., Zenger J., Smallwood N. (1991). *Results based leadership*. Massachusetts: Harvard Business School Press.

## Endnotes

- <sup>1</sup> Summarized from *The Fifth Discipline* by Peter M. Senge.
- <sup>2</sup> Summarized from *Leadership and the New Science* by Margaret J. Wheatley

