

CENTER *for* RURAL POLICY and DEVELOPMENT

Seeking Solutions for Greater Minnesota's Future

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Strength in numbers: Southern Minnesota legislators combine their influence

Working on the principle that the whole can be more influential than the sum of its parts, legislators with districts along the I-90 corridor have formed an alliance to watch out for the welfare of the region. Twenty-eight members strong at last count, the I-90 Group's districts stretch from the South Dakota border to the Wisconsin border. It is strictly bi-partisan and, adopting the slogan "Stronger Together," the group has plans to be an influence on both sides of the aisle in both chambers.

**Stronger
Together**



The reasons for forming such a group are clear to Rep. Bob Gunther (R-Fairmont), who was instrumental in bringing the group together: southern Minnesota's population is shrinking, getting older, school enrollments are declining, and the average income in the area is less than 60 percent of the Twin Cities metro area. "We're better than that," said Gunther. "We thought maybe we can pick away at different issues if we band together." The group has been growing steadily from the five legislators who showed up at the first meeting in Blue Earth last summer. "Unlike most organizations like this, this one's going up in numbers," he said.

For its first legislative session, the group has chosen six issues to support:

- Establishing an Office of Entrepreneurial Development
- State biosciences initiatives, including \$5 million in the bonding bill for bioscience development in southern Minnesota
- A 10-ton road policy that would require that all Minnesota roads that receive state or federal aid must be built to a 10-ton standard unless the county chooses to post it otherwise
- Fair and equitable treatment of agricultural land relating to school capital bonding referendums
- Increased local road and bridge funding in the bonding bill
- Further alternative energy development

It's important that they're coming up with initiatives that they can all get behind, said Sen. Dan Sparks (DFL-Austin), who has been in the group from the beginning. Other groups in the Legislature have operated in blocs before with success. And legislators don't want a repeat of last session's breakdown, he said. So far, most of the I-90 Group's initiatives are still moving through the Legislature.

"The fact that this group is and remains bi-partisan is crucial to its survival," said Jack Geller, who, as president of the non-partisan Center for Rural Policy and Development, was asked to facilitate the formation of the group. "The I-90 Group was modeled somewhat after the Iron Range coalition of legislators, but those legislators are solidly Democrat. The I-90 group is bi-partisan, and it can be more effective that way than if they were split into two smaller partisan groups. Republican or Democrat, these legislators and their constituents are all

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Announcing!

The Center for Rural Policy and Development is pleased to announce that its new online edition of the *Atlas of Minnesota* is now up and running on our web site. Visitors to the site can now view the same maps as those in our popular print edition, but we have updated the data and even included some new maps. An important new feature of this atlas is that many of the maps are also interactive: simply roll the cursor over a county to view its underlying data. And you can also download the maps in pdf and Powerpoint formats.

To try out the Atlas of Minnesota Online, just go to our web site at www.ruralmn.org and click on the Atlas button.



Rural Perspectives

Dan Reardon

Bremer Foundation & CRPD Board Chairman

Q

Please give us some introductory information for the readers who may not be familiar with the Otto Bremer Foundation: What is the Otto Bremer Foundation and what has been its relationship with rural Minnesota?

A

The Otto Bremer Foundation is a private philanthropic foundation set up in 1944 by Otto Bremer, a German immigrant who became a leader in Minnesota banking in the early 1900s, and who developed a great concern for all of Minnesota. The Foundation has a vested interest in rural Minnesota as our main asset; Bremer Financial Corporation has multiple banking interests throughout Greater Minnesota through its local banks. Otto Bremer was a strong believer in local communities, and the Foundation believes in giving back to those communities through our grant making process.

Q

Corporate philanthropy through foundations and giving has been a priority in the Minnesota business community for a long time. Why is that, and does it differ from other states?

A

Corporate philanthropy has been significant and unique to Minnesota for many reasons. Foremost is that more so than neighboring states, we have had many significant corporations established and/or headquartered here in Minnesota. In addition to corporate foundations like the Otto Bremer Foundation, many private foundations were set up by successful business people and families who prospered in Minnesota and wanted to enhance an area that they felt was vital to their success and wealth creation.

Q

The Bremer Foundation recently went through a planning process to change its focus, realigning its primary areas of interest and giving. What can you tell us about that?

A

In our planning process, we always try to focus on the original intent of our founder Otto Bremer. Keeping in mind that the Trust has specific purposes outlined in it and the fact that it was written

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Bonding bill: Legislators on fast track to get business done

Vowing they're not going to have a repeat of last year's messy legislative session and state shutdown, state legislators are moving with all haste and a great deal of cooperation to pass a state bonding bill, and pass it early.

Regardless of every other hot-button issue currently in the news, in even-numbered years the chief business of the Minnesota Legislature is to pass a bonding bill. When the bill is approved by the governor, it will authorize the state to sell bonds to finance capital improvements, big-ticket items like building repairs, road and bridge improvements, and land acquisitions. The last bonding bill was started in 2004 and finally passed in 2005, but this year, the bill is ahead of schedule and being approved with considerable bipartisan support in both the House and the Senate.

"After the 2004 session, hopefully this year people are getting the message that we have to get organized and get things done," said Rep. Dan Dorman (R-Albert Lea), chair of the Capital Investment Committee in the House and chief author of the House's bonding bill.

Some of the major projects in the bonding bill of interest to rural Minnesota include funding for road and bridge improvement projects all over the state, wastewater infrastructure improvements, building projects at MnSCU and

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CRPD awarded \$265,000 in three-year matching grant to support new civic engagement initiative

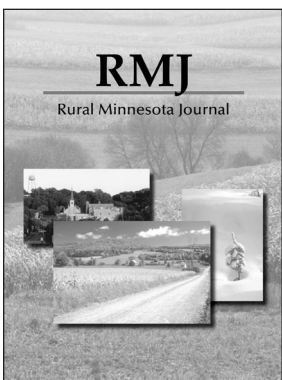
The Center for Rural Policy & Development announced early in April that it will be receiving a contribution of \$265,000 from the St. Paul-based Otto Bremer Foundation to help launch a new initiative aimed at elevating the level of civic engagement across Minnesota around important rural issues. The funds, which will be provided over three years with a dollar-for-dollar matching requirement, will support CRPD's efforts to further advance its highly acclaimed *Rural Minnesota Journal*; develop a series of statewide policy forums and events discussing critical issues addressed in the journal; and to continue the development of the new interactive online Atlas of Minnesota.

"The Otto Bremer Foundation has been a strong supporter since the very inception of the Center, and we are delighted that they are equally excited about this new phase in our development," said Jack Geller, president of the Center. The new initiative will coordinate a variety of activities and programs designed to provide state policymakers, community and organizational leaders with a better understanding of the root causes of many of rural Minnesota's most chronic issues. At the same time, the Center will create a variety of information tools to help state and local leaders plan for their communities' future.

The award is provided on a matching basis, which will give the Center an even better opportunity to leverage donations over the next three years, including new and increased memberships, Geller said. This kind of matching grant is a great way for organizations, corporations and foundations to get involved in meeting this challenge. "We are currently in active conversations with a variety of additional funders, and I feel very comfortable saying that this is, in fact, the first in a series of significant funding announcements we will be making in the very near future," Geller said.

More information about these programs can be found at the Center's website at www.ruralmn.org.

Education to be topic of next Journal



Since its release in late January, over 2,000 copies of the inaugural issue of *Rural Minnesota Journal* have been distributed, and it has been attracting attention across the state. The first issue addressed a variety of issues, from demographics and the economy to health care, education and agriculture, written by some of the leading experts in rural affairs.

Future issues of RMJ will cover single topics, however. The next issue of RMJ will be all about education, including articles on funding, agricultural education and the increase in immigrant and minority students in rural districts. This next issue will be released in August.

Praise for the first issue of RMJ has been widespread. Here are excerpts from newspapers around the state:

"It's a must-read for rural Minnesota's future decisionmakers."
Minneapolis Star Tribune editorial, Jan. 24, 2006.

"The new Rural Minnesota Journal is a gold mine of innovative ideas and new thinking. It's worth picking up for anyone who wants to join a serious debate about rural Minnesota's future."
Mankato Free Press editorial, Jan. 25, 2006.

"What makes the journal stand out is its devotion to research as opposed to wishful thinking."
Tom Dennis, Grand Forks Herald, Jan. 29, 2006.

"For those who wish to become leaders of the region or those whose policy decisions in St. Paul affect our futures, it's a necessary read and a valuable tool."
Marshall Independent editorial, Jan. 26, 2006.

Bonding bill CONTINUED FROM 1

University of Minnesota campuses and conservation set-aside programs for farmland. Some other major projects in Greater Minnesota include grants for bioscience business development, flood hazard mitigation and public transit systems around the state. All told, requests this session totaled \$2.2 billion.

The House and Senate versions included less than half of the requested dollars, but both bills are record size. The House bonding bill comes in at \$949 million, while the Senate version totals \$990 million. Unlike past years, the total dollar difference is not great, just \$41 million. But the bills vary on which projects each chamber chose to include, and therefore some work will be required in conference committee to make the two bills agree. Sen. Keith Langseth (D-Glyndon), chair of the Senate Capital Investment Committee, said the bills could be "resolved fairly easily." Looking through the projects, he said he could "see where compromises can be made."

Dorman agrees that the differences lie in the projects that were chosen on each side. Dorman says the House is supporting important infrastructure and rural development projects, including bioscience development grants, while Langseth says the Senate bill is particularly strong in higher education, especially MnSCU projects in rural Minnesota, and in flood control and bridge repair funding.

Both bills had strong bipartisan approval and passed by large margins. When asked how they garnered such support, both Dorman and Langseth said it was simply by talking to and including members from both parties in the process. That bipartisan cooperation will have to find its way into the conference committee as well if legislators hope to pass the bill and bring it to the governor's desk on schedule as they plan.

Yes, I would like to become a member of CRPD.

Name: _____

Organization: _____

Address: _____

City: _____ State: _____ Zip: _____

Phone: _____

E-mail: _____

Please choose a level:

Individual \$50 \$100

I have enclosed a check.

Organization \$100 \$250 \$500

Please bill me.

Benefactor \$1,000 or more

May we e-mail your invoice?

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Occasionally the Center will publish lists of members in publications and on our web site. Please check here if you do not wish to be included in these lists.

Welcome, new CRPD members!

Benefactor

Minnesota Rural Electric Association, Maple Grove

Government Partners

Stevens County Board of Commissioners
Steele County Board of Commissioners

Organizations

University of Nebraska Rural Initiative, Lincoln
Bethany Lutheran College, Mankato
Bolton & Menk, Mankato
Minnesota Farmers Union, New Brighton
Office of the Consulate General of Canada, Minneapolis
East Central Energy, Braham

Individuals

Bryan Lord, Manchester, NH
Douglas Van Thorne, Golden Valley
Thomas Dubbe, Shakopee
Mary Everett, Harris
Terry Morrow, St. Peter
Joyce Christensen, Brush Prairie, WA

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On January 23, 2006, we officially launched and began to publicly disseminate the *Rural Minnesota Journal*, our latest effort to infuse some new ideas and new thinking into how we look at rural Minnesota. To be honest, after nearly a year of designing and constructing the publication, recruiting all of the contributors, carefully editing all of the manuscripts and dealing with all the details, I was more than ready to kick this new publication out the door. At the same time however, I wasn't sure how it would be received by our peer organizations, academic institutions, government officials, and of course, rural Minnesotans. Would it be thought of as being too academic? Would they think of it as old wine in new bottles? Would policymakers take time to read it? Or most insulting of all — would people simply ignore it? I have to be honest and tell you that all of the above thoughts (and many more) crossed my mind.

However, my mood brightened considerably the very next morning when I got my first glimpse at the editorial in the *Minneapolis Star Tribune*, which wrote, "It's a must read for rural Minnesota's future decisionmakers." And as the week progressed more and more editorials came in from across the state remarking on this new publication. The Mankato Free Press (my hometown daily) called it "... a gold mine of innovative ideas and new thinking." The Marshall Independent editorial page noted that, "But for those who wish to become leaders of the region ... it's a necessary read and a valuable tool." And up in the Red River Valley, the Grand Forks (N.D.) Herald editor noted that, "What makes the journal stand out is its devotion to research as opposed to wishful thinking." Needless to say, I was quite pleased with the response.

In the following two weeks, over 2,000 journals sailed out of our office and landed on desks, kitchen tables and coffee tables all across Minnesota. The phone kept ringing and we made endless trips to the post office each day (they finally just gave us our own bins to carry the journals in). We

RMJ: A One Trick Pony?

Jack M. Geller, Ph.D.,
President

found organizational partners like the Association of Minnesota Counties, the Minnesota State Colleges and Universities System, the Minnesota Rural Education Association, the Minnesota Association for Rural Telecommunications and the Independent Community Bankers of Minnesota that helped us ensure a broad statewide distribution

Soon people started to add words like "ruralplex" and "metroplex" into their vocabulary. And most affirming to me several weeks later was a simple e-mail from the chair of the House Capital Investment Committee, who asked whether I had considered examining the Governor's bonding proposal by ruralplex? Yes, they are reading it!

But as the weeks wore on and the excitement quieted down, a more daunting thought entered my mind, that of the "one-trick pony." You know what I mean: at the end of the day it's not really that hard putting together a series of great manuscripts and collectively reaping the well-deserved praise - once. But to make the Rural Minnesota Journal a valuable and enduring part of the rural policy landscape, once is simply not enough. Rather, we have to be able to address these important if not critical rural issues with quality research and thoughtful, innovative ideas time after time, journal after journal. And we

have to follow up these publications with policy forums to turn ideas on a page into conversations among decision makers. Only then can we say we are doing something really quite worthy of praise and adding a valuable component into the policy process.

So that's our challenge now: to show all of Minnesota that the *Rural Minnesota Journal* is not a one-trick pony. We have to demonstrate that all of the editorial praise is not just hype; rather, it really is a "must-read" for rural and urban policymakers. Of course, that is easy to say and much harder to do. But that is our challenge. And as most people who know me will tell you - I just love a challenge! Stay tuned.



Rural Perspectives

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in 1944, we try to ascertain its meaning and purpose in today's environment. We came to the full realization that the common theme of his specific purposes is that of healthy, productive people and communities. Our focus then is furthering our mission, which is "to assist people in achieving full economic, civic and social participation in and for the betterment of their communities." It is important to note here that the foundation now emphasizes *regions* because today banking, philanthropy, and non-profit collaboration extend to a greater area than a specific community.

Q *The Bremer Foundation is, of course, not the only foundation working in rural Minnesota. Besides Bremer's areas of focus, what issues in rural Minnesota do you believe foundations are best equipped to address, and what kind of leadership can they provide?*

A Many issues jump to the forefront, namely immigration and the growing diversity of our communities, access to quality healthcare, education, economic vitality and opportunities in our communities, attraction and retention of people to greater Minnesota, and environmental issues related to all of the above. Fortunately the foundations of Minnesota are equipped to deal with these and other

issues. The beauty of our foundation community is that in isolation we don't have the answers, but rather in collaboration and convening we are best suited as a catalyst in bringing issues to the attention of stakeholders and policymakers. The leadership comes in being open, accessible and a resource to those who can really make a change. Systemic change, to be sustainable, has to come from the communities and the people in them.

Q *You're a founding member of the CRPD board and its current board chair. When you finish up your second term as chair in two years, what do you hope the Center will have accomplished by then?*

A Seeing the Center grow from its infancy has been a remarkable experience. The work of our staff and the engagement, passion and interest of the board has been unlike any other organization I have been involved with. My hope is becoming a reality as we speak, which is that our message and work reaches a broad representation of stakeholders and policy makers. People need to understand that the strength and gift of Minnesota is our wholeness as a state. Our success will be achieved when all the regions and communities of both rural and metro are strong and vital.

Join us for RuralMn Radio Each week on a radio station in your area

This weekly discussion of topics of interest to residents of rural Minnesota is available free to all Minnesota radio stations. If RuralMn Radio is not available on a station in your area, let your station know that they can receive the program weekly by contacting the Center for Rural Policy and Development at (507) 934-7700 or crpd@ruralmn.org.

You may also access RuralMn Radio on the Internet at www.ruralmn.org.

Thanks for Listening!

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Strength in numbers
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dealing with the same issues. And sometimes it may be necessary to stand up to their own party for the good of their districts. That's easier to do when you know you have the group behind you."

Rep. Tony Cornish (R-Good Thunder), a member of the I-90 Group and a member of the Center's board of directors, said that so far this session, the group's progress looks very good, but the real test will be next year. This year the group has been getting to know each other, and the congeniality, common interests and networking have been very positive. Next session will be a budget session, and they will have to adapt to whatever condition the state's finances are in at that time, Cornish said. However, the I-90 Group is prepared to face issues realistically and with flexibility. "It's an impressive group. We'll keep building on the successes of this year," Cornish said.

Education to be topic
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"A publication featuring rural policy issues is overdue. We hope the discussion generated by the Rural Minnesota Journal will eventually lead to policy innovations that will serve to help us in Greater Minnesota overcome our challenges."

International Falls Daily Journal editorial, Jan. 31, 2006.

There are still a few copies left of the first issue of RMJ. You may order one by calling the Center at (507) 934-7700 or (877) RURALMN. There is a \$3 charge to cover shipping and handling. You can also download RMJ for free (individual articles or the entire issue). Go to www.ruralmn.org and click on RMJ.

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SPRING 2006

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