

# MOVING FORWARD TOGETHER:

A THRIVING RURAL  
COMMUNITIES GAP ANALYSIS  
OF NORTHEAST MINNESOTA

CREATED BY

NORTHSPAN

ON BEHALF OF



NORTHLAND  
FOUNDATION

# TABLE OF CONTENTS



<b>EXECUTIVE SUMMARY</b> .....	<b>3</b>
<b>INTRODUCTION</b> .....	<b>6</b>
<b>PART 1: RURAL DEVELOPMENT HUBS</b> .....	<b>9</b>
RURAL DEVELOPMENT HUBS: A FRAMING AND A SOLUTION .....	9
APPLYING THE HUB LENS TO NORTHEAST MINNESOTA .....	11
HUB LENS CONCLUSIONS.....	25
<b>PART 2: THE THRIVE RURAL FRAMEWORK</b> .....	<b>26</b>
<b>PART 3: THRIVE RURAL GAP ANALYSIS</b> .....	<b>32</b>
RURAL VOICE AND POWER .....	33
EQUITABLE AIMS AND DESIGN .....	36
RESOURCES FOR PRODUCTIVE ACTION.....	40
<b>PART 4: THE THRIVE RURAL 20 BUILDING BLOCKS</b> .....	<b>44</b>
WELCOME ALL TO THE COMMUNITY .....	46
ADVANCE PERSONAL WELL-BEING .....	52
STRENGTHEN LOCAL OWNERSHIP AND INFLUENCE.....	57
RURAL VOICE IN DESIGN AND ACTION .....	63
ACCURATE RURAL NARRATIVE .....	68
BUILD FROM CURRENT ASSETS.....	73
BALANCE DEVELOPMENT GOALS.....	77
DESIGN FOR EVERYONE TO THRIVE.....	81
BALANCED DEVELOPMENT OUTCOMES .....	85
COHESIVE RURAL POLICY LENS .....	89
VALUED RURAL STEWARDSHIP .....	93
RURAL STAKEHOLDER EQUITY .....	98
PREPARE ACTION-ABLE LEADERSHIP .....	102
ORGANIZE AN ACTION INFRASTRUCTURE.....	107
ACT AS A REGION.....	111
BUILD MOMENTUM .....	116
READY RURAL CAPITAL ACCESS AND FLOW .....	120
RURAL DATA FOR ANALYSIS AND CHANGE .....	124
REGIONAL ANALYSIS AND ACTION .....	128
<b>PART 5: COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT AND FINALIZED ACTION AREAS</b> .....	<b>135</b>
SIMPLIFIED, SUPERCHARGED HOUSING.....	140
INVEST IN THE NEXT GENERATION OF LEADERSHIP .....	142
REBUILDING LOCAL INFORMATION SHARING SYSTEMS .....	144
BUILDING A SENSE OF BELONGING .....	145
INTENTIONAL DIALOGUE ON THE REGION'S MOST DIVISIVE TOPIC.....	147
CREATION OF A RURAL-TRIBAL ECONOMIC AND COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT ALLI ANCE .....	148
REBUILDING REGIONAL RESEARCH AND PLANNING SYSTEMS.....	149
<b>WHAT'S NEXT</b> .....	<b>151</b>

# MOVING FORWARD TOGETHER:

## A THRIVING RURAL COMMUNITIES GAP ANALYSIS OF NORTHEAST MINNESOTA

### EXECUTIVE SUMMARY



Information is only useful when it comes with a commitment to understanding. The economic and community development field is swimming in facts, frameworks, data, and case studies of varying quality and relevance to any particular place. Access to information provides incredible power, but without commitment to both deep research and subsequent action, practitioners and community partners can flounder in a mucky swamp that never quite coheres into solid ground for action. In Northeast Minnesota, the Northland Foundation, with its research partner Northspan, strives to escape that swamp with a first-of-its-kind analysis of regional gaps.

The goal of this report is the honest identification of gaps in the economic and community development ecosystem of the seven-county region in Northeast Minnesota and five Tribal Nations served by the Northland Foundation. It employs a framework from the Aspen Institute's Community Strategies Group (CSG) to analyze and identify these areas for action. We do not seek to sugarcoat the challenges the region faces, and we believe that failure to explore the roots of problems will make it impossible to solve them. We hope this report can yield breakthroughs that guide the region toward real action and new approaches to some of the most daunting issues we face.

### INTRODUCTION

The Introduction to this report provides background on how the project emerged. It explains that the Northland Foundation and Northspan undertake this work with a spirit of humility and recognize that they do not have full knowledge of the region and all its nuances, nor do they have the answers to all the challenges it faces. This report aims to use a unique tool to provide an insightful framing of gaps facing the region. It is particularly interested in challenges that regional partners have previously addressed on a limited basis, if they have at all. Tackling the action areas will take a wide group of regional partners and cannot belong to any one organization.

### PART 1

**1. RURAL AMERICA VARIES WIDELY BY ECONOMIC BASE AND GEOGRAPHY**

**2. RURAL AMERICA IS GROWING, BUT GROWTH IS UNEVEN**

**3. RURAL AMERICA'S POPULATION PROFILE IS CHANGING**

**4. ECONOMIC, SOCIAL, AND HEALTH OUTCOMES LAG**

**5. RURAL AND URBAN ARE CONNECTED IN INTERDEPENDENT REGIONS**

**6. RURAL IS RESOURCE-RICH, RESILIENT, AND CREATIVE**

The report draws on federal and state data sources to analyze Northeast Minnesota and how its demographic makeup and economic fortunes align with these trends. Notable conclusions include:

▶ **THE FUTURE IS MORE DIVERSE.**

All counties in Northeast Minnesota continue to add people of color even as their white population declines.

▶ **AN AGING POPULATION PROFOUNDLY DRIVES REGIONAL DEMOGRAPHICS.**

Despite positive migration trends, the area is losing workforce and population as a large cohort ages, with major implications for the area economy and social services.

▶ **ECONOMIC OUTCOMES ARE DIVERGING.**

Poverty is generally increasing across Northeast Minnesota, even as certain areas see greater concentrations of wealth. Within Northeast Minnesota, southern St. Louis County, Carlton County, and Cook have experienced growth in population and wealth, even as poverty grows noticeably; other parts of the region face flat or shrinking populations, more limited income growth, and more modest increases in poverty.

▶ **HOUSING IS INCREASINGLY DIFFICULT TO AFFORD AND FIND.**

Northeast Minnesota faces a tight, increasingly expensive housing market driven by inward migration, shrinking household size, and a growing number of vacation homes. Building new housing is essential to addressing this shortfall.

▶ **HEALTH INFRASTRUCTURE IS ABOVE AVERAGE, BUT OUTCOMES CAN LAG.**

Racial, class, and place-based disparities create challenges for well-being in Northeast Minnesota, most notably in areas related to certain health behaviors and mental health.

## PART 2

Part two provides an overview of Aspen CSG's Thrive Rural framework. It consists of 20 building blocks across both local and systems levels of analysis, with three foundational elements that weave through each. For ease of comprehension, these 20 building blocks are combined into three categories across both the local and systems levels: Rural Voice and Power, Equitable Aims and Design, and Resources for Productive Action.



## PART 3

Part three provides a gap analysis of Northeast Minnesota using the Thrive Rural framework and seeks to identify areas where the region has limited or underdeveloped efforts. The report identifies eight action areas that the region could address:

### RURAL VOICE AND POWER

- Rebuilding Local Information Sharing Systems
- Welcoming Work 2.0

### EQUITABLE AIMS AND DESIGN

- Intentional Dialogue on the Region's Most Divisive Topic
- Formation of a Rural-Tribal Economic and Community Development Alliance
- Supercharged, Simplified Housing

### RESOURCES FOR PRODUCTIVE ACTION

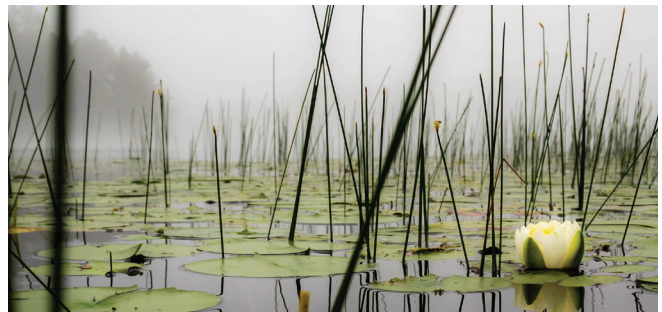
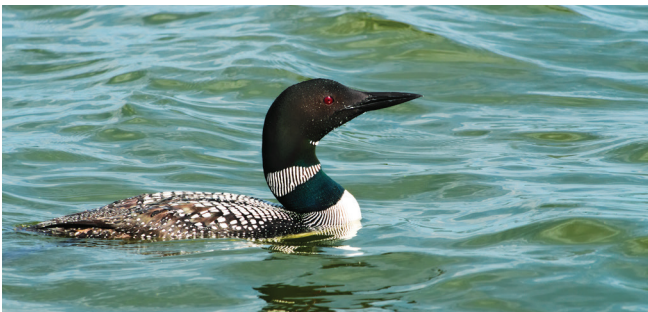
- Invest in the Next Generation of Leadership
- Identify and Sustainably Fund Economic and Community Development Research and Planning
- Rebuild Regional Planning Infrastructure

## PART 4

Part four provides details on each of the 20 building blocks. It gives interested readers the opportunity to explore the research that fed into the identification of the gaps in Part 3 and gives a thorough overview of the region. While the programs, initiatives, and organizations it identifies will not be an exhaustive list of efforts related to each building block in Northeast Minnesota, it does give a general sense of the state of affairs on each.

## PART 5

In fall 2025, the Northland Foundation and Northspan hosted engagement sessions across Northeast Minnesota to discuss the results of the initial analysis. Partner organizations, community members, and other interested parties shared their input on the eight action areas, reflecting on successes, barriers, and possible future actions on each. Over 250 participants broadly agreed that all eight action areas were important, and their input helped refine and prioritize the action areas into three categories:



## PRIORITY ACTION AREAS

**ACTION AREA 1: Supercharged, Simplified Housing** to provide laser focus on perhaps the most substantial factor affecting regional economic outcomes and growth potential.

**Action Area 2: Invest in the Next Generation of Leadership** by re-investing in local leadership programs, particularly in smaller communities that do not have other such options.

## ACTION AREA FOR FURTHER STUDY

**ACTION AREA 3: Rebuilding Local Information Sharing Systems** by both re-investing in local media and employing new technology to keep people connected.

## FOUR ADDITIONAL ACTION AREAS

**ACTION AREA 4: Building a Sense of Belonging** to build on the foundations of the past few years and scale up efforts to bridge local divides and limit counterproductive backlash.

**ACTION AREA 5: Intentional Dialogue on the Region's Most Divisive Topic**, namely, the split between economic development and environmental factions that prevents any agreement on what equitable aims and design for the region entail.

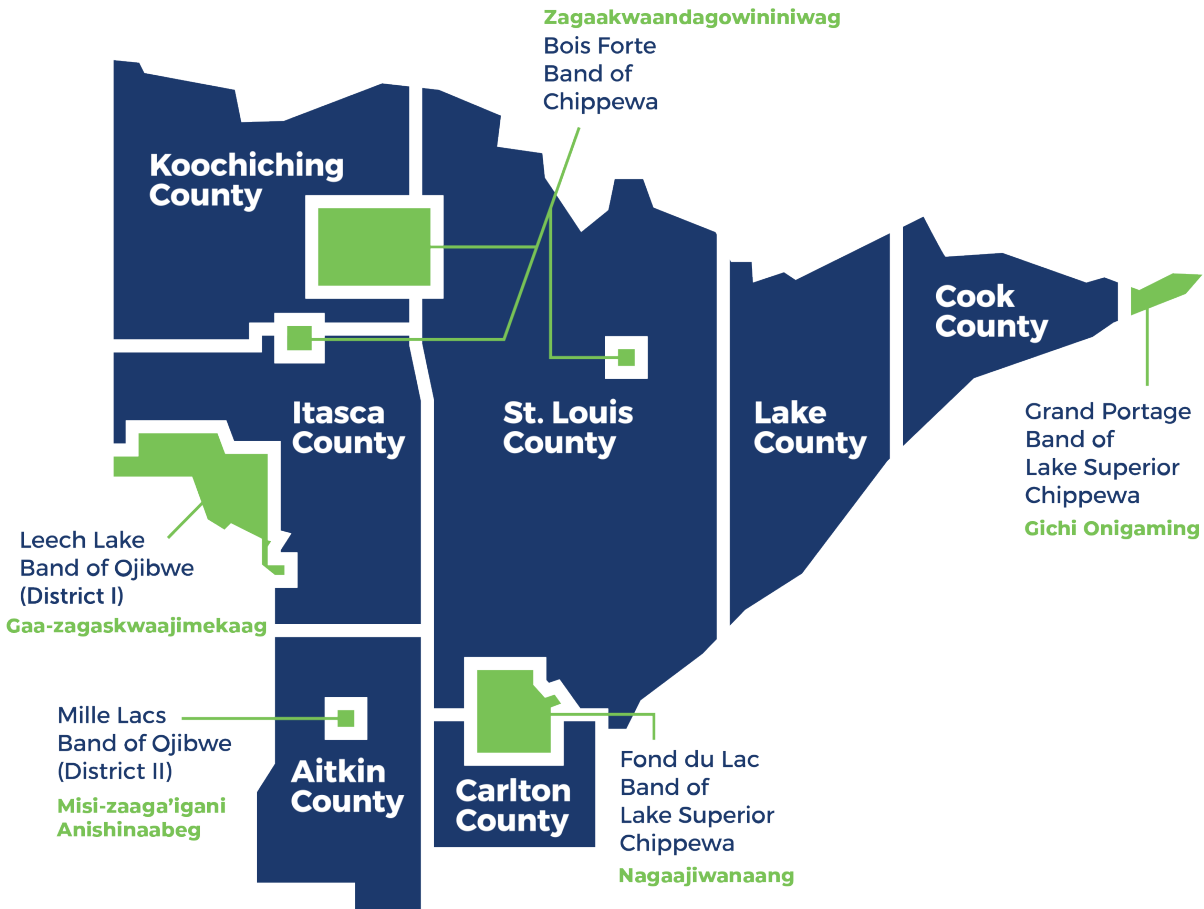
**ACTION AREA 6: Formation of a Rural-Tribal Economic and Community Development Alliance** to create a reliable forum for working together, recognizing that long-term relationships are more likely to yield fruitful results than scattered, ad hoc engagement.

**ACTION AREA 7: Rebuilding Regional Research and Planning Systems** to more thoroughly understand the region's assets, the root causes of its challenges, and build a new, inclusive action framework to tackle problems in a concerted, long-term manner.

## INTRODUCTION

In 2024, the [Northland Foundation](#) approached [Northspan](#) to discuss a regional assessment that would explore underlying factors that can drive regional prosperity in Northeast Minnesota. This report explains the reasons for undertaking this analysis, builds a collective understanding of the state of the region, and lays the groundwork for action to address the issues it identifies.

**FIGURE 1: MAP OF NORTHEAST MINNESOTA COUNTIES AND NATIVE NATIONS**



Source: Northland Foundation

Northeast Minnesota is a large, rural region of wide-ranging communities and economies nonetheless linked together by shared strands of history. This analysis for the region served by the Northland Foundation includes seven counties (Aitkin, Carlton, Cook, Itasca, Koochiching, Lake, and St. Louis) and the lands of all or parts of five Native Nations (Bois Forte Band of Chippewa, Fond du Lac Band of Lake Superior Chippewa, Grand Portage Band of Lake Superior Chippewa, Leech Lake Band of Ojibwe, and Mille Lacs Band of Ojibwe) collectively known referred to here as Northeast Minnesota. Many state and regional organizations group the seven counties together for regional analysis and activity, and many communities within it recognize their shared experiences. Over time, the region has built some infrastructure for regional cooperation, which has, at times, led to collective action and clear outcomes. At no point in recent memory, however, has the region attempted a systematic analysis of its collective framework for advancing community vitality.

This assessment uses the Thriving Rural Communities (TRC) framework developed by the Aspen Institute's [Community Strategies Group](#) (CSG) to analyze Northeast Minnesota. The framework identifies twenty building blocks on local and systemic levels, along with three foundational elements that, if unaddressed, perpetuate discriminatory practices that make it impossible for rural places to thrive. The TRC framework provides a new way of thinking about the challenges regions like Northeast Minnesota face by seeking to identify the scale at which issues exist and identifying collective problems that hamper progress.

## A SPIRIT OF HUMILITY

Northeast Minnesota is one of the first regions in the nation to undertake a systematic assessment of its state of affairs using this framework. Northspan and the Northland Foundation undertake this work in a spirit of humility and with a recognition that the researchers guiding this process have limited perspectives. Many of the building blocks are qualitative in nature, and their assessment relies on deep knowledge of communities and activities within them rather than hard metrics. Given the breadth and the complexity of the framework, however, we determined that it was most appropriate to begin with an internally driven assessment that takes stock of the stories we hear and witness in our work across this region. Our perspective is inherently incomplete, but by conducting some initial research and then providing an initial assessment that community members can react to, edit, and enhance with their own perspectives, we believe we can create a process that leads to genuine, actionable results. Instead of going into this process believing we have the answers, we believe we have identified a framework that will allow us to ask the right questions.

*Instead of going into this process believing we have the answers, we believe we have identified a framework that will allow us to ask the right questions.*

Upon completion of this draft, Northspan and the Northland Foundation will conduct community engagement in each county and with the Native Nations in the region. The end report will then identify numerous gaps in the region. The Northland Foundation may then select several challenges identified in the report for future action and investment, and it encourages other organizations to take up other causes identified through this process.

Neither Northland Foundation nor Northspan claims ownership of this process; we instead seek to shepherd it along, start conversations, share information, and build momentum. We present its results as an opportunity for any number of partner organizations to step in and work regionally to address any of the challenges and gaps the report identifies.

**MOVING FORWARD TOGETHER:  
A THRIVING RURAL COMMUNITIES GAP ANALYSIS  
OF NORTHEAST MINNESOTA**

**PART 1:**

**RURAL DEVELOPMENT HUBS**

**N O R T H S P A N**



## PART 1: RURAL DEVELOPMENT HUBS

### RURAL DEVELOPMENT HUBS: A FRAMING AND A FOUNDATION

All rural regions have existing economic and community development ecosystems, whether they are healthy and robust and collaborative or limiting and conflictual. In most cases, they exist somewhere on a spectrum, to the extent that they are quantifiable at all; many are a complex collection of stories that all feed into a subjective reality.

Aspen CSG envisions [Rural Development Hubs](#) as place-based intermediary groups that act at a scale at which meaningful change can happen in rural<sup>1</sup> areas. They seek to increase and improve the assets that are fundamental to current and future prosperity, increase local ownership and control of those assets, and do this work in a truly inclusive manner. They focus on the “critical ingredients in a region’s system that can either advance or impede prosperity,” i.e., the Thrive Rural building blocks that this report will use as their tool of analysis.<sup>2</sup>

The Hub model, as proposed by Aspen CSG, offers a loose framework for addressing regional challenges. There is no set model for the creation of a Hub, and they take creative leadership that thinks outside of traditional silos to implement. Overcoming resistance to change can be challenging in rural areas, and historical legacies of discrimination, poverty, and other inequities can limit Hub creation. Funding streams that address actual needs may be small, shrinking, or nonexistent. Nevertheless, the Aspen Institute CSG identifies twelve characteristics that can set Hubs apart as vehicles to change outcomes in rural areas:

1. **Hubs think and work “region.”** Connections across an area are essential to broader development, and progress requires partnerships and the development of a collective regional mindset, because actors cannot successfully work alone.
2. **Hubs assemble the region for discovery and dialogue.** Gathering people from many small communities across a large geography is an inherent challenge in rural areas, and hubs create a space for real discussion.
3. **Hubs are of their region, know their region, and are widely and deeply trusted in their region.** People involved in this work need to build trust in all directions and demonstrate an authentic commitment to advancing its future.
4. **Hubs take the long view.** A long-time horizon less constrained by political realities allows hubs to act in the region’s best interests instead of chasing sporadic trends in community and economic development.
5. **Hubs bridge issues and silos.** Because social and economic challenges are complex and interwoven, hubs can connect actors who are addressing individual pieces of these challenges to build a more coherent strategy.

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<sup>1</sup> Definitions of rural areas are notoriously inconsistent. Different federal agencies use different definitions; for example, many US Department of Agriculture programs define rural to be any community below a certain population threshold (by which measure all of Northeast Minnesota outside of the City of Duluth is rural), while the US Census defines metropolitan areas to include the entirety of counties within certain commute sheds, meaning that no part of the 9,000 square miles of land area of St. Louis, Carlton, and Lake Counties are considered rural. At 86,000 residents, Duluth is among the smaller hubs for a metropolitan area in the country, and it is also relatively isolated from other metropolitan areas, rendering it deeply connected to the rural areas around it. Given these realities and the region’s alignment with many of the characteristics of rural America outlined in Aspen CSG materials, we have no qualms about labeling Northeast Minnesota “rural.”

<sup>2</sup> “Rural Development Hubs: Strengthening America’s Rural Innovation Infrastructure.” The Aspen Institute Community Strategies Group, Washington DC, 5 June 2020, <https://www.aspeninstitute.org/publications/rural-development-hubs/>.

6. **Hubs analyze at the systems level, and intentionally address gaps in the system.** They look at systems to identify areas that need action, or resources that could be further cultivated to address issues that go beyond immediate organizational mission, scope, and funding streams.
7. **Hubs collaborate as an essential way of being and doing.** Partnerships are fundamental for hub work; putting in the time and effort necessary to build a trust-based, participatory network of collaborators is necessary to deal with the complex problems that rural regions face.
8. **Hubs create structures, products, and tools that foster collaborative doing.** They take the lead on new initiatives that take genuine action instead of just discussing problems.
9. **Hubs translate, span, and integrate action between local and national actors.** Local leaders tend to know what will and will not work in their communities, but they often lack the resources to implement change; state and national leaders have resources and a broad understanding of rural needs, but struggle to tailor them to local contexts. Hubs aim to bridge this gap and can funnel information from one level to another.
10. **Hubs flex, innovate, and become what they need to become to get the job done.** They are entrepreneurial in nature, being willing to try new things and see them through, thanks to the foundations of local understanding they have built.
11. **Hubs take and tolerate risk.** The entrepreneurial, experimental approach hubs take will inevitably require some risk and occasional failure.
12. **Hubs hold themselves accountable to the community – the whole community.** While hubs have certain responsibilities to investors, funders, and boards, the hub’s effectiveness is based on community reputation above all else. Keeping the community at the center feeds a collective search for hope in rural regions.

## *Rural Development Hubs work to advance solutions for communities on their own terms.*

Rural Development Hubs work to advance solutions for communities on their own terms. They avoid easy headline metrics that can provide an inaccurate picture of where a region is, such as frequent attempts to compare Northeast Minnesota to the Fargo, North Dakota region, where a different history and geography make comparisons challenging. They define success in relation to where the region began, creating realistic expectations around some of the daunting challenges they may face.

Aspen CSG makes the following recommendations for measuring impact, which influenced the framing of the metrics used in this report:

- Use percentages, not raw numbers.
- Recognize impact as outcomes (not outputs). For example, use the number of housing units constructed or loans made to measure progress on housing instead of fixating on housing scarcity. Start from relative, not absolute, places to show improvement over time.
- Emphasize reducing disparities as a sign of real progress.
- Recognize policy change potential as a real impact.
- Look for region-wide results.

For a more thorough overview of the rural development hub concept, see [Aspen CSG’s “Rural Development Hubs” article](#)

## APPLYING THE HUB LENS TO NORTHEAST MINNESOTA

In its “Rural Development Hubs” article, Aspen CSG outlines a series of “Things to Know About Rural America” that provide context on the state of a region. Together, they provide a useful framework to begin understanding the baseline reality in a region. These characteristics include:

1. Rural America Varies Widely by Economic Base and Geography.
2. Rural America Is Growing, but Growth Is Uneven.
3. Rural America’s Population Profile Is Changing.
4. Economic, Social, and Health Outcomes Lag.
5. Rural and Urban Are Connected in Interdependent Regions.
6. Rural Is Resource-Rich, Resilient, and Creative.

While these characteristics uncover some real diversity between Northeast Minnesota communities, they also underscore some similarities and create a foundation for shared understanding. This report seeks not to dwell on snapshots of particular troubles, but instead to understand them so regional partners can create pathways to address some of these challenges using the building blocks framework.

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### 1. RURAL AMERICA VARIES WIDELY BY ECONOMIC BASE AND GEOGRAPHY.

Northeast Minnesota is home to at least four distinct economic regions united by geography and shared history:

1. *The metropolitan area in and around Duluth*, which encompasses southern St. Louis County and a portion of Carlton County in Minnesota,<sup>3</sup> has a diverse economy thanks to its status as a regional services hub, education center, and the largest freshwater port in the world. It has seen slow but steady population growth and the emergence of an outdoor-focused ethos as part of its post-Rust Belt reinvention.
2. *The Iron Range region of northern St. Louis County and eastern Itasca County* consists of many communities interlinked by the past and present iron ore and taconite mining that still provides the vast majority of the raw materials for American steel production. Though mining employment has decreased over time, it remains critical to the region’s economy, and Iron Range communities have reinvented themselves with new business opportunities as times change.
3. *The North Shore region of Lake and Cook Counties*, while small in population, has emerged as a major tourism destination that capitalizes on the Lake Superior shoreline and rugged wilderness landscapes beyond. It maintains a deep connection to the region’s natural resources and draws visitors and new residents from far beyond the region.
4. A different version of a similar story is afoot in *western Itasca, Aitkin, and Koochiching Counties*, which maintain a mix of both traditional natural resource-based industries and attract new residents thanks to the quality of life afforded by lakes, forests, and escapes into relative solitude. While growth has been uneven, these communities now have some of the widest-ranging economic bases in the region that have moved into Northeast Minnesota.

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<sup>3</sup> The Duluth MSA, as defined by federal sources, also includes Douglas County, Wisconsin. This analysis maintains its focus on the Minnesota portions of the MSA.

In recognition of the economic diversity of this region, this report presents data by county, when possible. It also splits St. Louis County into northern and southern halves when sub-county data is available. With a land area greater than several US states and two related but distinct centers of economic and political power in (Duluth and the core Iron Range), St. Louis County data has long vexed area analysts of economic, demographic, and societal trends. The decision to split the county aims to illuminate similarities and differences between the two halves.<sup>4</sup>

The seven-county region of Northeast Minnesota overlaps with all or parts of five Native Nations (Bois Forte Band of Chippewa, Fond du Lac Band of Lake Superior Chippewa, Grand Portage Band of Lake Superior Chippewa, Leech Lake Band of Ojibwe, and Mille Lacs Band of Ojibwe). These areas vary considerably in size, population, economy, and local culture, and they are interconnected with each other in complex ways. They also share many aspects of a history of relations with the United States government and non-Native populations that have moved into Northeast Minnesota.

Demographic data for Tribal Nations includes some inherent shortcomings. While the US Census does collect data for Tribal Nations through the American Community Survey just as it does for other legal jurisdictions using its My Tribal Area tool, the data shows all residents living on reservation or off-reservation trust lands regardless of Tribal membership or racial identification, which can lead to a skewed picture on reservations that include substantial non-Native populations. Previous Northspan analyses of areas with large Native American populations have shown that data can fluctuate significantly, both due to shifting definitions of Native status and due to historical concerns in these communities with government interaction. Data on Northeast Minnesota's Tribal Nations therefore remains somewhat less reliable than it is for non-Native populations.

## 2. RURAL AMERICA IS GROWING, BUT GROWTH IS UNEVEN.

### *Contrary to some popular narratives, Northeast Minnesota has grown somewhat over the past two decades.*

Contrary to some popular narratives, Northeast Minnesota has grown somewhat over the past two decades. The largest absolute population growth has occurred in southern St. Louis County, which has added nearly 5,000 residents since 2000, and neighboring Carlton County has added a similar number. This growth is also not just limited to urban and exurban areas around Duluth, however: Cook County is among the fastest-growing rural regions of the state, and Aitkin County has grown as well. Serious population loss in Koochiching County is a regional outlier, and northern St. Louis County has also faced some headwinds. Itasca and Lake Counties have proven relatively stable, though they are on different trajectories, with Itasca Country growing over the first 15 years of the century before leveling off, and Lake recovering from some decline to show pandemic era growth.

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<sup>4</sup> For the purposes of this analysis, "Southern St. Louis County" includes the cities of Duluth, Hermantown, Proctor, and Rice Lake, Midway Township, and the entirety of census tracts 105 (parts of Duluth and Lakewood Townships), 106.1 (Gnesen, Normanna, North Star, Alden, and Pequaywan Townships), 106.2 (primarily Fredenberg and Canosia Townships), 111.01 (Solway, Brevator, and parts of Grand Lake and Industrial Townships), and 111.02 (New Independence and parts of Grand Lake and Industrial Townships). These census tracts were chosen due to their proximity to and interconnection with the Duluth metropolitan area, as demonstrated by income and commute pattern data; several were also included to allow for comparison across time prior to a 2020 Census decision to split some of the tracts in half. All other parts of the county (including some ostensibly "southern" parts of the county such as census tract 112, in its southwest corner) are considered "Northern St. Louis County."

**FIGURE 2: POPULATION CHANGE IN NORTHEAST MINNESOTA, 2000-2023**

County	2000	2015	2023	Pct. Change since 2000	Pct. Change since 2015
Cook	5,168	5,194	5,633	9.0%	8.5%
Carlton	31,671	35,443	36,457	15.1%	2.9%
Lake	11,058	10,750	10,911	-1.3%	1.5%
Aitkin	15,301	15,839	15,930	4.1%	0.6%
St. Louis	200,528	200,506	200,056	-0.2%	-0.2%
N. St. Louis	81,963	78,369	76,518	-6.6%	-2.4%
S. St. Louis	118,565	122,137	123,538	4.2%	1.1%
Itasca	43,992	45,354	45,141	2.6%	-0.5%
Koochiching	14,355	13,054	11,950	-16.8%	-8.5%
<b>Total</b>	<b>322,073</b>	<b>326,140</b>	<b>326,078</b>	<b>1.2%</b>	<b>0.0%</b>

Source: US Census and American Community Survey, 2000-2023.

### 3. RURAL AMERICA'S POPULATION PROFILE IS CHANGING.

There are two distinct changes underway in Northeast Minnesota's demographics: an aging population and increased racial and ethnic diversity.

#### AGING POPULATION

The United States is an aging society, and this is particularly true in regions like Northeast Minnesota, which have seen relatively little immigration from other countries to offset the broader trend. Over the past decade, a large cohort of Baby Boomers has aged into the 65+ age bracket, which has significant implications for the regional workforce, health care needs, and the composition of area communities. Parts of Northeast Minnesota have also emerged as destinations for retirement, as people move from other regions to enjoy the region's lakes, natural beauty, and slower pace of life.

**FIGURE 3: CHANGE IN POPULATION BY AGE GROUP IN NORTHEAST MINNESOTA, 2000-2023**

County	Under 18	18-34	35-64	65+
Cook	-19.7%	13.3%	-10.0%	91.8%
Itasca	-14.4%	-2.8%	-5.9%	54.0%
Aitkin	-20.5%	-0.9%	-8.9%	53.7%
Carlton	-0.2%	12.9%	17.0%	38.7%
Lake	-15.5%	-8.6%	-8.5%	35.2%
St. Louis	-16.3%	6.7%	-7.0%	29.1%
N. St. Louis	-18.8%	-12.4%	-14.3%	29.5%
S. St. Louis	-14.6%	16.0%	-1.6%	28.8%
Koochiching	-38.1%	-21.7%	-21.9%	28.0%
<b>Total</b>	<b>-15.5%</b>	<b>4.6%</b>	<b>-5.4%</b>	<b>36.2%</b>

Source: US Census and American Community Survey, 2000-2023.

## *Every county in the region saw at least a 28% increase in the number of residents over 65 since the turn of the century.*

The latest data from the American Community Survey supports this case. Every county in the region saw at least a 28% increase in the number of residents over 65 since the turn of the century. This happened even in Koochiching County, which lost 2,500 residents between 2000 and 2023; the 65+ population nearly doubled in growing Cook County. Meanwhile, most counties saw over a ten percent decline in population under age 18, with only Carlton County proving relatively stable. The regional trend is clear, substantial, and shows little sign of slowing.

Nonetheless, there are some pockets of the region that keep its demographic story from being uniform. Carlton, Cook, and southern St. Louis Counties saw increases in the 18-34 age bracket, a trend that bodes well for workforce participation and family formation. Carlton County is also an outlier in the 35-64 age bracket, where it added a substantial number of residents even as many previously in this group aged into 65+ territory, and southern St. Louis County only saw a small loss here.

### **RACE AND ETHNICITY**

The racial and ethnic composition of Northeast Minnesota is also shifting. While the region is still over 90% white, demographic change has accelerated since 2000, as it has lost over 10,000 white residents in that timeframe while adding nearly 14,000 people of other racial backgrounds. This growing diversity accounts for all population growth in the region, and the regions that have grown since 2000 are among those that have added the most diversity in absolute numbers. Notably, however, many of the counties with the least robust population trends have seen a proportionally larger increase in their BIPOC populations. While this is in some cases attributable to effects based on a small sample, the fact that even Koochiching County saw an absolute increase in

its BIPOC population despite a substantial decrease in overall population shows just how deeply these trends are engrained. While numbers by specific race and ethnicity are small and subject to data noise, the growth is consistent across all groups measured by the US Census, including the region’s Black, Native American, and Asian population and people identifying as some other race or two or more races.

**FIGURE 4: CHANGE IN BIPOC AND WHITE POPULATION IN NORTHEAST MINNESOTA, 2000-2023**

County	Pct. BIPOC 2000	Pct. BIPOC 2023	Pct. Change BIPOC	Total Change White	Total Change BIPOC
Lake	2.0%	4.5%	120.3%	-414	267
Koochiching	3.9%	9.8%	109.5%	-3,015	610
Itasca	5.4%	10.6%	103.5%	-1,294	2,443
Aitkin	3.6%	6.5%	90.0%	135	494
St. Louis	5.1%	9.5%	83.6%	-9,094	8,622
N. St. Louis	3.8%	7.6%	90.2%	-8,220	2775
S. St. Louis	6.1%	10.6%	80.8%	-874	5,847
Carlton	8.3%	12.0%	67.6%	3,020	1,766
Cook	10.5%	14.9%	54.3%	169	296
<b>Total</b>	<b>5.3%</b>	<b>9.7%</b>	<b>81.2%</b>	<b>-10,493</b>	<b>13,945</b>

Source: US Census and American Community Survey, 2000-2023.

Statistics for ethnicity show even more dramatic growth in the Hispanic and Latino population of Northeast Minnesota. Cook County, though starting from a very low point, saw dramatic growth in its Hispanic and Latino population, and most of the rest of the counties saw robust 130-160% growth. Once again, Koochiching County saw a healthy growth in this segment of its population despite its overall population decrease.

**FIGURE 5: CHANGE IN HISPANIC OR LATINO POPULATION IN NORTHEAST MINNESOTA, 2000-2023**

County	Hispanic or Latino, 2000	Pct. 2000	Hispanic or Latino, 2023	Pct. 2023	Pct. Change
Cook	39	0.8%	156	2.8%	300.0%
Carlton	266	0.8%	676	1.9%	154.1%
Aitkin	92	0.6%	233	1.5%	153.3%
Itasca	263	0.6%	656	1.5%	149.4%
Lake	63	0.6%	154	1.4%	144.4%
St. Louis	1,597	0.8%	3,767	1.9%	135.9%
N. St. Louis	488	0.6%	1,091	1.4%	123.6%
S. St. Louis	1,109	0.9%	2,676	2.2%	141.3%
Koochiching	81	0.6%	175	1.5%	116.0%
<b>Total</b>	<b>2,401</b>	<b>0.7%</b>	<b>5,817</b>	<b>1.8%</b>	<b>142.3%</b>

Source: US Census and American Community Survey, 2000-2023.

***A common narrative regarding rural regions like Northeast Minnesota suggests they are seeing a steady drain in population through outmigration, but a closer look at data debunks this theory.***

#### **MIGRATION DATA**

A common narrative regarding rural regions like Northeast Minnesota suggests they are seeing a steady drain in population through outmigration, but a closer look at data debunks this theory. Between 2015 and 2022, IRS tax records indicate the region has netted over 4,000 migrants. While this trend has accelerated following a well-documented burst of rural migration during the Covid-19 pandemic, the region was gaining residents through migration prior to 2020 as well. Only Koochiching and St. Louis Counties have lost population due to net migration since 2015, and both have tipped over and begun to gain population via migration in the years since the pandemic. Aitkin, Carlton, Itasca, and Lake Counties all added people via migration every single year between 2015 and 2022. While some of this migration was internal to the region (Carlton County, for example, routinely netted over 100 residents per year from neighboring St. Louis County), the aggregate change is substantial.

**FIGURE 6: NET MIGRATION BY COUNTY BY YEAR, 2015-2022**

Year	Aitkin	Carlton	Cook	Itasca	Koochiching	Lake	St. Louis	Total
2015-2016	114	189	-1	127	-169	35	-337	-42
2016-2017	295	377	113	384	9	48	-471	755
2017-2018	144	158	53	92	-46	157	-482	76
2018-2019	29	98	29	155	-118	48	-388	-147
2019-2020	425	143	66	374	178	106	-505	787
2020-2021	397	397	120	544	20	123	65	1,666
2021-2022	258	91	56	437	29	12	124	1,007
Total Net Migration	1,662	1,453	436	2,113	-97	529	-1,994	4,102
Annual Average Net Migration	237	208	62	302	-14	76	-285	586

Source: Internal Revenue Service, 2015-2022.

These numbers are particularly surprising given the overall population trend in the region between 2015 and 2022, which was generally flat to slightly negative.<sup>5</sup> Figure 6 illustrates this comparison and its clear implication: deaths in Northeast Minnesota substantially outpace births. Only St. Louis County has seen natural population growth absent migration over this time period; Aitkin, Itasca, and Koochiching have seen substantial declines, and even Carlton County with its growing younger population owes its uptick entirely to inward migration. Northeast Minnesota is not draining residents to other regions at a significant scale; it owes its relatively flat population entirely to an aging population whose death rates substantially outpace birth rates.

**FIGURE 7: COMPONENTS OF POPULATION CHANGE, 2015-2022**

	Aitkin	Carlton	Cook	Itasca	Koochiching	Lake	St. Louis	Total
Total Population Change	20	919	417	-300	-982	165	-384	-145
Migration Change	1,662	1,453	436	2,113	-97	529	-1,994	4,102
Births Minus Deaths	-1,642	-534	-19	-2,413	-885	-364	1,610	-4,247

Sources: Internal Revenue Service, 2015-2022; American Community Survey, 2015 and 2022.

<sup>5</sup> Population change data in Figure 6 will not match that reported in other population tables in this report; because IRS migration data lags over a year behind ACS data, this table uses 2022 5-Year ACS data.

A deeper analysis underscores that an aging population is the reason for this shift. Using American Community Survey data, the approximate Crude Birth Rate (CBR)<sup>6</sup> in Northeast Minnesota is 9.79, a figure notably lower than the national CBR of 11.0 in 2022.<sup>7</sup> However, this gap is attributable to the relatively high percentage of the female population that is no longer of childbearing age in Northeast Minnesota. If the percentage of women of childbearing age in the region were the same as the national percentage and the birth rate per woman held constant, it would have resulted in an additional 355 births in the region in 2023. The resulting approximate CBR of this shift would be 10.9, which is nearly equivalent to the national CBR. While this figure is still below the replacement rate and flows into a discourse on sweeping national birthrate declines far beyond the scope of this study, exploring the gap shows how an aging population compounds population loss. This trend only stands to accelerate over time.<sup>8</sup>

IRS data provides an illuminating, if incomplete, picture of where migrants come from. (There is significant data suppression in county-to-county migration numbers, particularly for the smaller counties in the region.) Over 80% of residents moving to Aitkin, Carlton, Itasca, and Lake Counties came from elsewhere in Minnesota. Hennepin County is a major feeder across the region, and Anoka County also appears as a regular source for some counties. Cook County showed a unique ability to draw from a larger area, with 40% of its inward migrants coming from out of state. Koochiching County, meanwhile, operated in its own world, losing over 300 residents to other parts of the state but gaining over 200 from out-of-state. St. Louis County saw population losses both into and out of the state, but a flip in Metro migration during the COVID-19 pandemic changed its trajectory. It had been losing people to Hennepin, Ramsey, and other Twin Cities suburban counties prior to the pandemic, but began gaining from them during it, leading to positive net migration in 2021 and 2022. No other county saw a substantial switch in where its migrants came from or went.

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<sup>6</sup> The Crude Birth Rate, a simpler metric than Total Fertility Rate (TFR), calculates the number of births in a year divided by the total population times 1,000. Because the American Community Survey does not have data for births in a year, this data point is derived by taking the age 0-5 population and dividing it by five; hence the use of the term “approximate” to refer to the CBR calculated here.

<sup>7</sup> World Bank, Crude Birth Rate for the United States [SPDYNCBRTINUSA], retrieved from FRED, Federal Reserve Bank of St. Louis; <https://fred.stlouisfed.org/series/SPDYNCBRTINUSA>, February 14, 2025.

<sup>8</sup> Data from the Minnesota State Demographic Center’s May 2024 dataset support this claim, as they project a 10% population decline in the region by 2055 if migration, birth, and death rates hold constant from Census Annual Population Estimates between 2010 and 2022. The change in patterns late in this time window following the Covid pandemic, however, do throw some question on the likelihood of these trends holding static.

#### 4. ECONOMIC, SOCIAL, AND HEALTH OUTCOMES LAG.

As in many parts of rural America, Northeast Minnesota tends to lag in economic and health-related outcomes, both in comparison to national benchmarks and especially in comparison to the rest of Minnesota.

#### MEDIAN HOUSEHOLD INCOME

**FIGURE 8: CHANGE IN MEDIAN HOUSEHOLD INCOME IN NORTHEAST MINNESOTA, 2000-2023**

County	2000	2023	Pct. Change	Pct. Change Relative to Inflation
Carlton	\$40,021	\$80,042	100.0%	17.1%
Lake	\$40,402	\$75,621	87.2%	4.3%
Cook	\$36,640	\$71,643	95.5%	12.6%
St. Louis	\$36,306	\$69,455	91.3%	8.4%
N. St. Louis	\$34,914	\$62,728	79.7%	-3.2%
S. St. Louis	\$37,366	\$74,038	98.1%	15.2%
Koochiching	\$36,262	\$69,115	90.6%	7.7%
Itasca	\$36,324	\$66,380	82.7%	-0.2%
Aitkin	\$31,139	\$59,498	91.1%	8.2%
<b>Total</b>	<b>\$36,534</b>	<b>\$69,864</b>	<b>91.2%</b>	<b>8.3%</b>
Minnesota	\$47,111	\$87,556	85.9%	3.0%
United States	\$42,148	\$78,538	86.3%	3.4%

Source: US Census and American Community Survey, 2000-2023.

Not coincidentally, the parts of the region that have grown in population have shown the highest income growth, with Carlton, Cook, and southern St. Louis Counties all outpacing inflation by a healthy rate. Itasca and northern St. Louis Counties saw negative income growth relative to inflation, while Koochiching County managed to buck the general relationship between population and income growth by adding some wealth even as the population shrank. Regional income growth did outpace the state and nation, but in absolute terms it still lags both substantially.

## POVERTY

**FIGURE 9: PERCENTAGE OF POPULATION IN POVERTY IN NORTHEAST MINNESOTA, 2000-2023**

	2000	2023	Pct. Change in Poverty
St. Louis	12.1%	13.4%	11.4%
N. St. Louis	11.4%	13.1%	7.2%
S. St. Louis	12.5%	13.6%	14.0%
Itasca	10.6%	12.7%	22.2%
Aitkin	11.6%	12.3%	10.7%
Cook	10.1%	11.3%	21.5%
Carlton	7.9%	11.1%	61.0%
Koochiching	12.1%	10.7%	-26.4%
Lake	7.4%	8.3%	12.2%
<b>Total</b>	<b>11.2%</b>	<b>12.7%</b>	<b>14.5%</b>
Minnesota	7.9%	9.2%	16.5%
United States	11.3%	12.4%	9.7%

Source: US Census and American Community Survey, 2000-2023.

Northeast Minnesota has struggled to alleviate poverty since 2000, with a growth in overall poverty that outpaces the national rate, though Minnesota’s statewide poverty growth from its historically low levels has been even more substantial. Koochiching County is again an exception in the region due to its ability to lower its poverty rate. Despite showing some of the highest income growth, Carlton, Cook, and southern St. Louis Counties simultaneously saw some of the highest increases in poverty rates. These trends toward extremes show divergence and growing inequalities, even in the parts of the region that appear to be doing comparatively well.

## HOUSING

Housing is one of the most reliable indicators of social stability and a frequent vehicle for wealth creation. Historically, Northeast Minnesota enjoyed relatively affordable home prices that did not rise much, but this has changed over the past decade. According to Lake Superior Area Realtors, the median sales price of a single-family home rose from \$150,750 in 2015 to \$275,000 by early 2025,<sup>9</sup> an increase of 82% in the average home price that vastly exceeds the cumulative inflation rate of 36%. The functional cost for non-cash homebuyers is even higher, given the simultaneous increase in interest rates over the same period. Comprehensive data for rentals is somewhat harder to obtain, but a cursory look at rental rates in US Census data for the region suggests they, too, have outpaced inflation by at least 10%.

<sup>9</sup> Lake Superior Area Realtors, Inc., accessed from <https://www.lsarealtors.com/resourcecenter/statistics/>.

## *the median sales price of a single-family home rose from \$150,750 in 2015 to \$275,000 by early 2025, an increase of 82%*

The region's relatively flat population also masks several more complex dynamics that affect the housing supply. While Northeast Minnesota only added 5,000 residents between 2000 and 2023, it added nearly 7,000 households, as average household size continues to decline across the board. This necessitates additional housing units to absorb these smaller households, adding some strain to the housing stock. Moreover, over 20% of homes in Northeast Minnesota are not occupied by local residents, and this number is growing. Between 2000 and 2023, the region added over 6,500 units counted by the Census as "other vacant," which is a proxy for a vacation home or cabin. While the region added nearly 13,000 units over this time period, over half of them are not occupied by full-time residents, while another 7,000 simply went to absorbing household growth. Combined, these two figures exceed the number of units built by 500, leading to a tighter housing supply and limiting options for anyone who might want to move into the area. These trends are particularly acute in St. Louis and Cook Counties, which had the largest increase in other vacant homes. Vacation and second homes can bring significant economic benefits to a region, including injections of outside spending and civic engagement from part-time residents, but their presence can distort perceptions of the housing market and, without adequate development, limit housing stock for full-time residents.

**FIGURE 10: NORTHEAST MINNESOTA HOUSING INDICATORS, 2000-2023**

	2000	2023	Pct. Change
No. of Households	132,152	139,121	5.3%
Avg. Household Size	2.44	2.34	-4.1%
No. of Units	167,484	180,393	7.7%
No. Owner Occupied	102,635	105,314	2.6%
% Owner Occupied	61.3%	58.4%	-4.7%
% Owner Occupied Cost Burdened	11.0%	18.6%	69.3%
No. Renter Occupied	28,977	33,807	16.7%
% Renter Occupied	17.3%	18.7%	8.1%
% Renter Occupied Cost Burdened	36.1%	47.3%	31.2%
Other Vacant (i.e., Vacation) Units	32,104	38,630	20.3%
% Other Vacant (i.e., Vacation) Units	19.2%	21.4%	11.5%

Source: US Census and American Community Survey, 2000-2023.

Other housing indicators map on to some of the challenges observed in the income and poverty-related data. While there are many reasons individuals may choose to rent, increased numbers of rentals are correlated with higher poverty, and the region saw substantially higher growth in renter-occupied units than it did in owner-occupied units over the first quarter of the century. Owner-occupied housing growth for full-time residents was relatively flat and slower than both household and population growth. The percentage of area households that are cost-burdened (defined by most official metrics as spending over 30% of their income on housing) increased substantially for both homeowners and renters, and the increase was consistent across all counties other than shrinking Koochiching County. Housing attainability in Northeast Minnesota is increasingly difficult.

As the largest (and growing) expense for a typical household and a necessity for population growth as household size shrinks even without inward migration, a limited housing supply is one of the greatest barriers to economic vitality in Northeast Minnesota. Recent research shows that increasing supply is the most reliable and seriously neglected method to keep down costs, combat homelessness, and expand options to create a healthy level of turnover in the market.<sup>10</sup> Northeast Minnesota needs more housing units to keep the region affordable, attract new residents, and prevent the most vulnerable people from slipping through the cracks, and both regulatory and financial tools can play a role in creating them.

**HEALTH INDICATORS**

Health-related metrics also show distinct challenges in Northeast Minnesota. In rankings of Minnesota counties developed by the University of Wisconsin Population Health Institute’s County Health Rankings and Roadmaps, Northeast Minnesota counties tend to be among the least healthy among Minnesota’s 87 counties. While figures in the region still tend to outperform national averages, they trail neighboring communities in Minnesota.

The County Health Rankings is an aggregate of many health measures, and it divides these calculations into health factors and health outcomes. Health factors include a variety of indicators, including behaviors (alcohol consumption, exercise, tobacco use, and sexual activity, among others), access to and use of clinical care, social and economic factors (such as education and poverty-related measures), and physical environment factors (including pollution, housing, and length of commute). Health outcomes include life expectancy and measures of quality of life, including both physical and mental health factors.<sup>11</sup>

**FIGURE 11: NORTHEAST MINNESOTA HEALTH FACTOR AND OUTCOME COUNTY RANKINGS, 2024**

Health Factors		Health Outcomes	
County	State Rank	County	State Rank
Cook	28	Lake	4
Lake	58	Carlton	53
St. Louis	59	Aitkin	62
Carlton	67	Koochiching	69
Koochiching	71	St. Louis	76
Itasca	73	Itasca	79
Aitkin	83	Cook	80

Source: University of Wisconsin Population Health Institute County Health Rankings & Roadmaps, 2024.

Northeast Minnesota tends to perform well in health factors related to clinical care access, education, and physical environment,

<sup>10</sup> See such recent titles as *On the Housing Crisis* by Jerusalem Demsas (2024), *Abundance* by Ezra Klein and Derek Thompson (2025), and *Nowhere to Live: The Hidden Story of America’s Housing Crisis* by James S. Burling (2024).

<sup>11</sup> While the Population Health Institute no longer publishes explicit rankings in its county profiles, rankings can be derived from the Population Health Institute’s downloadable data, which presents Z-scores or standard scores showing the number of standard deviations each county is from the national mean for both health factors and health outcomes.

even as specific counties vary. It lags, however, in numerous health behaviors, preventative health, and statistics related to poverty. Among health outcomes, poor physical and mental health days<sup>12</sup> are a serious concern, even as overall life expectancy remains strong.

## 5. RURAL AND URBAN ARE CONNECTED IN INTERDEPENDENT REGIONS.

### *One-third of employed Northeast Minnesota residents commute outside their county of residence for their jobs*

While less easily measured than the previously discussed trends in rural communities, deep interdependencies have long been part of Northeast Minnesota. Prior to white settlement, different Ojibwe Tribes lived in the entire region, and these groups maintain deep ancestral ties. In the late 1800s, the region's economic history shared a trajectory cultivated by its wealth of natural resources, particularly in mining and forestry, that traveled to the outside world via port and rail connections in Duluth and on the North Shore. Throughout the twentieth century, the region retained a distinct political and cultural identity through boom-and-bust economic cycles. Now, even as the region works through the political polarization that has swept rural areas and the emergence of unique local economies, it remains interlinked in many ways, and it shares a complex relationship with neighboring rural regions and larger metropolitan areas such as the Twin Cities and other Great Lakes communities.

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<sup>12</sup> Poor physical and mental health days are self-reported through the Behavioral Risk Factor Surveillance System (BRFSS), an extensive annual survey from the Centers for Disease Control (CDC). For more information, see <https://www.cdc.gov/brfss/index.html>.

**FIGURE 12: COMMUTE PATTERNS FOR NORTHEAST MINNESOTA COUNTIES, 2022**

	% Employed residents who live and work inside	% Employed residents who live inside, work outside	% Workforce lives outside, works inside	Common Destinations	Net Commuters
Cook	77.5%	22.5%	24.9%	Duluth, Minneapolis	74
St. Louis	75.3%	24.7%	35.0%	Superior, Cloquet, Minneapolis	13,463
N. St. Louis	68.2%	31.8%	21.1%	Duluth, Hennepin Co, Itasca Co	-4,411
S. St. Louis	71.2%	28.8%	46.7%	Superior, Cloquet, Minneapolis	17,874
Koochiching	69.2%	30.8%	17.2%	Duluth, Bemidji, Minneapolis, Hibbing, Virginia, Grand Rapids	-825
Itasca	58.6%	41.4%	26.4%	Hibbing, Duluth, Minneapolis, Bemidji	-4,151
Lake	49.6%	50.4%	38.5%	Duluth, Superior, Minneapolis, Hermantown, Ely	1,816
Aitkin	42.5%	57.5%	34.9%	Grand Rapids, Brainerd, Duluth, Minneapolis	-2,318
Carlton	41.9%	58.1%	44.2%	Duluth, Superior, Hermantown, Minneapolis	-4,112

Source: US Census OntheMap Data Tool, 2022.

Data on regional commute patterns from the US Census underscores these interconnections. One-third of employed Northeast Minnesota residents commute outside their county of residence for their jobs, including over 50% of workers in Carlton, Aitkin, and Lake Counties. Given their more isolated locations, Cook and Koochiching Counties have fewer commuters between counties, though both still see regular interconnection with neighboring counties. St. Louis County, likely due to its large size, also has comparatively fewer residents leaving the county, but with Duluth serving as the regional center, it pulls in a substantial number of workers from neighboring areas. Lake and Cook Counties also attract a modest number of non-residents for jobs, while all other counties see a net loss in commuters.

Northeast Minnesota has additional regional interconnections that define it as a coherent area. The region is home to 10 campuses of higher education, including two four-year institutions (the University of Minnesota Duluth and the College of St. Scholastica, both in Duluth) and eight two-year campuses, including Lake Superior College in Duluth, Fond du Lac Tribal and Community College in Cloquet, and the six campuses of Minnesota North, which are located in Grand Rapids, Hibbing, Eveleth, Virginia, Ely, and International Falls. Together, these institutions provide a network of educational opportunities.

While Duluth is the region's foremost retail hub, other cities such as Grand Rapids, Hibbing, Virginia, and Cloquet also draw from a substantial trade area, and there are additional shopping clusters in other towns. Outdoor recreation opportunities, meanwhile, pull residents from the entire region and beyond in the other direction and into some of the most sparsely populated corners of Northeast Minnesota. These connections underscore the relationship between the region's towns and more urban areas, and additional research from Aspen CSG calls the urban-rural divide a "myth" given these interdependencies.<sup>13</sup>

## 6. RURAL IS RESOURCE-RICH, RESILIENT, AND CREATIVE.

Though this report will ultimately focus on areas for potential improvement, it also seeks to lift up the persistence and triumphs of many Northeastern Minnesotans and the wealth of opportunities the region faces. Success stories across the region will feature in snapshots provided in Section 4 of this report.

### HUB LENS CONCLUSIONS

The data in the previous section paints a complex picture of Northeast Minnesota, but several clear trends emerge:

**The future is more diverse.** Northeast Minnesota added 13,000 people of color from 2000 to 2023, even as the number of white people declined by over 10,000. The trend was consistent across all counties and shows no signs of slowing.

**An aging population profoundly drives regional demographics.** Northeast Minnesota is adding people from other regions, but even this positive trendline is not enough to make up for declining workforce and overall population due to a large cohort of aging people and below replacement birthrates. Barring a dramatic change in one of these two underlying factors, general demographic trends will continue if not accelerate, which has significant implications for population, economic growth, and social services.

**Economic outcomes are diverging.** Within Northeast Minnesota, southern St. Louis County, Carlton County, and Cook County simultaneously saw the highest growth in median income and some of the highest increases in poverty rate between 2015 and 2023. While wage growth in the region generally outpaces inflation, poverty has also risen, showing that a rising tide has not lifted all boats, and there is a growing percentage of the population for whom economic growth has not led to better outcomes.

**Housing is increasingly difficult to afford and find.** Northeast Minnesota's housing market is tight; even with limited population growth, shrinking household sizes and the steady addition of more vacation homes to the region limits availability. Costs are escalating, with nearly half of all renters now cost-burdened and homeownership growing more unattainable. Adding housing stock is essential to combating these trends.

**Health infrastructure is above average, but outcomes can lag.** Northeast Minnesota has a decent foundation for improving health outcomes, including respectable educational performance and access to opportunities for recreation. Rural healthcare, while straining in many places, is still better than national averages in access to primary care and in the size of the support network. The region benefits from the headquarters of two larger health care systems and numerous independent providers in the region. Many indicators related to behavioral health and mental health, however, show real room for improvement. Health outcomes often align with racial and class divisions, as does place, both in terms of access in deeply rural areas and in the concentration of troubling indicators in certain neighborhoods in more urban areas. While the causal arrows for geographic disparities may have more to do with economic barriers than anything particular to a place, they do run some risk of compounding themselves if disinvestment continues and people remain trapped in places with limits on access to healthy food, recreation, health care, or other fundamental pieces of a healthy lifestyle.

With this baseline understanding of Northeast Minnesota as a rural region, this report now proceeds to assess it using the Thrive Rural Framework.

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<sup>13</sup> Erin Cahill, "The myth of the 'rural-urban divide,'" Aspen Institute Community Strategies Group, 6 February 2025, <https://www.aspenicsg.org/the-myth-of-the-rural-urban-divide/>.

**MOVING FORWARD TOGETHER:  
A THRIVING RURAL COMMUNITIES GAP ANALYSIS  
OF NORTHEAST MINNESOTA**

**PART 2:**

**THE THRIVE RURAL FRAMEWORK**

**N O R T H S P A N**



## PART 2: THE THRIVE RURAL FRAMEWORK

The [Thrive Rural Framework](#), according to the Aspen Community Strategies Group, is “a new tool to help you take stock, target action, and gauge progress.” It seeks to “spark new ways of thinking and acting to move communities, regions, and systems toward producing more widespread and equitable rural prosperity, health, and well-being.” The framework consists of 20 building blocks that are divided into three categories: Rural Voice and Power, Equitable Aims and Design, and Resources for Productive Action.

### RURAL VOICE AND POWER

The Rural Voice and Power category assesses how well rural voices are heard. It recognizes a hierarchy of needs, noting that community members need a base level of needs met before they can thrive. It emphasizes the importance of a welcoming community for all to be heard, and it emphasizes local ownership for greater control. Rural communities need to have mechanisms to share their voice with policymakers, the media, and other actors that may not be physically located in their communities but have clear power over what happens in them. Coordination of these voices only amplifies their potential impact.

### EQUITABLE AIMS AND DESIGN

The second category, Equitable Aims and Design, applies an equity lens to ensure fair outcomes for the entire community. It addresses these challenges at both a local level, where it looks at existing efforts and resources, and at a more systemic level, where questions of outcomes, a cohesive policy lens, and valuing rural voices all emerge.

### RESOURCES FOR PRODUCTIVE ACTION

Even if a community is empowered and inclusive, it still needs resources to put its goals into action. The Resources for Productive Action category addresses this need to channel voice and good intent into tangible, measurable outcomes. It looks to leadership capacity and organizational infrastructure at the local level and broader efforts to direct capital to rural areas, and to analyze outcomes and create a shared framework for action.

### LOCAL AND SYSTEMS LEVELS

In addition to being split into these three categories, all twenty building blocks can be divided into local and systems levels. There are elements of Rural Voice and Power, Equitable Aims and Design, and Resources for Productive Action in each level, which underscores the interconnection between the local and the systemic, showing that progress requires work on both fronts.

FIGURE 13: THRIVING RURAL COMMUNITIES LOCAL-LEVEL BUILDING BLOCKS

## LOCAL-LEVEL BUILDING BLOCKS

Ten of the building blocks operate at a local level. These building blocks center on issues that local communities and regions can address on their own. While they may not be easy to advance, they provide a starting place for local action and are often less daunting in scope than systems-level building blocks. While insufficient to change rural communities' narratives on their own, they provide actionable starting points to confront issues that might otherwise feel overwhelming.

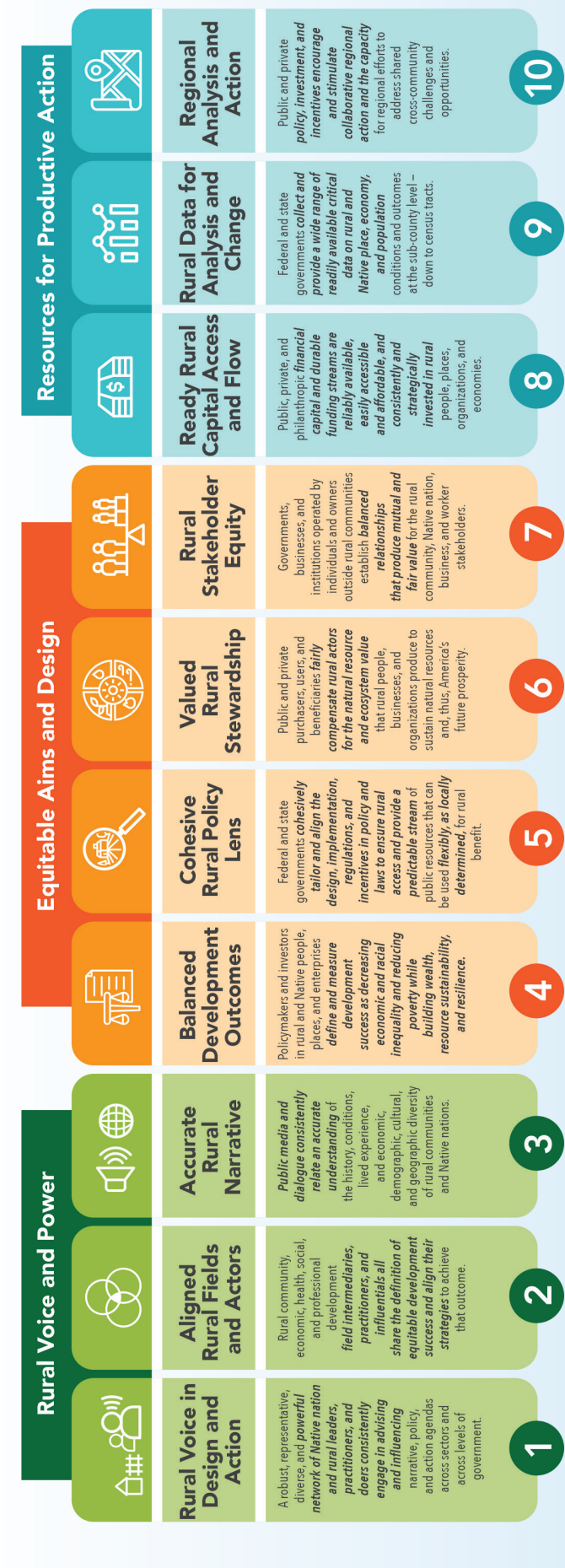


Source: Aspen Institute Community Strategies Group, 2024.

**FIGURE 14: THRIVING RURAL COMMUNITIES SYSTEMS-LEVEL BUILDING BLOCKS**

**SYSTEMS-LEVEL BUILDING BLOCKS**

The other ten building blocks are more systemic in nature. Individual communities cannot control them directly, and they require collaboration across rural communities, advocacy, and relationships with higher levels of government, business, and civil society. Confronting them, however, allows communities to move the needle on the seemingly intractable issues that can often leave locals feeling powerless.

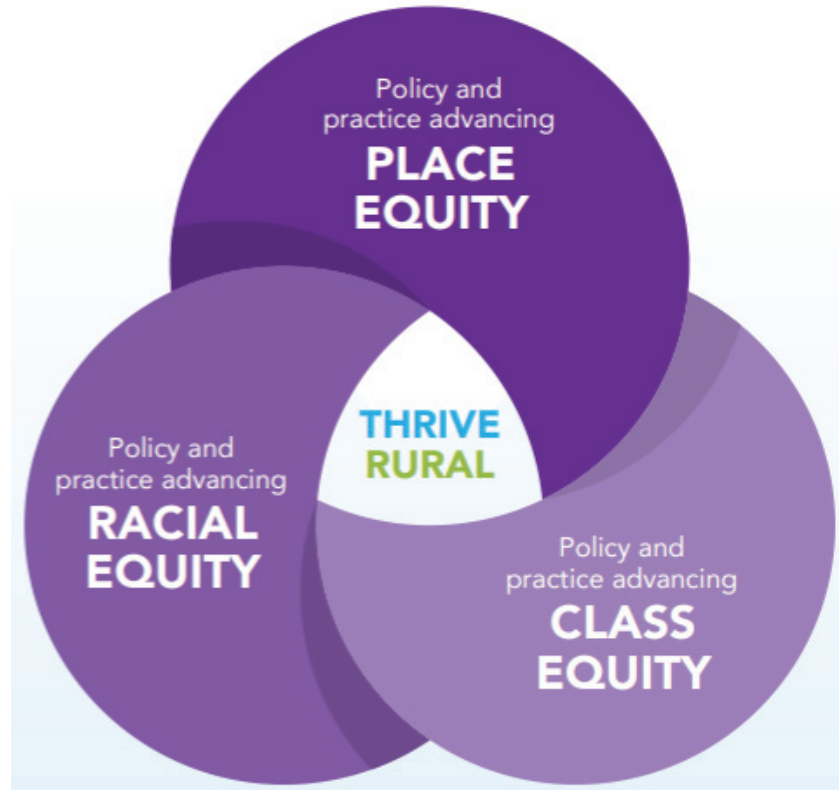


Source: Aspen Institute Community Strategies Group, 2024.

## FOUNDATIONAL ELEMENTS

In addition to the twenty building blocks, the TRC framework features three foundational elements that seek to dismantle what it terms “rural-discriminatory practices.” These practices, which can be both explicit or insidious, are tendencies that have become deeply entrenched in policy, regulation, decision-making mechanisms, and practices and behaviors. The three elements are:

**FIGURE 15: THRIVING RURAL COMMUNITIES FOUNDATIONAL ELEMENTS**



Source: Aspen Institute Community Strategies Group, 2024.

- 1. Place equity.** Place equity recognizes that the location and size of rural communities has often left them at a disadvantage in accessing resources. At the local level, services may be available to only a subset of the community (e.g., those able to drive vehicles), if they are available at all. At the systems level, policy frameworks may have scoring criteria biased against rural areas or require complex applications or reporting practices that smaller communities may not have the capacity to pursue or administer. Outside entities may impose one-size-fits-all models that do not work for many rural community members.
- 2. Racial equity.** Like most American communities, rural areas bear the scars of longstanding racial inequities. Deed restrictions, lending restrictions, and the legacy of explicit discrimination and hate crimes all have had lasting effects on rural communities. In Northeast Minnesota, treaty violations, allotment policies that have chopped up reservations, and the legacy of boarding schools are among the numerous discriminatory practices imposed on Native Americans that have ongoing implications for racial equity. Despite the region’s relatively small BIPOC population, members of these communities face significant disparities and are often concentrated in neighborhoods with greater environmental concerns and high-poverty schools.

- 3. Class equity.** Class divides permeate many communities, even in rural areas that may appear homogenous to the untrained eye. They limit public participation by adhering to practices that privilege certain lifestyles, and wealthier communities may enjoy stronger infrastructure, better-regarded schools, and a greater sense of community safety. Tax policy, government benefit systems, and certain aspects of the criminal justice system can make it difficult for those who become involved within it to escape certain vicious cycles. In Northeast Minnesota, the legacy of class divides dates to the labor wars of the early twentieth century and lingers in subtle social hierarchies of where people live and how they spend their free time.

For each foundational element, the TRC framework seeks to advance policies and practices that move toward more equitable outcomes. The three foundational elements weave their way through the building blocks, and each capsule in Part 4 captures dynamics that directly or indirectly run up against the region's efforts to build a strong economy that does not disadvantage people or groups within it.

**MOVING FORWARD TOGETHER:  
A THRIVING RURAL COMMUNITIES GAP ANALYSIS  
OF NORTHEAST MINNESOTA**

**PART 3:**

**THRIVE RURAL GAPS ANALYSIS**

**N O R T H S P A N**



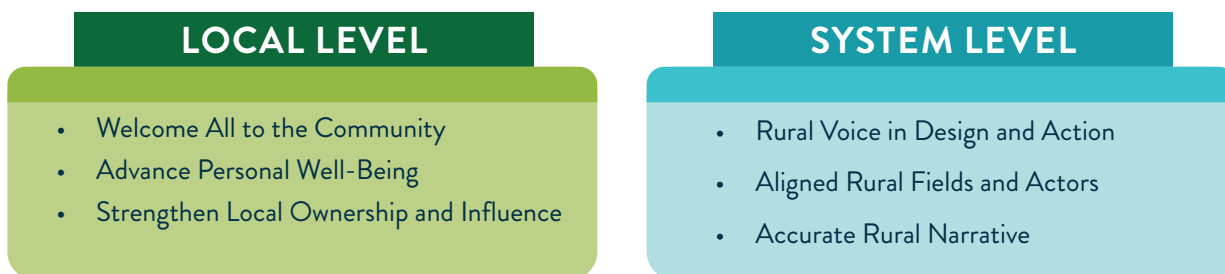
## PART 3: THRIVE RURAL GAPS ANALYSIS

With this understanding of the state of affairs in Northeast Minnesota, this report now proceeds to analyze Northeast Minnesota's current state using the Thriving Rural Communities framework. Part 4 of this report provides capsules on each of the 20 Building Blocks for readers who would like to explore these topics in greater depth. This portion of the report, however, proceeds with a summary of the findings from each and pulls out key issues in areas Northspan identified as the most pressing gaps in the regional ecosystem.

This portion of the report preserves Northspan's original gap analysis of the region. A subsequent engagement series led to edits and refinement of this initial analysis, and details on those updates are available in Part 5. We maintain this portion of the report to show how researchers worked to identify glaring gaps within the three major building block categories: Rural Voice and Power, Equitable Aims and Design, and Resources for Productive Action..

### RURAL VOICE AND POWER

The six building blocks under Rural Voice and Power assess how well rural voices are heard. They note the importance of foundational needs before such voice and power can be exercised effectively, including a welcoming community and some semblance of local control and agency. It feeds into broader questions about rural narrative and the ability of regional partners to align themselves to advocate for their needs. The six building blocks are:



Northeast Minnesota clearly aspires to advance rural voice and power, but outcomes remain scattershot. Northspan's researchers had no trouble identifying myriad initiatives seeking to advance many of these efforts. Many, however, happen in isolation, with varying quality and a frequent sense of being under-resourced. In this sense, some of the challenges felt relatively solvable, compared to some other building blocks enmeshed in deeper conflicts over values and collective action; Funding commitment could go a long way toward creating welcoming networks, providing resources to people struggling in the education or job training system, and improving health outcomes. The broader environment in which these funding decisions are made, however, can make all the difference for their success or failure.

## ACTION AREA 1: REBUILDING LOCAL INFORMATION SHARING SYSTEMS

*Building Blocks Addressed: Accurate Rural Narrative, Strengthen Local Ownership and Influence*

### ***There is nothing local about an algorithm.***

The local media landscape has fractured dramatically over the past several decades. An era of dominance by a few local newspapers and television stations is long gone, with news and local updates spread across a wide range of sources of varying detail, accuracy, and ties to the community. People seeking to highlight local news or events face an eternal struggle to get information out via traditional media platforms, social media, and through immediate networks, all of which are imperfect in their ability to deliver information; many can devolve into echo chambers or battlefields for loud voices attempting to assert influence. The process has become stunningly inefficient, and as generations shift and more and more people rely on digital content, it only gets harder.

There is nothing local about an algorithm. These drivers of contemporary media consumption are opaque, costly to crack, and constantly evolving. Local media challenges dovetail with the struggles of public engagement efforts, which are often fumbling through the same array of channels and failing to reach people beyond those who are already engaged.

There are several ways for locally focused actors to create a stronger local media environment. One is a selective retreat from algorithmically driven news. Increasing recognition of the mental health costs of addiction-fueling content and a revolt against an utter lack of control have led some people to value the predictable and identifiable local newspaper or radio station. In some regions, philanthropy has seeded these initiatives; for example, the [Press Forward Vermont](#) effort from the Vermont Community Foundation has provided \$500 million to local media outlets through an effort it frames as vital for local media access and strengthening democracy.

Efforts to strengthen traditional local media can work up to a point; there was clear value and wisdom in the older model that provides a measured, widely accessible, and predictable flow of information within a defined geography, and its resurgence in some pockets shows a continued appetite. However, local actors also must recognize that digital media is here to stay, and that a significant portion of the population is unlikely to intentionally seek out local options. Deep-seated questions around institutional trust, which are often most acute in rural areas, further complicate any effort to rebuild old models. If the answer cannot strictly involve turning away from the tools that have broken down the previous order, it may also require some effort to harness them.

One such effort is already underway in Northeast Minnesota. The Ordean Foundation is exploring ways to use artificial intelligence to drive community engagement, seeking a low-barrier form of connection through tools that could create some removal from the human biases often inherent in outreach and data interpretation. Many questions remain as to the design, efficacy, and broader applications of this technology, but it appears to be fertile territory for exploration. Twinned efforts to rebuild the best of traditional media while incorporating the frictionless speed and adaptability of the latest technology have the potential to rebuild local information ecosystems.

## ACTION AREA 2: WELCOMING WORK 2.0

*Building Blocks Addressed: Welcome All to the Community, Design for Everyone to Thrive, Provide Action-Able Leadership*

***An increasingly diverse population, long-term demographic trends, and a deepening understanding of the many different aspects of lived experiences and how they affect people's perspectives make it impossible to imagine a shared future without the intentional cultivation of a community that can hold all these different experiences without falling apart.***

The past decade has seen an eruption of interest in work designed to create more welcoming communities. The 2020 murder of George Floyd spurred a profusion of diversity, equity, and inclusion initiatives that sought to highlight, interrogate, and address past injustices. In turn, some of these efforts spurred strong reactions and rejections, and some are now in retreat due to government mandates or fear of repercussions.

The Thrive Rural framework lifts up many concepts related to welcoming community work. By whatever name it uses, the work of reducing biases and disparities, increasing intercultural competence, and reducing social fragmentation is fundamental for the success and vitality of Northeast Minnesota. An increasingly diverse population, long-term demographic trends, and a deepening understanding of the many different aspects of lived experiences and how they affect people's perspectives make it impossible to imagine a shared future without the intentional cultivation of a community that can hold all these different experiences without falling apart. Social contact, or bringing diverse people together over an extended period, generally proves effective.

However, research shows that not all DEI initiatives work as intended, and some may even be detrimental to their stated goals. Participants prefer to retain some control and consent over participation and autonomy in decision-making; once these initiatives start to apply a certain level of pressure, their efficacy drops dramatically. Research-based practices emphasize complexity of identity, authenticity of experience, and self-direction rather than reducing welcoming-related work to binary, blame-based, and poorly defined concepts.

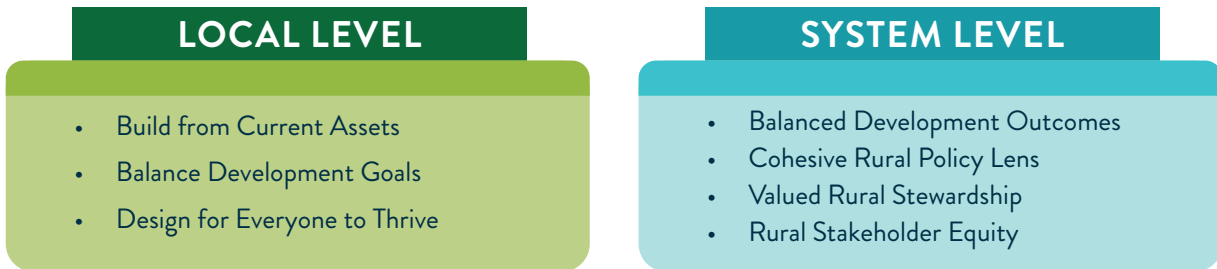
Since Northspan first ventured into this space in 2021, it has focused its welcoming work on building connections between community members and enhancing their capacity to address community challenges. It seeks to build a civic culture that increases contact between people and groups in educational, curiosity-inducing ways. Welcoming efforts remain strongest as a ground-up model that builds on momentum in individual communities. At its best, this work can expand beyond simply welcoming and help provide a rural voice, whether or not the issue in question has anything to do with welcoming communities.

Northspan's Inclusion Learning Cohorts are a successful model, but it is time for the region to think about the next stage of welcoming work. This could include efforts to sustain momentum for existing groups, coax out populations that have participated on a limited level previously, and empower organizations that have demonstrated real shifts in their internal cultures. Stronger efforts to collect data and better understand what works in the region can create an iterative process to drive welcoming work forward. Regional partners can create a space for welcoming-related efforts to learn from one another rather than operating in

isolation. With an increasingly challenging public funding environment for this area of work, now is the time for regional partners to show their commitment to efforts that meaningfully move the needle.

## EQUITABLE AIMS AND DESIGN

The seven building blocks under equitable aims and design strive for more inclusive outcomes that center the rural experience. They look at existing assets, the interconnection between economic outcomes and other measures of quality of life, and the development of goals and systems that advance this broad understanding of rural flourishing. Fundamentally, they seek to strengthen a culture where all rural residents' needs, desires, and long-term commitments are valued.



The Equitable Aims and Design building blocks often appear the most daunting in the Thrive Rural framework, in large part because they require some common understanding of assets and goals in the region to move toward any sense of development outcomes or shared idea of stewardship. Significant divisions create an underlying friction for many efforts, and they run into tensions between process and ability to produce outcomes. For this reason, it may be the area most ripe for transformational activity.

### ACTION AREA 3: INTENTIONAL DIALOGUE ON THE REGION'S MOST DIVISIVE TOPIC

*Building Blocks Addressed: Build from Current Assets, Balance Development Goals, Balanced Development Outcomes, Valued Rural Stewardship, Rural Stakeholder Equity*

***Without something closer to consensus on what the region's assets are, what rural stewardship entails, and how to balance development goals and outcomes, the region cannot attain more equitable aims and design because no one will agree on what these terms mean.***

The entire country has grown increasingly politically polarized over the past decade, and Northeast Minnesota is no exception, as the once-dominant DFL coalition has crumbled on the Iron Range while left-leaning areas such as Duluth and Cook County have grown bluer. These divisions are significant, and people who strive for greater regional and national unity have taken steps to create dialogue across these divisions. Organizations like Braver Angels, which seek to bridge red and blue divides, have emerged from a recognition that polarization is crippling the momentum communities need to address a wide range of other outcomes.

Nevertheless, Northeast Minnesotans should perhaps recognize that the most salient division that prevents regional cooperation is not necessarily between political parties (though this debate has drifted into somewhat clearer ideological lines over time), but between economic development and environmentalism. Most specifically visibly, the region has a rigid split between people who see nonferrous mining (and to a lesser extent, forest product manufacturing) as the future economic foundations of the region and environmental advocates who see them as a fundamental threat. However, this divide appears in numerous other areas in Northeast Minnesota, including disputes over housing development and its impacts on green space, sulfate standards, and forest product manufacturing. Without something closer to consensus on what the region's assets are, what rural stewardship entails, and how to balance development goals and outcomes, the region cannot attain more equitable aims and design because no one will agree on what these terms mean.

This space remains vitriolic, and there are no obvious existing community-based forums for good-faith discussions across these differences. To the extent that these conversations exist, they are facilitated by state or federal actors who come in from the outside seeking feedback and are often adversarial, with no real dialogue. The creation of such a space, while fraught with challenges, could begin to heal these wounds, or at the very least create opportunities for cooperation on other issues where there is more common ground. There is no greater barrier to cooperation across the seven-county region, and the region's Tribal Nations have a substantial role within this dialogue as well. Failure to address the elephant in the room will only create further antipathy, further divergence, and emasculate cooperative regional efforts, harming each community's ability to address problems at an appropriate scale.

Some existing initiatives provide a foundation that could help drive these conversations. The Natural Resources Research Institute's green steel initiative has the potential to bridge divides, providing both economic and environmental benefits, and research in other areas could also point toward solutions that meet multiple groups' goals. Collaboration on these topics is not a foregone conclusion, however, and engagement requires constructive dialogue, recognition of differences, and patience to understand and work through divergent worldviews.

## ACTION AREA 4: FORMATION OF A RURAL-TRIBAL ECONOMIC AND COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT ALLIANCE

*Building Blocks: Valued Rural Stewardship, Rural Stakeholder Equity, Cohesive Rural Policy Lens, Balance Development Goals*

### *Creating stronger forums of discussion where Native and non-Native rural partners can see benefits for overlapping or neighboring jurisdictions opens the door to more balanced development goals and a cohesive rural policy lens.*

Relations between Tribal Nations and non-Tribal economic and community development organizations have been an occasional source of friction in Northeast Minnesota. These are only the latest episodes in a long, complicated history between Native and non-Native peoples in the region, a series of interactions that have manifested in systematic disempowerment, cultural oppression, disinvestment, and unwillingness to partner as equals with Native Nations. Nevertheless, these communities remain neighbors, and local relationships and shared goals have often led to cooperation in spite of the broader struggle.

Native Nations and economic and community development organizations in Northeast Minnesota face numerous shared challenges, including historical disinvestment, inequitable tax structures, poorly aligned state and federal programs, and a general lack of capacity to pursue these resources. Creating stronger forums of discussion where Native and non-Native rural partners can see benefits for overlapping or neighboring jurisdictions opens the door to more balanced development goals and a cohesive rural policy lens. Success requires that all participants come to the table because they see value in it and have a hand in its creation; it cannot be imposed or simply brought to Tribes as a pre-formed plan. Some past efforts have left Tribes feeling tokenized or asked to give a rubber stamp instead of engaging meaningfully. This group would meet regularly to discuss shared challenges, learn about approaches and resources, and create relationships in the event that contentious projects or other disagreements arise.

At a more robust level, this working group could create a framework for the development of Tribal consultations, Good Neighbor Agreements, and Community Benefit Agreements that foster a collaborative approach to economic and community development because they are the right thing to do for communities, not because they feel like an obligation. It could provide a vehicle for Native Nations to share their own definitions of success and integrate them with regional goals. It also opens the door for potential expansion of Tribal Employment Rights Ordinances and avenues to move Tribal perspectives into state policy. Rather than leaving Tribes and economic and community development organizations fumbling through individual projects, it creates a shared infrastructure in which groups can navigate the questions they face as partners and operates at a scale that provides broader capacity and lived experience.

While this model is most immediately applicable to Tribal Nations due to their sovereign status and ability to enter into agreements with other governments or private parties, it could serve as a guide for other populations of color in Northeast Minnesota. Fundamentally, it creates a framework for engagement to begin advancing questions of equitable aims and design. As with the economic development-environment debate, it requires long-term commitment to honest and open dialogue, and it has no guarantee of a long-term consensus. It does, however, open the possibility of a more collaborative future.

## ACTION AREA 5: SUPERCHARGED, SIMPLIFIED HOUSING

*Building Blocks Addressed: Balanced Development Outcomes, Design for Everyone to Thrive, Cohesive Rural Policy Lens, Advance Personal Well-Being, Ready Rural Capital Access and Flow*

***The goal is not necessarily to build more housing units that meet certain design standards or labor standards or even build more supportive housing: it is to build units of housing, period.***

One area of emerging consensus is a need to address a serious housing shortage and affordability gap, and there is an increasing recognition that this is a supply-side issue: there simply aren't enough homes being built. While housing is a national problem, it is a relatively new one in Northeast Minnesota, at least at the current intensity of the crisis. Costs have accelerated much faster than incomes after a long period of stability and affordability when compared to state and national figures. Stable housing is one of the most fundamental predictors for other positive health and economic outcomes, and it can be a foundation for wealth generation. As the largest cost for most people, no other factor has a greater effect on individual and family financial situations, directly contributing to widening class divides. Future population growth, especially given the region's demographic trends, is also dependent on attracting new residents, and Northeast Minnesota cannot do so if it does not build housing.

Housing is a wickedly complex market. It is driven by zoning and building codes, land use patterns, construction workforce, social preferences, labor and energy requirements, built-in support services, and lending and financial assistance tools, among many other factors. Many of these puzzle pieces are important and exist for admirable reasons, but when taken together, their full weight can cripple both the private and public sectors' ability to build things. A network of regional partners, from the Department of Iron Range Resources and Rehabilitation to LISC Duluth to local housing and redevelopment authorities, all see the value in housing activity, but only sporadically do these efforts move in concert.

If housing truly is the region's foremost goal, its achievement should allow partners to accept stripping away other desirable goals. This action area proposes a clarity of mission that can get lost in a well-meaning desire to solve a host of social ills. The goal is not necessarily to build more housing units that meet certain design standards or labor standards or even build more supportive housing: it is to build units of housing, period.

Such an effort would require uncommon alignment of intent and funding for both government and philanthropy, which is not always easy when relying on donors, political forces, or specific funding sources. But if the region is serious about one issue that is most fundamental to regional equity, housing is a clear choice. This effort would entail both regulatory change that addresses the barriers that are more negotiable (e.g., zoning, parking requirements, allowance of accessory dwelling units) and funding tools, and it should feature both regional planning and small-scale tools to help individuals navigate a challenging, constrained market.

Electing to go deep for a period of time on one or two issues, rather than partial solutions for many things at once, could yield paradigm-changing investment and break out of funding cycles that are consistent, safe, and slow to move the needle. This approach could conceivably be replicated or transferred to another regional priority area, such as child care or education investments, as regional partners see fit, and perhaps as determined through an inclusive process using a planning infrastructure like the one outlined in Action Area 8. We propose it here to highlight the intensity of commitment necessary to shake up the status quo.

## RESOURCES FOR PRODUCTIVE ACTION

The seven building blocks under Resources for Productive Action seek to move the rural voice and the equitable aims of the previous two categories toward concrete action. They ground this action in leadership preparedness and a strong infrastructure that makes decisions based on data, analysis, and a deeper understanding of what truly ails a region. Successful mobilization around these topics enhances financial resources, creates a unified structure to implement new ideas and programming, and creates a self-reinforcing cycle of progress.

### LOCAL LEVEL

- Prepare Action-Able Leadership
- Organize an Action Infrastructure
- Act as a Region
- Build Momentum

### SYSTEM LEVEL

- Ready Rural Capital Access and Flow
- Rural Data for Analysis and Change
- Regional Analysis and Action

Northeast Minnesota stands at a turning point in its framework for regional action. The Arrowhead Regional Development Commission faces challenges, while the Arrowhead Growth Alliance has folded. Major regional funders in philanthropy and government invariably shift their focus areas over time, as have regional staples for action such as APEX and Northspan. At the same time, generational changes in leadership have altered both longstanding regional groups and the fabric of many smaller-scale community initiatives. Data and information on the region are abundant, but only sporadically harnessed and understood. Rapid changes at the federal level coupled with the disruptions of a changing economy and information landscape further roil the waters. The region has an opportunity to rethink how it can work together in a coherent, inclusive, and intelligent way.



## ACTION AREA 6: INVEST IN THE NEXT GENERATION OF LEADERSHIP

*Building Blocks Addressed: Prepare Action-Able Leadership, Organize an Action Infrastructure*

***Providing opportunities to boost civic capacity is vital to sustaining events and institutions, supporting information flow, understanding tax and financing structures, and mobilizing when community challenges arise.***

The Thrive Rural framework reveals a serious gap in local leadership training. A void left by the pause of the Blandin Foundation's leadership program has not been filled, and its absence came up in discussion of numerous building blocks.

Many of the people who wind up in community development-type roles in Northeast Minnesota (whether formal or informal) do not have a deep education in the ins and outs of policymaking, land use planning, event planning, and myriad other skillsets that are necessary, no matter how large a community may be. While the staff and volunteers in these roles bring valuable experiences and insights, the leadership skills, general knowledge, and regional networks that come from a deep-reaching cohort are foundational for success. People who have filled these local leadership roles for years express appreciation for the support they received early on, fatigue over doing the same work year after year, and concern that no one else has shown the interest or ability to step up.

Leadership development is clearly happening across Northeast Minnesota. Several larger communities have chamber of commerce-led leadership programs, and there are a few small, broader initiatives such as the Minnesota Young American Leaders Program; the Department of Iron Range Resources and Rehabilitation has funded some topic-specific cohorts around broadband and housing as well. Creating a space for collaboration among the leaders of these efforts could help streamline programming and share ideas across communities.

There is a glaring gap, however, for the most rural communities in the region that lack a well-resourced chamber, and for community functions that are less job-based and more closely tied to the volunteers and committed organizers that are the lifeblood of communities across Northeast Minnesota. Providing opportunities to boost civic capacity is vital to sustaining events and institutions, supporting information flow, understanding tax and financing structures, and mobilizing when community challenges arise. New programming could further make stronger efforts to apply lenses provided by the Thrive Rural foundational elements (place equity, class equity, and racial equity) and support a new generation of leaders in an era when their efforts may look different from those of previous eras. The time is ripe for a new leadership program to revitalize the civic fabric of Northeast Minnesota and draw in new voices, particularly in its smallest, least resourced towns and areas.

## ACTION AREA 7: IDENTIFY AND SUSTAINABLY FUND ECONOMIC AND COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT RESEARCH AND PLANNING

*Building Blocks Addressed: Rural Data for Analysis and Change, Regional Analysis and Action, Build Momentum*

### ***Good research does not forestall momentum; it unleashes it.***

Despite repeated cries for action instead of further study, understanding of Northeast Minnesota's challenges remains broad but shallow. Partners in the economic and community development ecosystem have a general knowledge of problems but less interest in their historical foundations or the tradeoffs inherent in some proposed solutions. Often, the region jumps from identifying a problem to demanding action without the interim steps of strategic planning or identifying clear and regionally relevant success metrics. Economic and community development is inherently a trend-driven field, and it is often easiest to chase the same projects or funding sources as one's neighbors without thinking critically about immediate community need.

While there is no shortage of information available, the capacity to pull it together into deeper reports such as this one remains a limited, ad hoc endeavor. Groups such as UMD's Bureau for Business and Economic Research and Northspan do semi-regular research on the region; foundations and economic and community development partners at regional, county, and local levels all fund one-off studies to analyze specific issues or demonstrate certain outcomes. A more sustainable commitment to regional analysis could fuel a culture grounded in intentional research that then leads to action, giving a sense of direction and long-term investment. Sample projects could include an updated cluster analysis, deeper housing research, understanding of tax structures, and other emerging topics that pique regional interest.

Such research would be a collaborative effort. Northspan, DEED, University of Minnesota Extension, the Center for Rural Policy and Development, Tribal governments, and other community initiatives that see the value in deeper understanding could all play a role within it. Research could provide a vehicle to move beyond the many topic-specific information-sharing groups in fields such as housing and child care to an action framework. Community engagement within the research could feed creative ideas and elevate success stories, indirectly supporting efforts to strengthen an accurate rural narrative. Any such research effort must also result in action planning and identification of leads so that it does not gather dust upon completion. Good research does not forestall momentum; it unleashes it.



## ACTION AREA 8: REBUILD REGIONAL PLANNING INFRASTRUCTURE

*Building Blocks Addressed: Organize an Action Infrastructure, Act as a Region, Rural Voice in Design and Action*

***As challenging as this current moment may be for some regional actors, it is an opportunity to think anew and incorporate rural voice in a way that is more representative and open than past regional groups***

A regional planning infrastructure emerged as an element of uncertainty in Northeast Minnesota, and its reinvigoration flows naturally from the foundational capacity in Action Area 7. Historically, the Arrowhead Regional Development Commission (ARDC) was a natural fit for such planning work given its regional scope and mission, and other RDCs such as Region 5 in north central Minnesota have continually provided innovative leadership. With a limited staff capacity and federal funding challenges, however, ARDC may have limited resources for such action.

This opens the opportunity for a collaborative effort to build a new framework that moves Northeast Minnesota from a network of loosely connected groups to a genuine rural development hub in line with the definition outlined in Part 2 of this report. This hub model has the potential to be dynamic, inclusive, and action-oriented. An effective framework would identify clear focus areas and have desired projects well-defined so that when funding opportunities arise, it can mobilize quickly to pursue them. It can also take matters into its own hands and guide the region toward better outcomes even if state or federal environments do not align with its priorities.

This effort should take care to avoid recreating the old institutions that existed for years. As challenging as this current moment may be for some regional actors, it is an opportunity to think anew and incorporate rural voice in a way that is more representative and open than past regional groups such as the Arrowhead Growth Alliance. Considerations of the three Thrive Rural Foundational Elements (place equity, racial equity, and class equity) can help frame a new, broad-based, participatory effort to get things done. Some of the innovations in Action Area 2 related to local media and information-sharing could further boost these efforts. A high-inclusion, high-action model could make sure that economic and community development goals reflect a broad swath of the community, not just the interests of specific professionals and well-connected individuals.



**MOVING FORWARD TOGETHER:  
A THRIVING RURAL COMMUNITIES GAP ANALYSIS  
OF NORTHEAST MINNESOTA**

**PART 4:**

**THE THRIVE RURAL 20  
BUILDING BLOCKS**

N O R T H S P A N



## PART 4: THE 20 THRIVE RURAL BUILDING BLOCKS

This section of the report features capsules on the 20 building blocks in the Thriving Rural Communities framework. It provides a summary of the background research that fed into the creation of the eight action areas in Part 4. While not an exhaustive list of all efforts associated with each building block, it provides an overview of what researchers and their partners saw in the region that fed into their perceptions of regional gaps.

Each building block features a capsule including the following components:

- **Aspen Description:** The wording used by the Aspen Institute’s Community Strategies Group (CSG) to describe each building block.
- **More Detail:** Northspan’s expansion on the Aspen description to provide additional context.
- **Where We Are:** A high-level summary on where Northeast Minnesota stands in relation to each building block.
- **Major Assets:** Lays out regional strengths that Northeast Minnesota can build upon as it seeks to advance this building block. These can include existing initiatives, organizations with clear roles or the capacity to address the building block, historical trends, geographic features, and existing infrastructure.
- **Success Stories:** Gives examples of where Northeast Minnesota has made progress on the building block, particularly in recent years.
- **Setbacks and Challenges:** Details areas related to the building block where Northeast Minnesota has struggled or faces serious obstacles to future progress.
- **Opportunities:** Highlights areas that the region could capitalize on to advance this building block.
- **Future Measurement:** Lists potential metrics that Northeast Minnesota could use to assess the success of its efforts.

**MOVING FORWARD TOGETHER:**  
A THRIVING RURAL COMMUNITIES GAP ANALYSIS  
OF NORTHEAST MINNESOTA

# BUILDING BLOCKS:

WELCOME ALL TO THE COMMUNITY

N O R T H S P A N



## BUILDING BLOCK: WELCOME ALL TO THE COMMUNITY

### ASPEN DESCRIPTION:

Each person in the community is welcomed, feels connected, and is able to exercise and influence power in decision-making.

### MORE DETAIL:

This building block relates to a more recent trend in economic development theory: the recognition that how individuals experience our communities is an essential component to the long-term success and vitality of our communities.

The “Welcome All to the Community” building block has far-reaching benefits, including:

- Promoting population and workforce stability and long-term growth
- Enhancing collaboration and networking across sectors
- Renewed energy and civic engagement, thereby reducing isolation
- Increasing access to diverse products and services
- Expanding market opportunities and supporting economic diversification

By fostering an environment where all individuals feel valued and connected, communities can experience sustained economic and social growth.

### WHERE WE ARE:

As noted in Part 1 of this report, Northeast Minnesota has experienced gradual demographic shifts in recent years, with census data indicating increasing racial, ethnic, and cultural diversity. While the overall numbers remain modest, the percentage increase is significant, signaling an evolving community landscape.

Despite this progress, historically underrepresented groups continue to face barriers, including long-standing biases, systemic challenges, and ingrained perceptions. These issues can drive out-migration, hinder workforce development, and create social divisions. Additionally, newcomers—including those from majority demographics who lack historical ties to the region—report struggles with integration and acceptance.

As a region, Northeast Minnesota has many programs and organizations focused on inclusion and belonging that have made meaningful strides. However, as a large geographic region, many initiatives remain localized, with limited resources for broader impact.

### MAJOR ASSETS:

As organizations and communities across Northeast Minnesota have seen declining populations, workforce, and economic base, motivation to engage in the underlying work of supporting welcoming and inclusive communities has increased. An uptick in these efforts occurred in 2020 as the murder of George Floyd ignited a national recognition of policing inequities and illuminated stories of isolation and disillusionment of many BIPOC community members in Northeast Minnesota. Stories of these challenges, along with a broader recognition of the need to attract residents simply to maintain population, resulted in new efforts directed at welcoming and inclusion.

The region possesses numerous strengths to support a more inclusive community:

- A rich history of immigration and cultural diversity
- Strong networks of local organizations and nonprofits focused on inclusion
- Expanding diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) consulting services
- Community libraries serving as hubs for connection and education
- Active faith communities fostering social engagement
- Robust outdoor recreation opportunities accessible to many
- Local events designed to welcome and integrate newcomers
- Collaborations with statewide resident recruitment and welcoming programs
- Engagement from chambers of commerce and service organizations
- Training opportunities for underrepresented individuals in leadership roles

## SUCCESS STORIES:

A region as large as Northeast Minnesota has efforts around welcoming and inclusion happening in almost every community. Although it is impossible to highlight all these efforts, which range from specific organizations with clear missions to loose groups and alliances, there are some key components identified that exemplify many of these local initiatives. Some of them include:

- Voices for Ethnic and Multicultural Awareness (VEMA): Advocating for multicultural engagement and dialogue.
- Hello Range: A resident recruitment and integration initiative.
- Northland Foundation's Age-Friendly Communities: Enhancing accessibility and inclusivity for aging and other populations.
- Northspan's Welcoming Community Initiatives: Supporting communities in developing inclusive strategies.
- Cook County's Committee Addressing Racial Equity: Promoting equitable policies and practices.
- Above & Beyond With U: Supporting individuals with disabilities to engage in full community participation.
- Braver Angels Alliances: Bridging political and ideological divides.
- Folk Schools: Providing cultural and community-based learning opportunities.
- Libraries: Serving as community anchors for education and inclusion.
- Local DEI Consultants: Offering training and support for businesses and organizations.
- BIPOC-led organizations: Providing advocacy and community-building efforts.
- Collaborations with Sovereign Tribal Nations: Strengthening Indigenous representation and partnerships.
- Local Pride Alliances: Supporting LGBTQ+ inclusion and community-building efforts.
- Inclusion Learning Cohorts (ILCs) led by Northspan in numerous regional communities to build capacity and understanding around inclusion.

These initiatives showcase the region's growing commitment to fostering a sense of belonging for community members from all backgrounds and lived experiences.

## SETBACKS AND CHALLENGES:

Despite progress, challenges persist. Many individuals from minority backgrounds continue to report negative experiences, including:

- Economic barriers: Limited access to employment and housing opportunities.
- Educational disparities: Implicit bias and exclusion impacting academic outcomes.
- Limited representation in leadership: Barriers to civic engagement and elected positions.
- Mental health challenges: Social isolation and discrimination affecting well-being.
- Underutilization of skills and talents: Missed opportunities for community contributions.
- Social divisions: Political, economic, and ideological polarization reducing collaboration.

While racial, cultural, and gender diversity have been focal points, other aspects—such as economic, political, generational, and ability diversity—often receive less attention. Additionally, since the Covid-19 pandemic, increased isolation has compounded these challenges. These issues, along with findings from other organizational surveys across the region, have indicated that social connection is a piece of growing importance for the overall wellbeing of community members but is also a continued challenge to foster amidst growing political and economic divides. Addressing these issues requires intentional efforts to foster social cohesion and inclusion across all demographics.

## **OPPORTUNITIES:**

Future efforts should focus on scaling best practices, securing funding for regional initiatives, and sharing success stories to inspire localized action. Major courses of action include:

### **EXPANDING PARTNERSHIPS.**

Strengthening collaboration among organizations focused on inclusion has the potential to share resources and keep communities from feeling like they are reinventing the wheel. For example, when Lake County hosted its first Pride celebration in 2024, other rural communities in the region that held Pride events were a valuable resource for guidance and support. Regional efforts such as Northspan’s Welcoming Community initiatives have laid the foundation for increased engagement and collaboration across Northeast Minnesota’s seven-county region. Northspan’s annual Equity Summit has, for the past four years, served as a vital gathering for organizations, practitioners, and individuals to connect, exchange ideas, and share best practices related to inclusion and belonging across a wide range of topics.

### **TRIBAL RELATIONSHIPS.**

Sustaining and expanding efforts to build relationships between Tribal communities and other regional partners is essential. Given the complex history between settlers in Northeast Minnesota and Indigenous Peoples, fostering mutual understanding and collaboration is key to creating a more inclusive and welcoming region. By acknowledging the past and working toward a shared future, Native and non-Native communities can strengthen trust and improve a sense of welcoming.

### **RESEARCH-BASED AND SCALABLE INITIATIVES.**

Implementing data-driven strategies for welcoming efforts driven by comprehensive community assessments, analyzing demographic trends, and adopting best practices from similar regions to ensure strategies are both effective and sustainable. A regional Belonging Survey and targeted rural outreach have already begun, and communities can learn from each other. Academic research continues to shed light on the most effective ways to foster inclusion and belonging, especially as national perspectives on diversity, equity, and inclusion continue to shift.

## **INCREASED FUNDING AND CAPACITY.**

One of the greatest challenges in sustaining inclusion initiatives is securing ongoing funding, particularly when such efforts are perceived by some as non-essential. However, research and global practice have demonstrated that fostering inclusion and belonging has far-reaching benefits, including economic growth, social cohesion, and workforce retention. Expanding these funding streams to include grant funding, government support, and private sector investment will allow existing initiatives to reach more communities and have a broader impact.

As poet and peacebuilder John Paul Lederach noted, “People say hope is not a strategy. What seems true, lies. What lies hidden, holds truth.” While the impact of inclusion efforts may not always be immediately visible, they play a crucial role in strengthening communities.

## **COMMUNITY STORYTELLING.**

Sharing success stories to inspire broader engagement is a powerful tool for fostering understanding and bridging divides, particularly in rural communities. Research shows that personal narratives help build relationships across differences and cultivate empathy among people with varied backgrounds and lived experiences.

For example, a motorsports company that modifies vehicles to accommodate people of different sizes can serve as a relatable analogy for the value of inclusion. Many rural residents already recognize the importance of adapting their businesses, services, and products to meet different needs. Framing inclusion in familiar terms—such as ensuring that all community members can fully participate and thrive—can make the concept more accessible and relatable.

Likewise, sharing firsthand accounts from residents who have struggled to integrate into their communities can foster greater awareness and encourage action. When people hear about their neighbors’ experiences—whether it’s the challenges of being seen as an outsider after decades in the community or the difficulty of navigating local systems without established networks—it can create the emotional connections needed to drive change.



## **FUTURE MEASUREMENT:**

Success in welcoming and inclusion can be measured through:

- Data related to community connectedness, sense of belonging, and feelings of isolation in Community Health Needs Assessments
- Centrality of welcoming community work in engagement for regional Comprehensive Economic Development Strategy (CEDs)
- Population growth and retention rates
- Increased feelings of psychological safety among residents
- Greater diversity in business ownership and product offerings
- More productive civic and political discourse
- Enhanced accessibility in buildings and public spaces
- Strengthened intergenerational collaboration
- Greater economic mobility and cross-class networking

**MOVING FORWARD TOGETHER:**  
A THRIVING RURAL COMMUNITIES GAP ANALYSIS  
OF NORTHEAST MINNESOTA

# BUILDING BLOCKS:

ADVANCE PERSONAL WELL-BEING

N O R T H S P A N



## **BUILDING BLOCK: ADVANCE PERSONAL WELL-BEING**

### **ASPEN DESCRIPTION:**

Each person in the community has the skills, resources, and social supports they need to pursue and live a healthy, safe, and fulfilling life.

### **MORE DETAIL:**

This building block recognizes that although all people in our communities want to live healthy, safe, and fulfilling lives, there are often barriers to reaching those goals. Skills that come through formal education and community learning opportunities are the foundation for ongoing growth and opportunities. Adequate resources need to be readily available and should consider the unique needs and cultures of community members. Social support is essential in fostering inclusion and belonging for community members, especially those from historically underrepresented groups, and may come from nonprofits, government, or other civil society organizations. Each of these elements are important in supporting a sense of community connection and personal well-being.

### **WHERE WE ARE:**

Northeast Minnesota has many programs and organizations that help residents build skills or access resources, though they are not always well-connected or well-resourced. A strong network of educational institutions, including early childhood, K-12, and 12 college campuses provide a foundation for building skills. Graduation rates in several counties meet or exceed national averages, and ongoing pipeline programs help students engage with in-demand industries. Disparities in graduation rates, particularly for low-income and historically underrepresented students, highlight inequities in the education system. A diverse nonprofit sector and a variety of local government entities anchor community well-being efforts. However, nonprofit capacity is unevenly distributed, with rural areas underserved and many organizations facing staffing and funding constraints. Mental health challenges, social isolation, and difficulty accessing care, especially for veterans and rural residents, persist as major concerns. Despite the abundance of natural spaces, barriers such as economic limitations, lack of outdoor experience, and harsh weather reduce equitable access.

### **MAJOR ASSETS:**

#### **STRONG LOCAL EDUCATION OPPORTUNITIES.**

Recent data on average graduation rates shows four counties in Northeast Minnesota on par or above the national average. Opportunities for higher education exist in an array of options across 12 college campuses including a selection of graduate options as well as four- and two-year degrees with a variety of focuses including the trades. While the larger colleges and universities are centered in the Duluth area, smaller campuses across the region are equipped with a variety of programs to provide local access. Many campuses feature tuition agreements to enable seamless credit transfers between colleges across the region.

#### **COMPREHENSIVE ARRAY OF NONPROFITS.**

Minnesota Council of Nonprofits reports show that there are over 650 nonprofit organizations in Northeast Minnesota. Nonprofits serve roles in providing skills, resources, and social support. A non-comprehensive list includes nonprofits with

missions focused on age (youth and elder), ability, culture, legal services, mental health, housing, food, workforce support, entrepreneurship, mentorship, youth recreation, social connection, arts, and continuing education. These organizations fill a central role in providing opportunities for growth and development to advance personal well-being.

### **AVAILABILITY OF OUTDOOR RESOURCES.**

Access to natural areas and outdoor activities abound in Northeast Minnesota. From lakes to forests, rises in elevation perfect for hiking, and distinct outdoor offerings accompanying each season, these are resources that cannot be replicated, and are a significant factor in personal well-being.

### **SUCCESS STORIES:**

#### **INCREASING ALIGNMENT AND COLLABORATION IN EDUCATION.**

In 2022, the region saw the merger of five separate community colleges in the region under the single banner of Minnesota North College. While retaining separate campuses to serve local areas, the merger provided the opportunity for enhanced cooperation in the local education system. Barriers to accessing a variety of classes were reduced by newfound cohesiveness and ability to take courses from any of the five campus offerings. In addition, virtual classroom technology allowed students to choose from additional course offerings and overcome transportation barriers.

#### **PIPELINE EVENTS.**

Pipeline events to engage students with local industry are hosted yearly by a conglomeration of local stakeholders and have become common across the region. Recent examples include Discover Healthcare (Duluth, Ashland, Hibbing, Grand Rapids), Construct Tomorrow (Duluth), Public Safety Expo (International Falls), and Law Enforcement Career Expo (Cloquet).

#### **NONPROFIT SERVICES AND COORDINATION TO FILL GAPS.**

Nonprofit work through intentional regional connections amplifies the efforts of individual organizations and provides a foundation for coordination across a large geographic area:

- Northspan's Driving Access to Wealth and Networks program functions as a regional ecosystem coordinator for economic and community development.
- Regional coordination through the Resourceful community resource website provides an example of coordinating streamlined access to support services and resources.
- Community Action Programs (Lakes & Pines Community Action Council, Arrowhead Economic Opportunity Agency, KOOTASCA Community Action) exist in various locations serving all seven counties and providing resources and services to low-income households.

The top three nonprofits by activity in Northeast Minnesota are related to human services, public societal benefit, and education. This indicates areas of greatest need and success. Cook County has the largest number of nonprofits per capita, followed by Lake County.

## **SETBACKS AND CHALLENGES:**

### **INEQUITABLE EDUCATIONAL OUTCOMES.**

Although public school graduation rates in Northeast Minnesota are on par with and in some counties above the national average of 87% (2021-2022), disparities continue to exist. For those in the seven-county region who qualify for free/reduced price meals, the average 4-year graduation rate drops from a regional average of 84% to 74% (2023). The greatest disparity appears in St. Louis County with a 14% (2023) decrease in graduation rates for those who qualify for free/reduced price meals. Similar themes in disparities are seen in relation to students from historically underrepresented groups in the region.

### **SECONDARY EDUCATION OPTIONS.**

Options for college degrees are limited, and although tuition agreements between college programs exist, knowledge of these programs is limited. Opportunities for advanced degrees in Northeast Minnesota are also limited to a select number of fields. Consolidation of college systems and budgetary challenges for higher education also run the risk of limiting access through both geographical constraints and financial challenges for students.

### **LIMITED NONPROFIT CAPACITY.**

Even with the robust array of over 650 non-profits, the Northeast region has the lowest number of nonprofits of any region in Minnesota. There is a significant concentration of nonprofits in the Duluth area with St. Louis County, which have the largest number of nonprofit employees per resident. Regional organizations are sometimes limited in their ability to provide effective services across large geographic distances. Staffing recruitment and retention for nonprofits can be challenging for the region. Traveling long distances to access healthcare is also common; for example, the nearest VA hospital is in the Twin Cities.

### **CHALLENGES FOR MENTAL AND SOCIAL WELLBEING.**

Community Needs Health Assessments across the region have consistently highlighted social isolation and lack of access to mental health resources as ongoing challenges further exacerbated by the Covid-19 pandemic. Community members from historically underrepresented groups, long term residents who don't have multi-generational roots in the region, and newcomers have reported negative experiences in finding adequate social support. This can mean years or even decades of being seen as an outsider contributing to negative mental health outcomes. Data shows increasing rates of youth mental health challenges, which indicates that this will be a top area of future concern.

### **LIMITATIONS TO OUTDOOR RESOURCE ACCESS.**

Although access to natural areas and resources is a rich area of opportunity, equitable access can present a challenge. Familiarity and knowledge about wildlife, weather preparedness, outdoor safety, and recreation experience can be important for residents to fully take advantage of outdoor wellbeing opportunities. Economic stability, culture, familiarity, and personal preferences all play a role in whether outdoor resources are fully utilized. Extreme cold in the winter months can limit the available health benefits of outdoor spaces.

## **OPPORTUNITIES:**

### **IMPROVED EDUCATIONAL OUTCOMES.**

Although the region's average 4-year High School graduations rates are similar to the national average at 85% (2023) the 7-year graduation rate jumps to 89% (2023). This indicates that opportunities to continue working towards graduation are available and

often successful in helping students reach this milestone. A focus on improving educational outcomes in the 4-year time span as well as continued support beyond that timeframe could result in positive gains.

### **CAREER READINESS.**

In 2025, the Duluth Promise was launched with a focus on improving student career readiness. This is a collaborative partnership in the Duluth area including the local public schools, area colleges, and the Duluth Area Chamber of Commerce. As education forms the foundation for numerous opportunities for personal well-being, these advances could provide significant return on investment in relation to this block. This is an opportunity that could be replicated in other areas across the region.

### **COLLABORATIVE EFFORTS AROUND MENTAL AND SOCIAL WELLBEING.**

Increasing mental health challenges are an area ripe for increased attention and collaboration between community leaders. There is an opportunity to foster collaborative initiatives focused on mental and social wellbeing, addressing root causes of access and isolation. Improved regional public transportation to access healthcare and social opportunities is important to this element.

### **ENHANCED NONPROFIT COORDINATION.**

An area of opportunity is in greater cross-county nonprofit coordination and supporting new nonprofits or expansion of existing nonprofits to address service gaps. While there are some efforts to convene partners, such as the Boreal Water North Community Foundation's efforts to create education and networking events for nonprofits, there is room for broader efforts, particularly outside of the Duluth area.

### **HOUSING FIRST.**

A growing academic consensus indicates that addressing housing needs and getting people into stable units is the most fundamental step a society can provide to address a wide range of social ills. Without the security of a safe, reliable place to sleep each night, individuals will likely struggle to address related issues such as mental health challenges, addiction, and coping with trauma. Addressing the region's housing limitations as a foremost priority will help to support many other aspects of personal well-being.

### **FUTURE MEASUREMENT:**

- Continued tracking of graduation rates by county and within subgroups (e.g. income, race/ethnicity)
- Measure changes in nonprofit service reach and capacity
- Collect data from community wellbeing surveys to assess changes in perceived inclusion, belonging, and mental health.
- Monitor access to outdoor resources through usage data, participation in recreation programs, and feedback from underrepresented groups.
- Track community collaboration metrics, such as shared initiatives, referrals between nonprofits, and use of centralized resource tools.

**MOVING FORWARD TOGETHER:**  
A THRIVING RURAL COMMUNITIES GAP ANALYSIS  
OF NORTHEAST MINNESOTA

# BUILDING BLOCKS:

STRENGTHEN LOCAL OWNERSHIP  
AND INFLUENCE

N O R T H S P A N



## BUILDING BLOCK: STRENGTHEN LOCAL OWNERSHIP AND INFLUENCE

### ASPEN DESCRIPTION:

Businesses, institutions, organizations, and resources critical to the community and its future are owned locally and/or directed and advised by the full range of community members who have a stake in their durability and success

### MORE DETAIL:

This building block focuses on the importance of local ownership and influence of critical community resources to the sustainability and success of rural communities. It recognizes that even when large state, national, or international organizations are producing and distributing essential products and services in our rural communities, intentional advisement from within the community can provide a level of influence and input beneficial to the local area.

### WHERE WE ARE:

Northeast Minnesota has a strong foundation to continue to build upon for reaching the goals laid out in this block. The region boasts abundant natural resources, a legacy of community engagement, and a culture of problem solving. Local influence has been maintained for generations through the region's history of community advisory panels, formation of cooperatives in healthcare and energy, and local groups coordinating reinvestment from industries like mining. There is a desire for independence in this region which has led to action when change is needed and continued input from community voices ensuring shifts in local ownership are thoughtfully considered.

As dynamics shift toward non-local ownership of major employers, the region will need to rely on its strengths of innovation and holding outside entities accountable to local communities. Opportunities lie in expanding Tribal economic development, supporting youth leadership, and building stronger advisory roles across sectors

### MAJOR ASSETS:

#### VARIETY OF NATURAL RESOURCES.

One of the largest assets in terms of ownership and influence stems from abundant natural resources in the region. Although local ownership in larger operations is often limited, many natural resources critical to the community can be obtained locally. With global climate change concerns looming, local access to fresh water, lumber, minerals, and land has seen increasing demand. Many landowners in rural Minnesota have ready access to these assets.

#### HISTORY OF LOCAL INFLUENCE.

Northeast Minnesota has a long history of local ownership and influence. In energy production and distribution this includes advisory boards that provide local oversight for decision-making, ensuring local perspectives continue to be heard. Examples of this can be found in energy cooperatives and Community Advisory Panels (CAPs) around the energy industry, which have kept local actors updated and present in conversations. Local advisory roles can focus future efforts on including a full range of community members and ensuring influence goes beyond discussion. Local media is another important avenue of local influence historically. Many small towns are home to local newspapers and reporting. When these sources of local information are lost, they are deeply felt in these communities.

## **LOCAL HEALTH CARE.**

In recent years, local health care providers have continued to merge to provide expanded resources and care in rural areas while keeping components of their independence. Essentia Health, the largest health care provider in the region, remains based in Duluth. Wilderness Health, meanwhile, provides an umbrella organization for smaller, independent health services that provides some coordination while maintaining local ownership and control.

## **COLLABORATION IN THE FACE OF SHARED CHALLENGES.**

Broadband infrastructure in the region exemplifies collaborative innovation. The challenging regional terrain, including shallow bedrock, forested areas, innumerable lakes, and a large geographic spread has resulted in broadband infrastructure with greater local control, as profitability is limited for larger non-local companies that lack other reasons for investment in the region. Electric coops such as Paul Bunyan have provided high-quality service in deeply rural parts of the region, while several counties and Tribal Nations have built out their own networks. Independence and creativity in solving rural needs is an asset that creates significant returns in piloting non-traditional solutions and filling gaps.

## **SUCCESS STORIES:**

### **LOCAL REINVESTMENT.**

Northeast Minnesota is a region known for mining. Although the wealth coming from the resources mined from the land often goes elsewhere, Northeast Minnesota has shown some success in bringing a portion of those profits home for reinvestment in the local area.

- Historical figures such as Victor Power, former mayor of Hibbing, are known for going toe-to-toe with mining companies to negotiate community reinvestment such as the infamous four-million-dollar Hibbing High School built in the 1920s and funded by mining dollars.
- Currently, Iron Range Resources and Rehabilitation (IRRR) is a state agency that is tasked with using taxes generated by local taconite to reinvest in the taconite production area. Those dollars support economic development and diversification in communities where non-renewable resources form a key portion of the economy.

### **GROWING TRIBAL ENTERPRISES.**

Historically underrepresented in local ownership and influence, Tribal governments and Native-owned businesses and organizations have seen growing development in a variety of areas.

- Support for entrepreneurs and small businesses has increased through focused programming and capacity building for Tribal communities.
- Northland Foundation's Maada'ookiing grant program provides funding for Native American led community building.
- Tribal Economy Business Incubator (TEBI), through Mille Lacs Corporate Ventures (MLCV) have provided opportunity for Native owned businesses to grow as well as receive training and technical assistance.
- Fond du Lac Band of Lake Superior Chippewa, utilized several sources of grant funding to create Aaniin Fiber Service and provide fiber-to-home internet access to residents on their Tribal lands.
- Food sovereignty efforts through the introduction of bison herds on Tribal lands and an increased focus on reintegration of Native cultural food products (wild rice, maple syrup, etc.)

## **PRODUCING AND SOURCING LOCAL FOODS.**

Increased interest in local farming and food production arising from sustainability, health, and environmental pressures.

In 2023, Northspan coordinated the establishment of a Northeast Minnesota Regional Food Business Center (RFBC) to provide support for local food system efforts. While initially successful in landing several grants for the region, funding challenges that arose following a change in federal administrations shut down this program:

- Restaurants utilizing locally sourced foods have trended for both health and economic reasons.
- Challenges to national supply chains for products during and after the Covid pandemic have invigorated local production.
- Northeast Minnesota is home to Miner's Inc., a chain of locally owned grocery stores serving as a primary provider for the region.
- Farmers markets are a growing resource to address food desserts and new demand for unique products.

## **SETBACKS AND CHALLENGES:**

### **CHANGING OWNERSHIP MODELS AND INTERNATIONAL INFLUENCE.**

Some challenges to local ownership and influence have arisen through acquisition of significant local companies:

- In 2011, Cirrus Aircraft, which was local to Duluth since 1994 and was sold to a China based company. This transition did not result in significant changes in the region as the new owners kept to their assurances of keeping the employee base and operations in Duluth. Cirrus is the largest employer in Duluth, with over 1000 employees.
- Minnesota Power is a locally grown energy company which started with the merger of six smaller electric utilities across Northeast Minnesota. Since 1923 Minnesota Power, under the parent company Allete, has served the region as a publicly traded company with local roots and ownership. In 2024, a sale was agreed upon to two large private entities based in Canada and New York. The eventual consequences on local influence remain to be seen.
- In 2024, the proposed \$14 Million sale of U.S. Steel to a Japanese steelmaker, Nippon Steel, was temporarily blocked by the President of the United States. The sale was flagged as a potential national security threat and temporarily kept the company under ownership in the US. While the sale is now proceeding, the deal includes some safeguards for national control of the steel industry.

### **LIMITED CAPACITY FOR ESSENTIAL SERVICES IN RURAL COMMUNITIES.**

In many of our rural communities' volunteer firefighters and emergency medical services provide a high degree of local control and influence. Challenges have arisen due to a lack of capacity, exacerbated by a growing elderly population and declining civic engagement. Local control may come at the cost of longer response times and reduced training and technical expertise of responders. This is part of the balance needed in rural areas; providing essential services with available local resources versus reliance on state or federal funding with reduced local control.

### **NON-LOCAL CONTROL OF NATURAL RESOURCES.**

Natural resources are a major asset in the region but often fall under non-local control. Natural resource-based industries such as mining are capital-intensive and usually require large outside investment on the front end. This need for outside money can erode local ability to influence business decisions. Much of the region is also under state or federal control in the form of state and national forests, wilderness areas, and areas controlled by mineral leases. This leaves the region vulnerable to political swings and decision-making by bodies of government that are not based in the region.

## **HOUSING AND HOMEOWNERSHIP.**

Homeownership is one of the most fundamental pieces of local control. It provides people with a tangible asset that they can control, use as their own, and potentially use as a vehicle for wealth creation, though rapidly escalating values can also exacerbate divides. It also allows people to put down longer-term roots in a community, increasing local commitment and influence. While Northeast Minnesota has high homeownership rates by national standards, these figures have been drifting downward over time. Escalating costs make the benefits of homeownership less achievable for many people.

### **OPPORTUNITIES:**

#### **BUILDING UPON COORDINATION EFFORTS IN ENTREPRENEURSHIP.**

Recent efforts to support entrepreneurship and small business success in the general population and in cooperation with Tribal Nations show promise in supplying new products and services and increasing local ownership.

#### **ENHANCED LOCAL ENGAGEMENT.**

With changing ownership dynamics, influence can be maintained with a focus on growing participation in local advisory boards and advocating for decision-making authority. Focus should be on broadening access to historically underrepresented groups and making meeting times, locations, and commitments more accessible. The Minnesota Star Tribune is an example of a statewide entity that has recently shifted to a model to be more inclusive to rural areas in the state, hiring columnists local to rural areas and featuring rural stories.

#### **YOUTH LEADERSHIP AND SUPPORT.**

As an aging population enters retirement, opportunities are ripe for mentorship of rising youth leaders, education on the value of local ownership and influence, and clear pathways to live, work, and experience a fulfilling life in the region.

#### **EXPANDING LOCAL REINVESTMENT.**

As a region with a significant supply of natural resources and growing publicity as a desirable climate refuge, opportunities are available to promote local reinvestment. This could include considerations for retaining ownership of valued goods and requiring reinvestment in the local community in cases of proposed growth and development. It also applies clearly to the housing market, where improving the region's generally older housing stock allows more people to have access to homes that meet their wants and needs.

#### **COMMUNITY LAND TRUSTS AND OTHER INNOVATIVE HOUSING MODELS.**

Efforts to increase homeownership can help to build wealth and local influence. For example, community land trusts control the costs of housing while still allowing for access to homeownership. Expanding on the efforts of groups like One Roof Community Housing could broaden this model across Northeast Minnesota and work in tandem with efforts to rehabilitate older houses to meet the current market.

## **FUTURE MEASUREMENT:**

### **INCREASED LOCAL OWNERSHIP AND ADVISING.**

Following successful models, Northeast Minnesota can utilize strengths around independence, innovation, and entrepreneurial support. Measurement metrics include:

- Increased local ownership
- Engagement and influence with advisory boards
- Coordinated regular inventory of local ownership and influence
- Strengthened relationships with non-local providers
- Increased variety of local products available

### **COMMUNITY RESILIENCE.**

Through natural disasters and local, state, national, and international supply chain disruptions and other challenges, the community is able to sustain itself and recover quickly.

**MOVING FORWARD TOGETHER:**  
A THRIVING RURAL COMMUNITIES GAP ANALYSIS  
OF NORTHEAST MINNESOTA

# BUILDING BLOCKS:

RURAL VOICE IN DESIGN AND ACTION

N O R T H S P A N



## BUILDING BLOCK: RURAL VOICE IN DESIGN AND ACTION

### ASPEN DESCRIPTION:

A robust, representative, diverse, and powerful network of Native Nation and rural leaders, practitioners, and doers consistently engage in advising and influencing narrative, policy, and action agendas across sectors and across levels of government.

### MORE DETAIL:

This building block is about creating avenues for rural communities and their residents to have consistent, meaningful opportunities to engage in advocating for their unique needs. It focuses on ensuring active rural participation and power in shaping the regional, state, and federal-level policies, programs, and investments that affect their lives. It ensures that a diverse representation of rural perspectives is at the table, including Tribal Nations and historically marginalized or underserved groups. The goal is to build up the ability of rural stakeholders to engage effectively, making sure decisions and policies are responsive to their specific challenges, strengths, and hopes.

### WHERE WE ARE:

The spirit of advocacy runs fairly deep through Northeast Minnesota. Pathways to engage in decisions affecting rural life are varied and include consistent efforts to connect with state leaders, the established ways our Tribal Nations engage in policy, and the role of local and regional groups advocating for the region's unique rural needs. While these are important strengths, there's still significant ground to cover in making sure the different voices across our region are truly aligned, engaged, and consistently heard, and that representation in decision making accurately reflects the various types of diversity present in the region.

### MAJOR ASSETS:

**Coordinated events to influence state policy.** The annual Duluth and St. Louis County Days at the Capitol reflect a significant, long-standing effort to directly engage state legislators and advocate for our region's unique rural needs and priorities. This event brings together a diverse group of local elected officials, business leaders, nonprofit representatives, and engaged citizens at the state capitol in St. Paul. By advocating for key rural issues such as infrastructure, economic development, and social service programs, the delegation effectively amplifies the voice of Northeast Minnesota. These dedicated days provide valuable opportunities for relationship building, direct dialogue, and ensuring that the perspectives of the region are heard and considered in state-level policy discussions.

**Formal channels for Tribal influence.** Through Minnesota's requirements for state agency Tribal liaisons and mandatory structures in place for Tribal consultation on issues affecting Native Nations, Tribal voices have consistent opportunities to influence policy. All five Bands sharing geography with Northeast Minnesota also exercise treaty-based authority while exerting influence through the Minnesota Indian Affairs Council (MIAC) and signed agency consultation compacts, creating a statutory pathway for Indigenous policy input.

**Active local and regional advocacy groups.** Northeastern Minnesota benefits from a handful of local and regional organizations that actively engage in advocacy to promote our region's rural interests. The Range Association of Municipalities and Schools (RAMS) serves as a powerful voice for the Iron Range, with a strong track record of advocating for policies crucial to rural areas.

Local Chambers of Commerce also often engage in advocacy related to business development and economic vitality in their communities, while industry-specific groups, like the Iron Mining Association, represent the interests of historically significant sectors such as mining to support their sustainability and growth. While their focus may vary, these groups contribute to amplifying the region's voice on a range of issues at a systems-level.

## SUCCESS STORIES:

**Rural broadband expansion efforts.** There have been numerous successes in recent years in state and federal policy in expanding rural broadband access across the region, which has been historically underserved in this regard. The region was an early leader in this area with the buildout of the Northeast Service Cooperative network, which has helped support numerous projects. More recently, local governments and advocacy groups such as the Minnesota Rural Broadband Coalition actively voiced the need for rural broadband funding for Northeast Minnesota, successfully resulting in substantial awards through sources such as the state's Border-to-Border Broadband Development Grant Program. Advocates for rural broadband access continue to work collaboratively to implement solutions, demonstrating the power of a unified rural voice in infrastructure development.

**Advocacy for rural EMS reform.** Recent legislative efforts in Minnesota demonstrate the effectiveness of rural voices in addressing critical regional needs. To address the unique challenges faced by Emergency Medical Services (EMS) in Northeast Minnesota's spread-out, sparsely populated rural areas, a coalition of local EMS providers, county officials, and advocacy groups, including RAMS, actively engaged state legislators. Their persistent advocacy highlighted financial strains and workforce shortages impacting rural EMS, leading to legislative reforms aimed at providing sustainable funding models and addressing staffing concerns. While the crisis has not been fully resolved, the region has taken an important step forward.

**Tribal influence on policy.** The Native Nations across Northeast Minnesota have had a long history of actively engaging in advocacy and have gained particularly significant traction in influencing policies related to natural resource management and environmental protection, with outcomes often rippling throughout the region. For many years, Indigenous voices have been increasingly recognized and included at the table. Both their modern-day experiences and traditional ways of knowing are being incorporated more frequently into decision-making processes. As an example of the strong impact of Tribal sovereignty and advocacy, the Fond du Lac, Grand Portage, and Leech Lake Bands have developed their own federally recognized water quality standards that have increasingly shaped state and federal permitting decisions, particularly around mining and other projects that may affect the region's waterways.

## SETBACKS AND CHALLENGES:

**Gaining alignment around common messaging.** Many entities and institutions throughout Northeast Minnesota engage in advocacy work to influence policy and decision-making. However, our voice as a region is far from unified and can often come across as unclear or disjointed. Various parties across our region, such as Tribal governments, economic developers, conservation groups, mining companies, utilities, and a slew of other industry sectors, along with different subregions themselves, all have their own agendas relevant to their interests and needs. However, this segmentation means that as a region, we often advocate for parallel, and sometimes directly conflicting, asks, diluting our collective influence and power in a broader policymaking context.

**Amplification of select voices.** While the presence of a core group of influential advocates and doers is in many ways an asset for the region, it can also create a certain degree of dependence on a handful of established figures. This could make regional

advocacy less sustainable in the long term unless there are active efforts to cultivate the capabilities of emerging leaders and rural stakeholders who wish to be engaged. Further, it can potentially create an echo chamber or exacerbate challenges in ensuring that Northeast Minnesota has a truly robust, representative, and diverse network of powerful voices. A dedicated and seemingly exclusive group of “power players” may inadvertently discourage or even drown out others, potentially stifling the diversity of perspectives our region has to offer.

**Limited resources and capacity for dedicated advocacy work.** Constraints such as funding, staffing, and capacity within many Northeast Minnesota communities and rural entities can restrict the ability to advocate consistently and effectively at the state or federal levels. Although certain assets, such as dedicated annual advocacy events like Duluth and St. Louis County Days at the Capitol, can offset some of these limitations, our region still has relatively fewer resources and opportunities to undertake full-time, ongoing advocacy work when compared to areas like the Twin Cities Metro region, which can contribute to challenges with sustained representation and influence.

## OPPORTUNITIES:

- 1. A region-wide, cross-sector rural advocacy network.** While groups engaging in advocacy work do exist in Northeast Minnesota, they are often largely focused on advocating for the needs of specific sectors, special interests, or defined subregions like the Iron Range and Taconite Assistance Area. Assembling a more inclusive, official advocacy coalition that unites municipalities, Tribal governments, nonprofits, private sector partners, and other key rural stakeholders across all of Northeast Minnesota could help build capacity, align messaging and policy interests, and strengthen collective voice at the state and federal levels. Alternatively, regional groups could emerge to cover portions of the region that are not covered by groups such as the Range Association of Municipalities and Schools (RAMS).
- 2. Investing in the next generation of “doers”.** Spurring an interest in advocacy leadership in younger individuals across Northeast Minnesota and developing their abilities to engage in policy work has the potential to amplify the voice of our region in a long-term, meaningful way. This could include advancing opportunities such as targeted programs offered through regional higher education institutions and mentorship programs that place young rural leaders with influential entities such as RAMS to help ensure continuity, consistent engagement, and diverse representation. Programs such as the Minnesota Youth in Government initiative and student activism on college campuses show a hunger among the region’s youth for opportunities to engage and help drive the regional conversation.
- 3. Leveraging digital tools for broader engagement.** Utilizing online platforms and digital communication strategies could help overcome geographical barriers and facilitate broader participation in discussions and feedback processes related to advocacy and policymaking activities. By building on our region’s wins regarding increased broadband access and capitalizing on tactics successfully piloted during the pandemic, such as virtual testimonies and targeted social media campaigns, there is strong potential to increase effective communication, equitably share policy-related information, and further promote consistent, diverse, and representative participation in regional advocacy.

## **FUTURE MEASUREMENT:**

- Increased rural and Tribal representation in advocacy and greater influence on policy, narrative, and agenda across all levels of government.
- The creation and sustainability of a region-wide rural advocacy network that spans sectors and subregional geographic boundaries.
- Greater success rates of state and federal policies reflecting and addressing Northeast Minnesota's unique needs as a rural region.

**MOVING FORWARD TOGETHER:**  
A THRIVING RURAL COMMUNITIES GAP ANALYSIS  
OF NORTHEAST MINNESOTA

# BUILDING BLOCKS:

ACCURATE RURAL NARRATIVE

N O R T H S P A N



## BUILDING BLOCK: ACCURATE RURAL NARRATIVE

### ASPEN DESCRIPTION:

Public media and dialogue consistently relate an accurate understanding of the history, conditions, lived experience, and economic, demographic, cultural, and geographic diversity of rural communities and Native Nations.

### MORE DETAIL:

This building block focuses on ensuring that the nuanced reality of rural communities and Native Nations is authentically represented in the stories, media, and discourse of the broader public sphere. It aims to consistently and faithfully highlight the diversity of rich local histories, cultural practices, geographic and place-based assets, current economic and demographic dynamics, and lived experiences of rural and Tribal areas. At its core, this building block emphasizes the need for authentic storytelling and balanced, unbiased media coverage to replace outdated stereotypes or misconceptions with a genuine recognition of the unique attributes and identities of rural communities.

### WHERE WE ARE:

Northeast Minnesota has engaged in ongoing efforts to craft a narrative that authentically portrays its rural communities and Native Nations. Regional initiatives that leverage creative media projects, intentionally promote the area, and preserve local culture and heritage all contribute toward creating a more balanced and realistic understanding of the area. The region has also benefited from increased coverage by prominent news media outlets, locally produced narratives, and the use of credible data to tell rural stories. Despite this, factors such as evolving trends that impact how media is perceived and consumed, inconsistent external media coverage of more rural areas, and enduring popularized stereotypes contribute to challenges in developing a rural narrative that is truly accurate and consistently reflective of the region.

### MAJOR ASSETS:

**Targeted tourism and recruitment campaigns.** Several regional organizations explicitly seek to promote a more nuanced understanding of rural life through dedicated tourism and resident recruitment efforts. Local and regional tourism initiatives, such as Visit Duluth, Visit Cook County, Visit Grand Rapids, and the Discover the Range, strategically highlight the area's natural beauty, abundant outdoor recreation, and unique cultural experiences that extend beyond common stereotypes. Simultaneously, initiatives such as Thrive Up North, Hello Range, and Be North work to attract new residents to the region by more accurately portraying the quality of life, community spirit, and professional opportunities available in our rural settings. These campaigns collectively challenge commonly held preconceptions about rural Northeast Minnesota by presenting a narrative of the region as a vibrant, desirable place to live, work, and visit.

**Strategic production initiatives.** A robust network of film and media organizations, events, and incentives enables Northeastern Minnesota to actively work toward shaping its image. The Upper Midwest Film Office (UMFO), founded in 1996 to promote and expand the region's creative economy, regularly leads initiatives to support film and television production in the area. These efforts are supported by the 2021 Minnesota Film Production Tax Credit, which incentivizes filming statewide and often works in tandem with localized incentive programs administered by UMFO. Annual events like the Duluth Superior and Minnesota Film Festivals also serve as platforms to share stories crafted by regional filmmakers. Aside from economic benefits, these initiatives help to showcase the region's diverse communities, cultures, and landscapes to a broader audience.

**Local, regional, and state historical preservation.** While not exclusively unique to the northeastern part of the state, the statewide Minnesota Historical Society nonetheless serves as a major asset in portraying an accurate narrative of our region. By meticulously documenting, preserving, and commemorating the diverse history and culture of Northeast Minnesota, including the profound and continuing narratives of the Tribal Nations in the area, it has proven to be an invaluable resource for conveying the richness and complexity of the region’s rural areas. Historical societies in each of the region’s seven counties, along with the regional Iron Range Historical Society and Tribal institutions dedicated to the preservation of their history, culture, and heritage, also work diligently to chronicle the unique background and lived experiences of their localized areas. The endeavors of these institutions ensure that historical accounts are preserved and accessible, providing a launching point for genuine dialogue about our region’s past, present, and future.

## SUCCESS STORIES:

**State and national media representation.** There has been an encouraging increase in the frequency with which Northeast Minnesota is portrayed by state and national media, including more common features in news outlets such as Minnesota Public Radio (MPR) and its national counterpart, NPR. The Star Tribune also rebranded in 2024 to “Minnesota Star Tribune” and has expanded to include more comprehensive coverage of Greater Minnesota, including northeastern rural communities. Furthermore, major statewide media outlets, such as MPR and the Minnesota Star Tribune, have shifted toward using locally based reporters and writers for coverage throughout the region. This change in focus has resulted in more consistent and often positive stories emerging from the region, moving beyond crisis-driven reporting to highlight successes, vibrant community life, and economic development happening across Northeast Minnesota to a wider audience.

**Community-driven narratives.** Efforts to cultivate and disseminate authentic stories from within Northeast Minnesota’s rural communities have been shown to be a popular and effective way to positively influence our regional narrative. Regional publications like Hometown Focus magazine exemplify this grassroots approach, consistently delivering features crafted by community members that celebrate cultural nuances and rural “slice of life” experiences. Several small local newspapers such as the Pine Knot and Timberjay have arisen to fill local media voids, and community radio stations from Grand Marais to Grand Rapids fill an important function as well. Beyond traditional outlets, online community groups, social media, and digital forums provide spaces where residents share news, milestones, and community-driven content from northeastern Minnesota with even wider audiences, helping to ensure that the unique character of the region is reflected and reinforced in external narratives.

**Storytelling through data.** A handful of key statewide initiatives help support accurate depictions of life in Northeast Minnesota by providing evidence-based insights into the current conditions of its rural communities. Institutions like the Center for Rural Policy and Development conduct in-depth research and analysis to clearly convey the economic, demographic, and social trends impacting the region. Similarly, Minnesota Compass uses comprehensive data and trend information to craft credible narratives of rural life throughout the region. These resources equip regional leaders, policymakers, and the public with verifiable, up-to-date information, enabling discussions and planning to be grounded in factual understanding rather than mere perceptions or anecdotal evidence.

## SETBACKS AND CHALLENGES:

**Shifting media landscapes.** The contemporary media environment presents significant hurdles to developing and maintaining an accurate rural narrative. Fundamental shifts in how people consume news, coupled with the increasingly widespread decline and disappearance of local rural news sources and rural newspapers, like the Deer River Press, all serve to create information gaps. This trend also coincides with a growing public skepticism toward news organizations and the prevalence of misinformation. This erosion of trust in the media complicates the dissemination of accurate local information, making rural communities vulnerable to perceptions that lack factual grounding or nuance.

**Disproportionate or biased coverage.** External media coverage of Northeast Minnesota sometimes faces challenges related to uneven distribution of media attention within the region. More rural parts of northeastern Minnesota are often overlooked when compared to Duluth, which tends to receive a disproportionate amount of coverage as the largest city in the region. This imbalance means that the unique achievements and realities of smaller, rural communities within the region are frequently relatively marginalized. Compounding this, broader media coverage can sometimes rely heavily on existing relationships with journalists, and the positive or negative slant of reporting may reflect personal biases, shaping an incomplete or skewed public understanding of the region.

**Stereotypes in popular culture.** A persistent challenge arises from portrayals of rural Northeast Minnesota in popular media. Notably, the ‘Fargo Effect’, which stems from both the iconic 1996 film and subsequent TV series set in northern Minnesota and has been echoed in other media, has indelibly shaped external perceptions and stereotypes of the region. Dramatized narratives of the region often depict a bleak, permanently snow-filled landscape with characters marked by exaggerated accents and a general sense of naiveté, presenting rural communities in a caricatured, less-than-accurate light.

unique

## OPPORTUNITIES:

**Strategic narrative alignment.** There is a significant opportunity to align existing regional organizations and media outlets to collectively weave a powerful, authentic narrative about rural Northeast Minnesota. By coordinating efforts across various stakeholders, including tourism bureaus, community groups, and media outlets, the region has the potential to collectively influence larger narrative systems by strategically communicating the unique value and diverse opportunities that our rural areas have to offer.

**Direct engagement with policymakers to shift rural narratives.** Organizing legislative visits or Capitol bus tours of rural northeastern Minnesota could help directly shape the narrative and dialogue among influential decision-makers by enabling them to witness the realities of rural life, replacing misconceptions with firsthand experiences. This direct exposure can cultivate understanding of the region’s diverse conditions and challenges, potentially influencing future policies to better reflect rural needs and aspirations.

**Elevating Native stories.** Ongoing Ojibwe language and cultural revitalization efforts by the region’s Tribal Nations present a profound opportunity to broaden and enrich the regional rural narrative. By actively supporting and showcasing Ojibwe culture, both traditional and contemporary Native stories can reach wider audiences. Promoting Indigenous filmmaking or Ojibwe-language media can significantly enhance understanding of Native communities and share diverse perspectives that are vital to a truly accurate regional portrayal.

**Innovative community storytelling initiatives.** Novel approaches to crafting realistic rural narratives present a unique opportunity, exemplified by programs like Sketches Across Minnesota. This community-based project, led by the Minnesota Humanities

Center in partnership with Danger Boat Productions, illustrates the lived experiences and stories of rural communities through improv comedy. The inaugural tour in 2024, which included Duluth and International Falls, culminated in performances shared with broader statewide audiences. Expanding the reach and scope of such initiatives could amplify rural voices and influence perceptions in an impactful, authentic way.

#### **FUTURE MEASUREMENT:**

- Public media and broader dialogue consistently relay an accurate understanding of the history, conditions, and lived experience of northeastern Minnesota's rural communities.
- Increased recognition and portrayal of the region's economic, demographic, cultural, and geographic diversity across various communication platforms and media outlets.
- Enhanced visibility and reach of narratives shaped by and reflecting the voices of the region's Native Nations.
- Reduced prevalence of stereotypes and caricatures in external representations and media portrayals of the region.

**MOVING FORWARD TOGETHER:**  
A THRIVING RURAL COMMUNITIES GAP ANALYSIS  
OF NORTHEAST MINNESOTA

# BUILDING BLOCKS:

BUILD FROM CURRENT ASSETS

N O R T H S P A N



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## BUILDING BLOCK: BUILD FROM CURRENT ASSETS

### ASPEN DESCRIPTION:

Local economic development approaches concentrate first on identifying and building on the area's existing people, place, business, and organizational assets to increase both well-being and equity outcomes.

### MORE DETAIL:

This building block grows from one of the core insights of contemporary economic development theory: that existing assets in a community are the foundation of real, sustainable economic growth. It defines an asset broadly:

- Place-based assets: Assets that take advantage of natural resources, natural beauty, or unique assets in the built environment such as a historic downtown
- Business assets: Local employers that are succeeding and have potential for future growth
- Organizational assets: unique organizations that increase local capacity, either directly or indirectly
- People: Human capital is a major asset and can define a places' ability to capitalize on its opportunities

This building block does not intend to list out every single conceivable asset in the region, but instead to highlight how local communities are drawing on assets to create positive change in their communities.

### WHERE WE ARE:

Many communities in Northeast Minnesota have attempted some version of asset-based economic development in recent decades. Success rates vary widely and have been dependent on successful identification of actionable assets, the relative ease of cultivating certain assets, and local capacity to follow through.

### MAJOR ASSETS:

**Institutions unique to Northeast Minnesota.** While this is not an exhaustive list of assets in the region, there are some that are unique to the area, or lack obvious analogues in other neighboring regions. Examples of such institutions include:

Department of Iron Range Resources and Rehabilitation, a state agency that gives community and economic development capacity to a defined geographic area

- Duluth Seaway Port Authority, the largest freshwater port in the world
- University of Minnesota Natural Resources Research Institute
- Blandin Foundation, a unique foundation with substantial assets devoted to supporting the Itasca County area and rural communities in general
- Northspan/DAWN program, a broad suite of services designed to help support entrepreneurs and community and economic development partners form connections, build capacity, and access capital

**Local economic development authorities and comparable organizations.** Communities with active EDAs have been able to create loan funds, use unique economic development tools, and pursue outside funding to drive projects in their communities. Successful EDAs require some staffing capacity or a very committed core for their boards to move projects forward, and those that include non-city council representation tend to attract locals with stronger passions for economic development who can help advance a clearer vision.

**Natural resources.** The natural environment is fundamental to Northeast Minnesota's identity. While opinions on how to work with these resources may differ, they clearly make the region fundamentally unique from other parts of Minnesota and the nation. Shoreline along Lake Superior and thousands of smaller lakes, vast areas of designated wilderness, a robust network of trails and recreation opportunities, and the promise of solitude all draw in visitors and new residents. A large wood basket, substantial mineral reserves, and emerging opportunities in new natural resources such as helium all make the region unique as well.

## SUCCESS STORIES:

**Outdoor recreation economy.** Many communities in Northeast Minnesota have capitalized on their natural beauty to develop local economies built around tourism and outdoor recreation. Grand Marais is a prime example, having developed a bustling downtown buoyed by retail, restaurants, and a strong local arts scene around a picturesque harbor. Duluth's Canal Park neighborhood is a national model for conversion of a somewhat derelict former industrial area into a thriving tourism hub. Further north, Ely has sprouted many local businesses that trade on the community's access to the Boundary Waters Canoe Area Wilderness and other remote retreats.

**Economic clusters.** Asset-based traditional economic development has helped expand the regional economy as well. The success of Cirrus Aircraft in Duluth spawned a small aviation cluster that has supported its supply chain. Similarly, the Iron Range has worked to build out mining-related supply chains, and further back in history launched a successful push to attract call centers to the region. Past work on economic clusters has proven successful, and it can be again.

## SETBACKS AND CHALLENGES:

Several challenges appear to hold back communities' abilities to capitalize on their assets, including:

**Incomplete understanding of assets.** While the idea of asset-based economic development makes intuitive sense to many people loosely involved in the field, systematically documenting and developing strategies to build on them is a much greater undertaking. Few communities have done so systematically, and they sometimes rely on received wisdom or the opinions of a small subset of the population when identifying priorities.

**Conflicting understanding of assets.** At times, Northeast Minnesota has encountered major divisions between camps who believe certain economic assets are incompatible. Most recognizably, some advocates for the region's natural assets believe nonferrous mining projects that draw on the region's substantial reserves threaten the region's natural beauty with disruption and environmental destruction, while some mining advocates argue the protections given to natural areas crush economic opportunity stemming from mining. While other building blocks explore these clashes in greater detail, disagreements over the nature of assets can clearly keep them from being a source of growth.

**Capacity.** Many small towns in the area lack dedicated community and economic development staff and assign these job responsibilities to city administrators, clerks, or hybrid positions that include other duties. Moreover, relatively few staff have lengthy backgrounds in the field or a formal degree in planning or economic development. While many learn quickly and bring

unique perspectives from other fields, understanding a dense network of organizations and the complexities of unlocking certain assets is not always easy. For busy practitioners stuck in the day-to-day work, the time necessary to prioritize specific assets and proactively plan for how to build from them can be in short supply. In rural communities that have seen little development activity, a scarcity mindset can lead some local leaders to seize on any opportunity that comes along, and it may lead them to pursue development or funding sources that are not ideal fits for a community.

**Infrastructure for growth.** Limited housing options, few shovel ready properties, geographic barriers such as wetlands and bedrock, and community challenges such as child care are just a few of the issues that can hamper economic growth in Northeast Minnesota. Moreover, a portion of the population in the region would prefer not to grow, whether for environmental reasons or simply because people would prefer their communities to stay as they are. Research from the University of Minnesota Extension and Center for Rural Policy and Development suggests that the availability of housing stock may be the single most important determinant of the region's ability to grow as more and more people choose where to live first instead of moving for a job.

## OPPORTUNITIES:

- 1. Use outside money as a catalyst for local revitalization.** While a growing tourism economy naturally creates jobs and employment, some of its most powerful impacts are in its ability to fuel the revitalization of communities in Northeast Minnesota. Like Grand Marais and Duluth's Canal Park, several communities have been able to focus new resources into their downtown cores. Two Harbors has seen a burst of activity in its historic downtown, moving traffic off Highway 61 and into a previously somewhat neglected waterfront area. Silver Bay, a historic mining community that was not designed to provide much highway visibility to attract visitors, has started down a similar road, with the development of several businesses and a campground, and greater focus on a beach. Cities such as Grand Rapids and Virginia have recently completed downtown plans that seek to revitalize historic architecture and generate more activity in the city core, and projects of different size and scale are under way from Ely to Chisholm to Deer River.
- 2. Transformative research.** Northeast Minnesota's natural resources remain a crucial asset. Environmental concerns may linger to varying degrees with many of them, and the United States (and Minnesota in particular) will likely struggle to compete on price alone in commodities markets. To succeed, these projects can differentiate themselves through value-added research. The Natural Resources Research Institute's green iron initiative is a clear example of an attempt to meet an emerging opportunity, and other NRRI projects could open new doors regionally.
- 3. Strengthened local capacity.** An asset-based approach is not rocket science, but it does require community capacity to document local assets, lay out realistic plans, and begin to implement them. Building up this capacity is an obvious starting place for funding partners in community and economic development, though any such approaches should make sure the added capacity understands the broader ecosystem rather than being dropped in from the outside, and communities must own these efforts and champion them lest any plans developed from the outside end up dying due to lack of real commitment or concept for implementation.

## FUTURE MEASUREMENT:

- Do communities have their own clearly articulated, asset-based economic development plans with the capacity necessary to implement them?
- Can communities find some common ground when there are competing visions of their assets?
- Are institutions unique to the Northeast Minnesota fostering distinct opportunities in the region than can be measured in investment or economic impact?

**MOVING FORWARD TOGETHER:**  
A THRIVING RURAL COMMUNITIES GAP ANALYSIS  
OF NORTHEAST MINNESOTA

# BUILDING BLOCKS:

BALANCE DEVELOPMENT GOALS

NORTHSPAN



## BUILDING BLOCK: BALANCE DEVELOPMENT GOALS

### ASPEN DESCRIPTION:

Local action to create a more dynamic, durable economy also seeks to strengthen the natural environment and built infrastructure – and vice versa – connecting efforts to steadily improve the resilience of the economy, the ecosystem, the people, and the planet.

### MORE DETAIL:

This building block recognizes the complex interplay between the natural environment and built infrastructure, a dynamic that has been a source of major debates in economic development. It builds toward interconnection between ideas of what is best for both the environment and built infrastructure, seeking resilience and intentional, long-term planning on both fronts.

### WHERE WE ARE:

Questions regarding economic development, the environment, and collective goals have received substantial attention in Northeast Minnesota. Debates related to this building block have at times been a third rail in the region, fracturing political coalitions and communities and inspiring strong emotion. However, headlines can obscure some quieter work, especially at a local level, where progress that avoids binary camps remains possible. The region has undertaken substantial efforts at adaptive reuse and remediation of past environmental contamination, and emerging opportunities in clean energy and natural resources have transformational potential to unite environmental and economic development goals. While completely bridging community divides is unlikely, there are opportunities to find common ground and coordinate on less controversial topics.

### MAJOR ASSETS:

**Close ties to the land.** Northeast Minnesota has a strong ethic of conservation, self-sufficiency, and general consciousness of the environment. While the region's agriculture takes place on a much smaller scale than other parts of the state and country, it has a robust network of producers and improving infrastructure for local food systems. Appreciation for what the region's lands and waters can offer runs deep.

**A beloved natural environment.** Natural beauty is a major reason why many people move to and stay in Northeast Minnesota. Lakes, forests, trails, and wilderness areas are major draws for both visitors and residents, and the region includes substantial state and natural forest lands, the world's largest freshwater lake, a national park, and a large, designated wilderness area with no analogue elsewhere in the country. Wherever they stand on hot-button political issues, most Northeast Minnesotans recognize and appreciate the natural beauty that surrounds them.

**Substantial natural resources with economic development potential.** Northeast Minnesota's modern economy was built on natural resources in the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, and that legacy continues today. Taconite mining remains one of the region's largest sources of GDP and economic impact, and reserves of copper, nickel, and other nonferrous metals have attracted significant development interest. The region is home to a large timber basket, along with concentrations of other resources ranging from peat to helium. Abundant supplies of clean water and a cool climate have economic benefit for certain industries that require cooling. While debates about the relative value of and tradeoffs inherent in these industries will continue, the economic potential afforded by the region's natural resources is substantial and will continue to draw interest.

**Energy around energy.** Clean energy and energy independence are emerging themes in the region. Regional utility Minnesota Power was the first in Minnesota to receive 50% of its energy from renewable sources; both it and Great River Energy, which is the umbrella organization for Northeast Minnesota's rural electrical co-ops, offer incentives encouraging local energy use. Meanwhile, local efforts such as the Cook County Local Energy Project and Duluth-based Ecolibrium3 have helped communities improve energy efficiency and use of renewables.

## SUCCESS STORIES:

**Economic development projects that balance goals.** One success story is Heliene, a solar panel manufacturing plant in Mountain Iron. As one of the first solar panel makers and a leader in the building of a domestic supply chain, Heliene has both created jobs on the Iron Range and advanced a national transition to cleaner energy. On a related note, the Duluth Seaway Port Authority has facilitated the construction of many wind turbines in the United States as parts have been imported, stored, and transferred to other modes of transportation in Duluth.

**Mineland Reclamation.** Northeast Minnesota has been a leader in returning former minelands to productive and community uses when the ore has been exhausted. Former mine pits have been turned into lakes that are used for recreation and town drinking water supplies. Others have been converted into recreation areas, such as the Redhead Mountain Bike Park in Chisholm. The Mineland Vision Partnership (MVP) meets regularly to highlight these successes, and numerous other sub-regional groups cooperate to address the region's brownfields and return them to economic use or community benefit.

**St. Louis River cleanup and restoration.** Over the course of several decades, an interlocking group of public, private, local, and national partners have worked to restore the St. Louis River estuary, which had suffered significant contamination through the industrial history of western Duluth. Cleanup efforts have significantly improved water quality, created recreational opportunities, and resulted in greater acknowledgement of the river's significance to Native Americans. This project has led both to the preservation of natural environments and efforts to move other sites, such as the area around the former US Steel mill in Morgan Park, back toward economic development uses.

## SETBACKS AND CHALLENGES:

**No shared understanding, and some outright conflict, over understanding of a resilient economy and ecosystem.** Most Northeast Minnesotans want to see a strong economy and preserve the region's natural environment. What exactly this looks like, however, has been a source of major contestation as people weigh competing priorities and values. The region is unlikely to find a common solution that fully satisfies the most intense partisans.

**Shifting politics.** A changing landscape for federal funding and regulatory structures re-orient many considerations and at times mounts a direct challenge to the premises behind this building block. Losing funding could stall some efforts to engage in innovative and research-based efforts to address it, and regulatory changes in any direction have the power to upend this dynamic. Regardless of the political winds, local actors can find ways to build their own consensus and seek out resources that advance.

**Misunderstanding or ignorance of Tribal Nation treaty rights, agreements, and history.** Tribal Nations have played a substantial role in regional environmental battles related to mining, manufacturing, and pipeline construction. While stances vary from Tribe to Tribe (and within Tribes), Native Nations have generally striven to ensure treaty rights are upheld and maintain strong

environmental protections for water quality, air quality, and remediation of past damage. Regional infrastructure projects have also encountered barriers when they come into contact with sites protected by the Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act (NAGPRA). Future economic development projects must recognize this dynamic, and a stronger framework for collaboration before issues arise could lessen future misunderstanding and conflict.

## OPPORTUNITIES:

- 1. Green Iron.** Northeast Minnesota's significant role in iron ore and steel supply chains and research capabilities through the University of Minnesota's Natural Resources Research Institute give the region considerable potential in efforts to develop new technologies that could revolutionize the manufacturing process and significantly lessen environmental impacts.
- 2. Greater collaboration between Tribal and non-Tribal governments.** Efforts to engage Tribal Nations in regional economic development projects run the gamut, with some proving highly successful and others ending in conflict and serious frustration for some, if not all, parties. Relationships with Tribal Nations require long-term commitment, not merely transactional approaches, and some engagement processes have come across as box-checking or considered tokenizing by Tribal members. Intentional relationship-building outside the immediate context of a proposed project is essential.
- 3. Greater community discussion.** When economic development projects root themselves in communities and commit to local discussion, they can build goodwill and opportunities to bridge gaps with people who may not fully understand its agendas. For example, Minnesota Power has long held Community Advisory Panels (CAPs) in its communities where it has generating facilities, setting an industry standard practice that other major employers have since sought to replicate. In Itasca County, the Itasca Economic Development Corporation has worked with a group of regional partners to launch an economic diversification initiative named Sparking Change. While it began as a response to a Public Utilities Commission directive to cease coal operations at the Boswell Energy Center, it has ultimately broadened in scope and escaped some of the jobs-versus-environment rhetoric around Boswell to unite around a common goal of a diversified, thriving economy.

## FUTURE MEASUREMENT:

- Have local debates over the future use of natural resources become less adversarial as partners find common ground? Is it less common as a major political cleavage?
- Are Tribal Nations active partners with Businesses and Local Governments on projects that interface with their treaty and legal rights and community concerns?
- Can we point to new case studies on innovative efforts that both build local economies while protecting or advancing the protection of the region's natural assets?

**MOVING FORWARD TOGETHER:**  
A THRIVING RURAL COMMUNITIES GAP ANALYSIS  
OF NORTHEAST MINNESOTA

# BUILDING BLOCKS:

DESIGN FOR EVERYONE TO THRIVE

N O R T H S P A N



## BUILDING BLOCK: DESIGN FOR EVERYONE TO THRIVE

### ASPEN DESCRIPTION:

Local leaders intentionally design community and economic development efforts to improve outcomes for people disadvantaged due to historic or ongoing economic, racial, age, gender, or cultural discrimination.

### MORE DETAIL:

This building block strives to improve outcomes for historically disadvantaged people and groups in Northeast Minnesota. It aims for more inclusive economic development efforts through intentional creation of structures that support people from a wide range of backgrounds.

### WHERE WE ARE:

Northeast Minnesota has a patchwork series of initiatives devoted to designing development efforts, or influence those efforts, to include all people in the region, particularly those who have often faced barriers. In some cases, these efforts try to use existing resources or influence existing systems to change the framework; in other cases, they have created their own structures to build up local capacity. While the region has generally progressed and many in economic development have good intentions, efforts to date have a mixed record, and sparse resources coupled with small populations across a large, rural area have limited outcomes. Housing, workforce, and transportation are significant areas where communities can make progress, and philanthropic alignment can help address needs, particularly in an era of government retreat from these priorities.

### MAJOR ASSETS:

**Community Action Agencies.** All seven counties in the region are covered by a community action agency: the Arrowhead Economic Opportunity Agency (AEOA), Kootasca, and Community Action Duluth. These organizations are dedicated to supporting low-income individuals and others facing noticeable barriers.

**Good intentions.** Many partners in economic development in Northeast Minnesota recognize the importance of welcoming new people, and people of different backgrounds, into the fabric of their communities. Concerns about workforce have often proven an effective framing for these issues; efforts such as Hello Range and Thrive Up North support resident recruitment and retention. Northspan's Welcoming Community and DAWN work builds in many of these components and has also received support from numerous regional partners.

### SUCCESS STORIES:

**Tribal Led Economic Development.** Northeast Minnesota's Tribal Nations have been enhancing their economic development capacity, creating opportunities for both members of their bands and the broader community. A leading example is the Tribal Economy Business Incubator concept launched by Mille Lacs Corporate Ventures, which has developed two incubator spaces, complete with a broad suite of entrepreneurial support services. While launched by a subsidiary of the Mille Lacs Band of Ojibwe, its resources are open to all people living in the census tracts that form the Tribal Economy, including a portion of Aitkin County.

This innovative, inclusive use of resources is a model for Tribal development, and other Tribal Nations in the region are expanding their enterprises and creating more opportunities for community-based economic growth.

**Affinity groups.** Organizations dedicated to supporting people who belong to groups sharing racial, ethnic, cultural, gender and sexuality-based, ability-based, and other characteristics can foster a sense of community, assist with access to resources, and a shared voice that can help them advocate for their needs. These groups provide spaces for people to celebrate their cultural heritage and embrace their uniqueness. Northeast Minnesota examples include:

- Voices for Multicultural Equity and Access (VEMA)
- Above & Beyond with U
- NAACP
- Family Rise Together
- Family Freedom Center

**Employment opportunities for the disabled.** Organizations such as Minnesota Diversified Industries and UDAC are prime examples of successful ventures to provide individuals facing various limitations with opportunities for serious work.

**Resources for aging adults.** Northeast Minnesota has begun developing resources that acknowledge the surge in senior citizens in the region. For example, the Arrowhead Area Agency on Aging works to recognize and center the dignity of elders, seeking to navigate a complex network of local, state, and national resources. Many additional resources have arisen to help these individuals across the region.

## SETBACKS AND CHALLENGES:

**Neglect in design.** Community and economic development efforts in Northeast Minnesota have historically paid little attention to the characteristics of diverse populations. Programs often have little recognition of the history and lived experiences of some groups, and rarely do resources or scoring criteria recognize some of the inherent challenges that members of certain groups may face. While this has begun to change, the region still has considerable distance to travel before it meets the ideal spelled out in this building block.

**Limited infrastructure and economies of scale to address issues.** Northeast Minnesota has relatively underdeveloped resources for people of diverse backgrounds. Some of this is simply a matter of scale, as some non-majority groups lack a critical mass of population that may be necessary to create and sustain a group that can provide a consistent, vocal presence. For example, with relatively few English language learners in smaller communities, finding the resources necessary to assist them can be difficult even with the best of intentions.

**Geography, climate, and the built environment.** Northeast Minnesota can be an unforgiving place to people who face accessibility challenges. As a large, rural region, only small parts of Northeast Minnesota can support the ridership necessary for frequent transit service. Harsh winters and poor sidewalk clearance can make getting around without a vehicle challenging if not dangerous. Rough terrain and historic buildings that may not meet accessibility standards make it even harder for community members to access important resources. Poverty can compound many of these issues, as some of the people most in need of support services cannot always access them.

## OPPORTUNITIES:

**Local housing access.** Access to attainable, good-quality housing can provide a vital foundation for Northeast Minnesotans working to build comfortable lives. Many communities recognize they can play an active role in preparing land and courting developers, and basic reforms such as making zoning codes less restrictive can help the cause. Communities that have seen escalating housing prices have found considerable benefit in employing a community land trust model, which provides access to long-term affordable homeownership options by holding properties in trust. One Roof Community Housing in Duluth has spearheaded the CLT concept in the region and has supported developments in communities such as Grand Marais and Grand Rapids when it makes sense for the organization.

**Breakthroughs in transportation.** In a region where long distances between communities can create transportation barriers, several innovations show some promise for scalability. The Minnesota Autonomous Rural Transit Initiative (goMARTI) in Grand Rapids has piloted a self-driving shuttle that provides free, on-demand rides on set routes around the community. The Duluth Transit Authority has adjusted its model to provide more frequent service on high-need corridors, while Arrowhead Transit has built out a stronger bus network across a large rural region.

**Workforce development innovations.** Many partners across Northeast Minnesota have worked to improve workforce pipelines, both out of necessity to meet their own needs and in recognition that not all employees will follow the same path. Several area high schools have moved to an academy model, where students choose a course of study that prepares them for careers aligned with their interests rather than simply meeting one-size-fits-all checkboxes for graduation. Several partners have focused on opportunities for formerly incarcerated individuals to re-enter the workforce, including SOAR (now part of True North Goodwill) and the Minnesota Correctional Facility in Togo. The Northeast Minnesota Office of Job Training, or JET, provides resources in schools and has offices in many regional communities, helping to knit efforts together.

**More accessible infrastructure.** Continued improvements to facilities to allow all Northeast Minnesotans to use them are an ongoing element of this building block. Creative efforts to ensure sidewalk clearance in winter may have a role to play, and broader efforts to improve streetscapes, such as those led by Rethos and its Minnesota Main Streets program, create more welcoming communities that invite activity and investment.

**Philanthropic alignment.** Many regional foundations have been proactive in thinking about how their investments can create more equitable processes and outcomes. While these organizations have different areas of focus, there may be opportunities to align their efforts to design programs that create spaces for many people to thrive. Philanthropic support may be particularly beneficial as the federal government moves away from funding initiatives related to inclusivity.

## FUTURE MEASUREMENT:

- Improved outcomes on community health needs assessments. These tools assess community wellbeing in ways that often go deeper than high-level demographic statistics allow
- Improved workforce participation rates, particularly among previously underrepresented demographics
- Expansion of affinity groups and programming to support individuals of diverse backgrounds
- Fewer gaps in transportation networks

**MOVING FORWARD TOGETHER:**  
A THRIVING RURAL COMMUNITIES GAP ANALYSIS  
OF NORTHEAST MINNESOTA

# BUILDING BLOCKS:

BALANCED DEVELOPMENT OUTCOMES

N O R T H S P A N



## BUILDING BLOCK: BALANCED DEVELOPMENT OUTCOMES

### ASPEN DESCRIPTION:

Policymakers and investors in rural and Native people, places, and enterprises define and measure development success as decreasing economic and racial inequality and reducing poverty while building wealth, resource sustainability, and resilience.

### MORE DETAILS:

This building block tries to move from short-term growth strategies toward inclusive, long-term development aligned with the region's people, places, and systems. It entails designing policies and investments that prioritize not just economic outcomes, but who will benefit and who will decide. It moves beyond a general emphasis on equity concerns to seek systemic solutions to specific issues that hold back residents of the region, including poverty and the long-term good of communities and the environment.

### WHERE WE ARE:

Northern Minnesota faces significant economic disparities across racial, geographic, and socioeconomic lines. While the region has pockets of prosperity, many communities, particularly rural areas and Native American reservations, experience limited access to capital, fewer opportunities for wealth building, and persistent economic inequality. The gap between who's thriving and who's being left behind falls along familiar lines of race, location, and income. Yet across this complex development landscape, promising initiatives are beginning to shift this narrative. They are working to level the playing field so prosperity and development can reach everyone, not just those who already have advantages.

The foundation is in place, with Northeast Minnesota being home to multiple sovereign Tribal Nations each with their own governments, enterprises, and development visions. Native Nations are advancing energy, food sovereignty, and cultural tourism. Yet these assets are often left out of regional planning efforts or engaged only in tokenized symbolism.

### MAJOR ASSETS:

**Driving Access to Wealth and Networks (DAWN).** Northspan's DAWN program helps entrepreneurs of color and Tribal business owners through building capacity, connections, and capital. The program's explicit efforts to reach a diverse audience is a step forward for equity-focused entrepreneurship, and its provision of training resources through organizations such as Family Rise Together, ILT Academy, and Family Freedom Center help to drive culturally relevant programming.

**Empowered Native Nations.** The Native Nations of Northeast Minnesota are asserting their sovereignty and working to improve development outcomes in holistic ways. Tribal enterprises have successfully blended economic development with cultural preservation, lifting many Tribal members out of poverty and strengthening ties to history and tradition. Tribal Nations coordinate through both formal and informal networks, with the Minnesota Chippewa Tribe providing an avenue for advancement of common goals.

**Legacy of recognizing shortcomings.** Northeast Minnesota politics have historically reflected some or all the components of this building block, albeit with lurching results. Many elected officials have had an acute awareness of real or perceived slights to the region, and the strong labor presence in the region has often centered fairness as a key issue. Resource sustainability and conservation is also a common theme throughout the region, though actors do not always agree on what this means in practice.

## SUCCESS STORIES:

**Dedicated investment in neighborhoods that need assistance.** Communities in Northeast Minnesota have begun to recognize the value in revitalizing downtowns and historic neighborhoods through storefront improvement, infrastructure repair, and abatement of hazards. Notable successes include the Lincoln Park neighborhood of Duluth, downtown Ely, downtown Virginia, and downtown Chisholm. These initial steps help invest in neighborhoods that have often suffered from a lack of resources and open economies to reinvention through the arts, tourism, and other emerging industries. IRRR programming has moved some of these initiatives in the direction of a systemic effort, though the onus remains on local communities to organize and launch these processes.

**Native-led tourism.** These emerging initiatives change who tells the stories and who profits from cultural heritage. They are part of a broader shift to counteract the legacy of treating Native Nations as cultural owners rather than equal economic partners.

## SETBACKS AND CHALLENGES:

- 1. Absence of poverty reduction and equity considerations from regional policy.** Though many nonprofits and some local governments are taking steps to think deeply about poverty reduction and address equity concerns, there is no overarching system to guide such efforts in Northeast Minnesota. They are also often at the mercy of state and federal economic and political trends, which can limit effectiveness.
- 2. Decentralized governance.** Many separate government jurisdictions making coordination difficult; while one community may take steps to balance its development outcomes, there is no mechanism to ensure coordination across these efforts. While this would likely be true in any rural region, Northeast Minnesota's large geography and low population density create added capacity issues, especially in townships and deeply rural portions of the region.
- 3. Infrastructure challenges.** Some foundational pieces of inclusive development are in poor shape in Northeast Minnesota, requiring extensive maintenance simply to keep up what already exists, to say nothing of innovative new projects. The region's large area and challenging winters necessitate extensive road maintenance every year, and older communities require utility upgrades, lead pipe abatement, and management of legacy brownfields or pollutants. Broadband internet access, while improving, can limit rural opportunities for remote work and digital business. Many of these pieces are foundational to economic success in the region.
- 4. Tight housing market.** Rapidly increasing costs of housing threaten to price people out of Northeast Minnesota and create setbacks on other indicators of rural flourishing, given the extent of costs tied up in housing for many area residents. Limited inventory also forces workers to live far from jobs, further limiting quality of life. The burden of a housing shortage falls heaviest on those with the least, fueling increased homelessness and precarity as people fall through the cracks.
- 5. Climate disruptions.** Shifting climate patterns affect traditional industries like forestry, fishing, and winter tourism and can lead to increased natural disasters in Northeast Minnesota. Despite the region's reputation as a "climate refuge," these shifts still have implications for regional ecology, identity, and economics, and may affect different communities in different ways.

## OPPORTUNITIES:

**Include Equity in Good Neighbor Agreements.** Good Neighbor Agreements are an emerging concept that lay groundwork for mutual accountability related to development projects, and are included in the Rural Stakeholder Equity building block as well. They could also go a step further to center equity and ensure that wealth creation, environmental remediation, and workforce development truly reach marginalized communities.

- 1. Asset mapping and national models.** Many frameworks exist to help frame conversations around balanced development outcomes. For example, the WealthWorks model of mapping local assets and creating opportunities that keep wealth in communities is a broadly applicable tool that can assist regional communities.
- 2. Green economy growth.** With its substantial natural assets, Northeast Minnesota has an opportunity to position itself as a leader in climate resilience and green business development. Circular economy approaches find new uses for waste materials and reuse brownfields to create virtuous cycles of investment and community health. Investment in local ownership stakes in renewable energy and other new developments can help to maintain wealth in the region.
- 3. Coordinated philanthropic investment.** Northeast Minnesota's funding partners could establish regional investment funds specifically designed for underserved and rural communities, expanding on efforts such as those of the Blandin Foundation to create a truly regional strategy. For example, these efforts could support Native-led investment opportunities that benefit the entire region.

## FUTURE MEASUREMENT:

- Smaller demographic gaps in business ownership, homeownership, and savings across racial groups
- New businesses appearing throughout the region, not just in a few prosperous areas
- Including Native Nations' own definitions of success in our regional goals
- Improved income mobility compared to previous generations
- Equitable distribution of investments supporting climate resilience
- Reduced poverty rates and less reliance on assistance programs
- Development resources successfully reaching historically excluded groups

**MOVING FORWARD TOGETHER:**  
A THRIVING RURAL COMMUNITIES GAP ANALYSIS  
OF NORTHEAST MINNESOTA

# BUILDING BLOCKS:

COHESIVE RURAL POLICY LENS

N O R T H S P A N



## BUILDING BLOCK: COHESIVE RURAL POLICY LENS

### ASPEN DESCRIPTION:

Federal and state governments cohesively tailor and align the design, implementation, regulations, and incentives in policy and laws to ensure rural access and provide a predictable stream of public resources that can be used flexibly, as locally determined, for rural benefit.

### MORE DETAIL:

This building block looks to further the understanding that policies created without rural and Tribal voices and specific realities, and keeping their lived experiences in mind, often do a disservice to these communities and create unintended consequences. Rather than having a one-size-fits-all policy of solutions, this building block pursues equitable outcomes grounded in community input and self-determination, with respectful engagement around Tribal sovereignty. It is structured to build long-term and inclusive rural systems and solutions.

### WHERE WE ARE:

Northern Minnesota has a complex relationship with state and federal policymaking. It has historically wielded strong political influence due to aligned economic interests, but this unity has drifted over time, and different parts of the region have different priorities and face certain power disparities. As in any rural area, there are concerns over how well politicians in distant centers of power track reality on the ground. Geographic isolation, harsh climate, and economic evolution as traditional industries adapt and others emerge compound questions of future direction and resources necessary to build cohesion behind a single policy lens. Given the region's demographic trends, banding together will only become more important over time for exercising a voice.

### MAJOR ASSETS:

**Strong advocacy arms.** As noted elsewhere in this report, Northeast Minnesota has a reasonably strong infrastructure to demand change at the federal and state levels, including organizations such as the Range Association of Municipalities and Schools and events such as Duluth and St. Louis County Days. Historically, the region's legislators have been able to punch above their weight to secure resources for Northeast Minnesota, though shifting political realities leave the future somewhat uncertain. A loose framework for cooperation exists across the region, even if it is not always formal.

**Tribal knowledge.** Tribal communities, since time immemorial, have brought environmental knowledge and leadership/governance practices that are hugely relevant to provide solutions for the current challenges around sustainability and climate change.

### SUCCESS STORIES:

**Enhanced Tribal consultation practices.** These efforts are strengthening relationships between state agencies and Tribal nations, moving toward greater respect for Tribal sovereignty and shared governance. Environmental efforts, particularly those led in partnership with the Minnesota Pollution Control Agency, are incorporating Tribal ecological knowledge into monitoring and restoration programs, providing a more complete and culturally grounded approach to addressing the inherited pollution of our ecosystem.

**Broadband leadership.** Northeast Minnesota has been an active advocate for improved internet service across the region, and these efforts led to a bevy of new tools to help support broadband access. While program design and implementation has not always been ideal, the process shows a roadmap for improved outcomes, and it has substantially increased the number of households served in the region.

**Investments in recreational infrastructure.** Several funding streams have enabled both community engagement and the growth of recreation-based businesses and amenities in Northeast Minnesota. For example, the state's Clean Water, Land and Legacy Amendment has led to substantial investment in trail infrastructure and the local arts, and the IRRR and local units of government have regularly been able to leverage this funding to complete projects.

## SETBACKS AND CHALLENGES:

**Geographic realities of rural.** Isolated communities with low population density are a defining feature of Northeast Minnesota, which imposes high transportation costs and restricts access to services, markets, and professional networks, particularly for individuals and communities with limited resources. This reality makes it difficult to marshal resources at any scale in parts of the region.

**Legislation made without understanding.** Decisions made in Washington often care little for the nuances of Northeast Minnesota, with policy often sticking to the talking points of national parties with little thoughts of complex implications. Perhaps more egregiously, this disconnect also occurs on a state level, where some legislators outside of Northeast Minnesota have fixed ideas of the region's communities and assets may be based on an inaccurate or incomplete understanding of the region's natural resources economy, tax impacts, and the behind-the-scenes challenges communities encounter that are less visible to a tourist passing through.

**Processes for development in Minnesota.** Wherever they stand on debates on the merits of certain economic development projects as they relate to environmental protections, nearly everyone involved in the debate agrees the process is often unclear and inefficient. Timelines are often unclear, and legal proceedings can drag out decisions indefinitely. Fiats issued from Washington also swing the terms of the debate dramatically, killing or reviving certain economic development projects with no additional input. Northeast Minnesota has some influence on these state-level debates, but is often subject to broader forces at play.

**Systemic disparities for the region's BIPOC populations.** Outcomes for many of the region's populations of color remain poor and are rooted in generational trauma, systemic underinvestment, and limited culturally appropriate services. Access to capital is limited, with small and Tribally owned businesses often facing steep hurdles in securing financing. Some institutions and agencies continue to resist inclusive design practices, favoring traditional models that ignore or inadequately address the historical and structural roots of rural inequity, digital divides, and structures of investment.

**The eternal capacity challenge.** Even when policy and program design are generally aligned with rural interests, small communities still need the capacity to pursue them and manage them. With limited staff capacity, sometimes with little knowledge of nuanced government programs, communities often lack the time and expertise to go after funding that could create substantial benefits.

## OPPORTUNITIES:

- 1. Pursue strategies that overcome geographic barriers.** Northeast Minnesota can support policies that expand and solidify the future of telehealth, remote work, and distance learning initiatives with specific strategies to ensure inclusivity and longevity regardless of location or resources.
- 2. Integration of Tribal perspectives.** Formally incorporate Tribal environmental expertise into state agency practices would lead them to value traditional tribal knowledge alongside current scientific approaches.
- 3. Unified efforts.** Northeast Minnesota lacks the population to exercise consistent, significant influence on a state level, to say nothing of the national level. As such, it may be necessary to unify with other rural regions to effectively advocate and advance certain others. Some Northeast Minnesota actors, including the Northland Foundation, Arrowhead Regional Development Commission, Arrowhead Regional Arts Council, and the area's community action agencies, have equivalents across the state that can allow them to speak with a broader voice. Minnesota's Tribal Nations have several formal and informal mechanisms to coordinate their efforts. Other organizations in this ecosystem, including the Blandin Foundation, Entrepreneur Fund, and Northspan, do work in other parts of the state and can leverage those ties. A statewide rural voice can have far more influence in St. Paul than one region alone.

## FUTURE MEASUREMENT:

- Metrics of job diversity, income levels, business ownership rates, and poverty reduction, understanding this by area, race, gender, and other factors, focusing on closing historical gaps for rural and underrepresented communities.
- Improvements in water quality, climate resilience, sustainable harvest levels, and the elimination of environmental health disparities.
- Reductions in key health disparities between tribal and non-Tribal communities
- Metrics to track infrastructure investments, including internet access, transportation connectivity, and infrastructure improvements in response to community need
- Evaluation framework for Tribal consultations, respect for Tribal sovereignty, success of cross-jurisdictional projects, community participation and engagement, and representation within decision-making roles.
- Metrics for new business creation, improved access to capital, partnerships involving rural and Tribal communities.

**MOVING FORWARD TOGETHER:**  
A THRIVING RURAL COMMUNITIES GAP ANALYSIS  
OF NORTHEAST MINNESOTA

# BUILDING BLOCKS:

VALUED RURAL STEWARDSHIP

N O R T H S P A N



## BUILDING BLOCK: VALUED RURAL STEWARDSHIP

### ASPEN DESCRIPTION:

Public and private purchasers, users, and beneficiaries fairly compensate rural actors for the natural resource and ecosystem value that rural people, businesses, and organizations produce to sustain natural resources and, thus, America's future prosperity.

### MORE DETAIL:

This building block recognizes that Tribal and rural communities are keepers of many natural resources, which often are the backbones of their economies and the reason many people choose to live in them. Rural regions thereby benefit the entire state and nation, but they often pay the direct costs for cultivating, preserving, and managing these regions without receiving much compensation. This goal of stewardship is pulled into deeper debates over resource development and environmental preservation and feed into questions regarding resource use and long-term sustainability. Rather than viewing environmental protection and economic development as opposing forces, this building block could build toward greater assurance that those who maintain natural systems receive real benefits.

### WHERE WE ARE:

Northern Minnesota sits at a crossroads of resource stewardship. The region manages vast forests, pristine waters, and mineral resources that provide benefits far beyond its borders. While some mechanisms exist to compensate for local stewardship, like conservation easements and sustainable tourism, many ecosystem services remain undervalued. The tension between immediate natural resource development and long-term conservation creates ongoing community conflicts, particularly around mining. These questions have been central to Northeast Minnesota since the formation of its modern economy, though there has been some progress through partnerships between state agencies, Tribal governments, nonprofits, and private landowners. However, these efforts remain fragmented rather than systematic.

### MAJOR ASSETS:

**Land and water that inspires stewardship.** Northeast Minnesota is home to some of the most remarkable natural resources and conservation efforts in the world, including Lake Superior, the largest freshwater lake by surface area. With thousands of lakes and significant wetlands, the state provides management services for water filtration, flood control, and wildlife habitat. Minnesota forests not only sequester carbon but also support sustainable timber industries. Protected areas like the Boundary Waters Canoe Area Wilderness preserve critical ecosystems and offer recreational opportunities that support the growth of a thriving outdoor recreational economy. While desired usage patterns may vary, most Northeast Minnesotans see incredible value in the world around them and understand the importance of some concept of fairness in its conservation and use.

**Tribal natural resources departments.** Tribal departments are rooted in generations of traditional ecological knowledge, supplemented local university research on sustainable resource management. These agencies are growing their programming as they work to conserve natural areas and make sure their communities benefit from any profit derived from it.

**Protection of pristine lands.** The Minnesota Land Trust has partnered with private landowners across northern Minnesota to permanently protect over 60,000 acres while allowing sustainable uses that support local livelihoods. These easements have

helped maintain working forests, farms, and shorelines while providing landowners with tax benefits and sometimes direct payments.

**Sustainable practices.** The Sustainable Forestry Initiative and Forest Stewardship Council certification programs have enabled northern Minnesota's timber industry to access premium markets while maintaining forest health. St. Louis and Itasca Counties are home to programming that manages public and trust forest lands for both timber production and ecosystem management services. State and national forests are also a significant part of this balance.

## SUCCESS STORIES:

**Rural stewardship as community identity.** Communities like Ely, Grand Marais, and Grand Rapids have built thriving economies around people paying to experience the natural environments. Visitors come to learn about ecology, animal life, and environmentally friendly crafts, and often leave with a new appreciation for the importance of conservation in the region. Other communities are now seeking to replicate parts of this approach, and the trend is likely to continue over time.

**IRRR production tax.** The production tax on taconite mines in Northeast Minnesota guides funding to a regional agency that reinvests in communities and works to advance regional benefits. This unique model helps keep profits from mining in the region and protects the mines against onerous tax burdens during downturns in the economy. The model could theoretically extend to other regional economic assets.

**Tourism taxes.** Numerous municipalities and groups of municipalities exercise a lodging tax or sales tax that collect revenue from outside visitors and use it to support destination marketing organizations or attractions within their communities, many of which trade on the region's natural beauty. These taxes help to capture outside wealth from people who use Northeast Minnesota public amenities but do not necessarily pay for them.

**Tribal resource management.** Tribal Nations have spearheaded approaches to wild rice management that protect this cultural and spiritual lifeline while creating economic opportunities through harvest and sale. Their integration of traditional ecological knowledge with modern science has created a model for sustainable resource management.

**Ecologically conscious local agriculture.** With conditions that are not amenable to the large-scale monoculture present in other rural areas, Northeast Minnesota's agriculture sector is locally based and often centers sustainable practices. The Minnesota Department of Agriculture's Local Food Purchase Assistance program has created new markets for northern Minnesota farmers while improving food security, connecting food producers with schools, food shelves, and tribal programs, and improving the economic future of smaller-scale agriculture.

## SETBACKS AND CHALLENGES:

**Persistent conflict.** The debate between forces supporting the development of new natural resource-based economies and those opposed to them, most notably those related to potential nonferrous mining, shows the challenge of balancing the immediate economic opportunities with long-term natural resource protection. These deep community divisions appear repeatedly as a barrier throughout this report.

**The preponderance of outside money.** Natural resource-based development projects in mining and forest products are often capital intensive and require outside investors to be viable, creating inherent challenges for local economic benefit. Even the tourism-focused economy faces a version of this challenge, albeit on a very different scale, as many urban-based residents benefit from Minnesota's rural ecosystem without incurring the costs of maintenance. Some Northeast Minnesotans perceive the current taxation structure as unfair to the region, particularly as it relates to taxation on non-homesteaded properties.

**Allocation of resources.** Fair and equitable distribution of compensation can be a challenge even when it does exist. IRRR creates a unique vehicle for the region, but it faces some constraints in what it can fund, and its decisions can be politicized. Seemingly arbitrary boundaries can determine who is eligible for funding for any number of sources, and the presence of many small municipalities can leave the region with more entities seeking funding than it could reasonably hope to support.

**Barriers to adoption.** Paying higher prices for sustainable energy, transportation, and local or environmentally friendly products creates barriers and, at times, resistance in Northeast Minnesota. Some of the opportunities in this building block, such as revenue for environmental preservation and compensation for affected communities, are relatively new concepts that come with a price tag that can complicate incentives for development.

## OPPORTUNITIES:

**Tax reform.** Numerous potential changes to Minnesota tax law could benefit Northeast Minnesota, especially if the legislature addresses several issues related to homestead status properties that limit the region's ability to collect revenue on second homes. Changes around home renovations and collection of lodging tax on vacation rentals could also support the region. More ambitiously, IRRR provides a model for regionally shared tax revenue for certain industries that could be replicated elsewhere.

**Revenue for environmental preservation.** Northeast Minnesota could develop forest carbon projects with landowners, counties, and Tribes to generate revenue. Similarly, there is some potential to create systems where downstream users (e.g., communities and businesses along the Mississippi River to the south) pay upstream stewards (e.g., Northeast Minnesota counties and Tribal Nations in the watershed) for clean water maintenance, particularly in the Mississippi River. Greater user-funded conservation through permits and fees is also an option, though this creates trade-offs for ease of access.

**Compensation for affected communities.** Formalize agreements ensuring local and Tribal communities receive fair compensation from resource development projects, connecting conservation and development efforts. Another avenue for exploration is payment of rural landowners and Tribal traditional knowledge leaders to share sustainable management practices in preserving this knowledge.

## FUTURE MEASUREMENT:

- Percentage of landowners receiving compensation for ecosystem management, total annual payments for ecosystem management in the region, and price premiums received for certified sustainable products
- Tourism revenue linked to ecotourism and access to natural resources
- Number of jobs supported and created by conservation
- Income from carbon or other new market credits and carbon sequestration rates in managed forests
- Amount of acres under conservation management
- Water quality improvements in watershed areas, wildlife population trends in areas receiving management payments

- Community satisfaction with resource management
- Reduction in conflicts over resource use
- Integration of traditional Tribal ecological knowledge in management decisions across jurisdictions
- Urban residents' willingness to pay for rural ecosystem management

**MOVING FORWARD TOGETHER:**  
A THRIVING RURAL COMMUNITIES GAP ANALYSIS  
OF NORTHEAST MINNESOTA

# BUILDING BLOCKS:

RURAL STAKEHOLDER EQUITY

N O R T H S P A N



## BUILDING BLOCK: RURAL STAKEHOLDER EQUITY

### ASPEN DESCRIPTION:

Governments, businesses, and institutions operated by individuals and owners outside rural communities establish balanced relationships that produce mutual and fair value for the rural community, Native Nation, business, and worker stakeholders.

### MORE DETAIL:

This building block focuses on creating equitable partnerships between rural communities and external entities. It recognizes that many decisions affecting rural areas are made by organizations headquartered elsewhere, often resulting in unbalanced relationships where rural communities provide resources but receive disproportionately small benefits. This building block therefore centers collaborative approaches that respect local knowledge and priorities. On a deeply related note, sovereign status gives Tribal Nations inherent rights and creates systems through which Tribal voices can take part in decision-making with other bodies of government. The goal, ultimately, is the creation of structures that better provide mutual and fair value, even as power imbalances may linger.

### WHERE WE ARE:

Northern Minnesota exemplifies both the challenges and opportunities in creating equitable stakeholder relationships. The region's abundance of natural resources has historically supported industries that often extracted value with limited consideration for local benefit. While some progress has been made through innovative partnerships, policy tools, and a change in the general climate between ownership and labor in regionally significant industries such as mining, many regional stakeholders still struggle for equitable representation in decisions affecting their communities. Tribal Nations have made significant advances in asserting sovereignty, yet they continue to face systemic barriers. Recent initiatives from state agencies, nonprofit organizations, and progressive businesses show promising movement toward more balanced relationships, though implementation remains uneven across the region.

### MAJOR ASSETS:

**Labor history.** Throughout the history of Northeast Minnesota many leading employers have not been based locally, and the labor movement emerged as a check on non-local control. Though far short of historic highs, organized labor remains strong in Northeast Minnesota and has fought for the rights of locals.

**Tribal sovereign authority.** Tribal governments have the sovereign authority to negotiate government-to-government relationships and can exercise it for a variety of projects that improve equity in Northeast Minnesota, including Tribal enterprises for economic development, treaty rights that guarantee rights to culturally significant activities, and programming that improves employment and education-related outcomes. Many Tribes in Northeast Minnesota have expanded their efforts to exercise and strengthen these rights in recent decades.

**University systems.** Northeast Minnesota is home to the second-largest campus in the University of Minnesota system and numerous extension services with rural development expertise, plus three community and technical colleges across seven campuses that are part of the Minnesota State system. These connections can and often do provide substantial resources to the

region, though there are some simmering disputes over resource allocation and connection between campuses and community needs. These institutions are both an existing asset and a foundation for improved future collaboration.

## SUCCESS STORIES:

**Strengthening employment in Native Nations.** Tribal Nations in Northeast Minnesota have implemented Tribal Employment Rights Ordinances (TERO), which have secured jobs and training for Tribal members on and near reservation lands. Through federal obligation, the TERO program has ensured that Native hiring is prioritized, resulting in meaningful employment opportunities and greater capacity-building within the community. Additionally, the Minnesota Indigenous Business Alliance and the Minnesota American Indian Chamber of Commerce have established paths for Native entrepreneurs to access markets, capital, and technical assistance.

**Legislative visits.** Some state legislators have begun building connections with legislators from other parts of the state (and often across the aisle) by inviting them to visit each other's districts and learn about local challenges. There is also a longer history of topic-specific tours that bring in numerous legislators from other parts of the state to visit bonding projects or economic assets, or to forums on serious rural issues such as EMS service, to further their knowledge of Northeast Minnesota's success. Building upon these efforts can build understanding and improve the likelihood of balanced relationships with higher levels of government.

**Community benefit agreements.** Some mining companies have established community benefit agreements, which contribute funding for local infrastructure, education, and environmental initiatives. They mark a movement toward more balanced relationships and equitable sharing of resource benefits.

**Commitment to local procurement.** Several healthcare facilities and educational institutions have adopted localized procurement policies that prioritize purchases from regional suppliers. This strategy helps retain healthcare and education spending within Northeast Minnesota and creates mutually beneficial relationships with local businesses.

## SETBACKS AND CHALLENGES:

**Capacity to pursue balanced relationships.** Building relationships with the state and national actors necessary to cultivate rural stakeholder equity takes time and commitment, which can be in short supply in small communities with limited staff. This leaves many rural and Tribal communities at a disadvantage when competing for attention or resources, and overcoming it may require collaborative efforts that do not always come naturally.

**No local control.** Decision-making power for major economic development projects frequently resides with external players. This can limit the influence of projects in our local communities that directly impact the future. A disconnect often forces rural communities to reshape their initiatives to meet expectations from outside the region rather than addressing the most immediate local concerns. While some external partners can and do value Northeast Minnesota stakeholders, this is often due to mutual alignment of interests or voluntary generosity, not because of a deep-seated commitment. The power imbalance is real and difficult to overcome, and may only be growing as more longtime businesses and companies drift toward non-local control.

**A history of distrust and unmet expectations.** Historical patterns of marginalization have left many Tribal nations distrustful of partnerships with outside entities, making trust-building a genuine step in collaboration. The need to improve relationships goes beyond project-specific efforts and feeds into a broader, systemic challenge for interaction between Tribal and external actors.

#### **OPPORTUNITIES:**

**Expanded relationships between Tribal governments and neighboring jurisdictions.** Tribal Nations and the jurisdictions with which they share boundaries or general proximity are often closely interconnected and have many common challenges. A more permanent structure for collaboration could help make dialogue feel routine and cut off some disputes before they happen. These forums could help develop a standard framework for community benefit agreements to ensure local returns from resource development projects and expand Tribal Employment Rights Ordinances beyond reservation boundaries through voluntary agreements with major employers and developers.

**Develop ownership structures that give communities stakes in major development projects affecting northern Minnesota.** While developing a process to create more inclusive development projects faces notable hurdles given incentive structures in the current economy, the benefits of local ownership are well-documented and would certainly help advance this building block. Where possible, they have the opportunity to change the orientation of a local economy.

#### **FUTURE MEASUREMENT:**

- Percentage of profits/revenues from natural resource industries retained within the region
- Number and value amount of contracts held by local and Native-owned businesses from external partners
- Rates of success for rural and Native American applicants for state and federal funding programs
- Representation of rural and Tribal stakeholders on non-local decision-making bodies
- Frequency and impact of formal consultation with rural communities on policies affecting them

**MOVING FORWARD TOGETHER:**  
A THRIVING RURAL COMMUNITIES GAP ANALYSIS  
OF NORTHEAST MINNESOTA

# BUILDING BLOCKS:

PREPARE ACTION-ABLE LEADERSHIP

N O R T H S P A N



## BUILDING BLOCK: PREPARE ACTION-ABLE LEADERSHIP

### ASPEN DESCRIPTION:

Communities have and prepare leaders with the will, skills, relationships, diversity, knowledge, and power needed to fully engage the community and the region to establish, align, and achieve priorities that increase both well-being and equity outcomes.

### MORE DETAIL:

Effective, inclusive leadership is the backbone of resilient rural communities. This building block emphasizes cultivating leaders who reflect the full diversity of their communities and can work collaboratively across differences. In Northeast Minnesota, this means elevating Indigenous voices, rural youth, women, and individuals who have historically been underrepresented in civic, nonprofit, and business leadership.

This building block also stresses the importance of alignment—ensuring that leadership priorities are not only strategic but also support broader outcomes in equity and community well-being. Rural communities thrive when leaders act with intention and prioritize inclusive growth.

Strengthening this building block means investing in systems of mentorship, creating new leadership pathways, building bridges between generations, and supporting community members in leading from where they are.

### WHERE WE ARE:

Northeast Minnesota is rich with individuals who demonstrate leadership every day—in local schools, Tribal governments, community organizations, and neighborhood associations. However, formal leadership structures often rely on legacy systems like chambers of commerce or educational institutions that may unintentionally exclude emerging or nontraditional leaders.

While there are strong leadership programs in place, access and participation remain uneven across geography, race, age, and class. Communities across the region recognize that leadership development can't be one-size-fits-all. As older leaders retire or step back, the region faces both a challenge and an opportunity to prepare the next generation in a way that is more representative, relational, and rooted in rural realities.

### MAJOR ASSETS:

Northeast Minnesota possesses a complex network of informal and formal leadership traditions rooted in community, service, and persistence. Across the region, residents consistently step into leadership roles, often not because of titles, but because of a deep sense of place and responsibility. Whether in small towns, Tribal communities, or rural counties, there is a culture of rising to meet local challenges through volunteerism, neighbor-to-neighbor coordination, and longstanding civic engagement. Core assets include:

**Intergenerational Leadership.** Elders and long-time residents hold deep institutional and cultural knowledge. Younger leaders bring energy, innovation, and modern skills. There's growing recognition of the value in bridging these generations through mentorship, peer learning, and shared leadership models.

**Strong Community Networks Enable Responsive Action.** Informal coalitions, local collaborations, and cross-sector partnerships regularly address regional needs such as childcare, housing, healthcare access, and workforce development. These relationships form a relational infrastructure built on trust, mutual respect, and shared commitment, creating fertile ground for cultivating leadership.

**Resilience is Baked into Local Leadership.** Geographic isolation, shifting economies, and chronic underinvestment have produced leaders who are adaptable, pragmatic, and deeply connected to their communities. These leaders know how to navigate complexity, operate with limited resources, and build consensus, all of which are key traits for driving effective, action-oriented change.

**Momentum Is Building for More Inclusive Leadership.** There has been a visible shift toward redefining who gets to lead in many parts of Northeast Minnesota. Lived experience is gaining value alongside formal credentials, and rural, Indigenous, and historically underrepresented voices are increasingly being invited to the table.

## SUCCESS STORIES:

Northern Minnesota is home to a growing ecosystem of leadership development initiatives, ranging from long-established programs to newer efforts designed to meet the changing needs of communities. These programs offer valuable infrastructure and serve as a springboard for strengthening leadership capacity across the region.

**Local leadership programs.** Programs like Leadership Duluth, Leadership Hibbing, and Leadership Cloquet offer structured, regionally grounded curricula that introduce participants to critical local issues while helping them build skills in communication, problem-solving, and civic engagement. These programs have cultivated decades of leaders in both the public and private sectors and continue to provide meaningful connections to local institutions and networks.

**Young professional programs.** Fuse Duluth, a program of the Duluth Area Chamber of Commerce, focuses on retaining and developing young professionals in the area. It blends professional development with networking opportunities to help participants build a sense of place and possibility in the region. For many emerging leaders, Fuse Duluth serves as an entry point into longer-term civic and leadership roles. On a more regional scale, the Minnesota Young American Leaders Program (MYALP), coordinated by the Northland Foundation in Northeast Minnesota, provides a handful of individuals each year with access to a nationally recognized model for cross-sector collaboration and systems-level thinking to pressing problems.

**Nonprofit training.** The Minnesota Council of Nonprofits (MCN) offers regional partnerships that support nonprofit board members, executive directors, and emerging sector leaders. Through training, peer learning, and policy engagement, MCN provides a vital platform for nonprofit leadership development that is especially important in rural areas where professional development opportunities can be limited.

**Youth leadership opportunities.** For younger community members, a range of programs exist to guide local youth into leadership. For example, 4-H leadership programs play a foundational role in rural communities across Northeast Minnesota, developing leadership skills in youth through hands-on projects, community service, and civic involvement, often creating the first formal leadership experience for rural youth. The Northland Foundation's Youth in Philanthropy board exposes some regional youth to the world of philanthropy, and many K-12 leadership programs have emerged in or around schools such as St. Louis County's Youth in Action program.

## SETBACKS AND CHALLENGES:

Despite the region's many strengths, persistent gaps remain in how leadership is cultivated and supported. Much of Northeast Minnesota's current leadership development infrastructure is still anchored in traditional institutions that, while well-established, often lack the reach and flexibility to engage new and diverse leaders. This reliance can unintentionally limit innovation and exclude those who don't already have access to these spaces in a variety of ways:

**Barriers of time, cost, and accessibility limit participation.** Many existing leadership programs are not designed for individuals who are low-income, working-class, or caregivers. These constraints disproportionately exclude those who often have the deepest knowledge of their communities' needs, preventing them from engaging in formal leadership roles.

**Emerging leaders from marginalized groups often feel isolated.** BIPOC, LGBTQ+, and young rural leaders report feeling underrepresented and unsupported. Without intentional mentorship, peer networks, or inclusive pathways, these individuals face greater challenges sustaining their leadership journeys.

**Pause of successful programs.** Numerous regional partners cited a pause in the Blandin Leadership Program, a leadership initiative that supported cohorts across rural communities, as a setback for Northeast Minnesota. This model provided a deep reach into many smaller communities that other existing programs do not or cannot replicate, and helped build both formal and informal capacity to strengthen local civic life. Though its exact replication may be impossible—and the moment may call for updates to the concept as well—it provides a model for what a good program can look like.

**Lack of succession planning creates leadership gaps.** As veteran leaders in civic and nonprofit sectors step away, organizations are often left with no clear strategy for continuity. This loss of institutional knowledge and unclear pathways for emerging leaders contributes to instability and missed opportunities.

## OPPORTUNITIES:

Northeast Minnesota is at a pivotal moment, equipped with a strong foundation and growing recognition that the region's future depends on leadership that is inclusive, representative, and prepared to meet complexity with creativity. To strengthen this foundation, there are a number of promising opportunities to expand and deepen leadership development:

- 1. Supporting and training local candidates for public office.** Political leadership in Northeast Minnesota often does not represent the demographic realities of the region's communities. Programs like Women Winning and the League of Minnesota Cities' Elected Leaders Institute can be adapted or expanded locally to equip aspiring leaders—especially women, Indigenous residents, and young rural professionals—with the tools and confidence to step into governance roles. This is especially important in townships and small cities where leadership transitions often happen informally or without preparation.
- 2. Cross-sector mentorship circles.** Connections between early career leaders and experienced community builders can make all the difference in setting up future generations for success. These peer and intergenerational relationships bridge urban-rural divides, share lessons across Tribal and municipal systems, and build a sense of belonging for those who might otherwise feel isolated in leadership spaces.
- 3. Investing in shared leadership models.** Opportunities to distribute decision-making responsibility across teams or collaboratives can increase sustainability and reduce burnout. This is particularly effective in rural nonprofits and local

government departments that are stretched thin, allowing leadership to emerge from within, rather than relying on a single executive or figurehead.

4. **Expanding youth civic leadership opportunities.** School-based leadership clubs, youth seats on city commissions, and student shadowing of elected officials can all help normalize leadership as accessible and relevant. In several communities, young people have organized around mental health advocacy and community beautification projects, demonstrating that when invited to lead, they do so with energy and insight.
5. **Celebrate and amplify local leadership stories.** Recognizing often thankless leadership work, especially from those who don't fit the traditional mold, can help shift perceptions about who can lead. By lifting up diverse narratives and nontraditional pathways, the region can inspire broader participation and design a more inclusive vision of community leadership.

#### **FUTURE MEASUREMENT:**

- Leadership will reflect the region's full diversity: Greater representation of Indigenous, BIPOC, LGBTQ+, younger, and rural voices at leadership tables across sectors.
- Increased participation in leadership programs: More individuals from historically excluded groups will join, stay engaged, and transition into formal roles. Younger leaders will feel seen, valued, and supported in developing their leadership potential.
- Succession planning and mentorship will become the norm: Local governments, boards, and nonprofits will implement intentional systems for leadership continuity. These practices will help prevent gaps, build confidence, and foster intergenerational support.
- Stronger trust and shared ownership at the community level: Residents will express greater confidence in leadership processes. People will feel empowered to engage in civic life—both through formal roles and informal contributions like event organizing or local initiatives.
- More cross-sector collaboration driven by local leaders: Homegrown leaders will bridge silos and unify partners across health, education, business, and community development. Solutions will be place-based, inclusive, and driven by those rooted in the community.
- Leadership will be redefined as a shared practice: Leadership will be recognized not as a title, but as an evolving, supported, and community-rooted practice.

**MOVING FORWARD TOGETHER:**  
A THRIVING RURAL COMMUNITIES GAP ANALYSIS  
OF NORTHEAST MINNESOTA

# BUILDING BLOCKS:

ORGANIZE AN ACTION INFRASTRUCTURE

N O R T H S P A N



**NORTHLAND  
FOUNDATION**

## BUILDING BLOCK: ORGANIZE AN ACTION INFRASTRUCTURE

### ASPEN DESCRIPTION:

Communities have the local and regional institutions, policies, systems, data, information, media, and resources needed to establish, align, and achieve priorities that increase both well-being and equity.

### MORE DETAIL:

Communities thrive not simply because they have strong ideas, but because they have the infrastructure to turn ideas into action. In rural regions like Northeast Minnesota, organizing an action infrastructure means ensuring there are people, systems, and processes in place to keep momentum going, even when leadership transitions, funding cycles end, or new challenges arise.

### WHERE WE ARE:

Northeast Minnesota is in a foundational phase of building the systems, roles, and relationships that support long-term action infrastructure. While many efforts remain localized or reliant on individual champions, there are strong signs of regional readiness.

Multiple networks, including civic coalitions, economic development alliances, and Tribal-municipal partnerships, are beginning to formalize their work through shared staffing, joint planning, and cross-sector dialogue. Organizations like RAMS and IREA show how long-standing coordination mechanisms can evolve to meet new challenges.

Efforts like Ready North disaster response exercise and the Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women/Missing and Murdered Indigenous Relatives (MMIW/MMIR) action response have demonstrated that the region can quickly mobilize around shared priorities when the infrastructure for collaboration exists. However, such efforts are still the exception rather than the rule.

At present, Northeast Minnesota has many of the necessary ingredients: trusted institutions, passionate leaders, and successful pilots. What's needed now is greater connectivity across initiatives, sustained investment in coordination roles, and stronger systems for tracking and adapting collective work. This will ensure that the region's energy doesn't just spark change, but sustains it.

### MAJOR ASSETS:

**Longstanding regional organizations.** Numerous organizations provide foundational coordination structures for parts or all of the region and have a track record of working across jurisdictions. The Iron Range Economic Alliance (IREA) provides a forum for information-sharing and a foundation for some advocacy, while the Range Association of Municipalities and Schools (RAMS) supports its members' interests and advocates effectively at the state level.

**Joint advocacy efforts.** Parts of the region often mobilize to advocate for regional issues. Events like Duluth and St. Louis County Days at the Capitol demonstrate the region's ability to craft shared messages and mobilize stakeholders for collective impact. Though stronger in some parts of the regions than others, these efforts are successful, scalable, and build a strong spirit of camaraderie among regional partners.

**Organized labor.** Labor unions offer models of sustained infrastructure and leadership development; with deep roots in the region, unions support long-term leadership pipelines, membership engagement, and strategic coordination.

**Topic-specific cross-sector collaboration.** An emerging example of cross-sector collaboration is Ready North, which brings together diverse partners to address community resilience and emergency preparedness. It serves as a promising model for collaborative action that spans sectors and communities.

**APEX and business sector alignment.** The Area Partnership for Economic Expansion (APEX) covers the entire region and provides a vehicle for the private sector to work together on topics of interest. APEX has over 20 years of history in driving a shared agenda and cultivating economic development projects in the region.

## SUCCESS STORIES:

**A regional broadband push.** Spearheaded by the Blandin Foundation and IRRR funding, a regional effort to strengthen broadband connectivity yielded results across Northeast Minnesota. This initiative included building local capacity to address deficient service, conducting the research necessary to entice providers, funneling funding to viable projects, and joining statewide advocacy efforts to articulate regional needs. This deep investment in a single challenging issue substantially moved the needle for Northeast Minnesota.

**Northland Foundation's child care efforts.** The Northland Foundation has been a leader in addressing child care issues in Northeast Minnesota by funding research, supporting action plans, and providing a long-term commitment to finding resources for one of the region's most intractable problems. While the issue remains deeply challenging, Northland Foundation can point to its role as a regional support and funder for dozens of projects as vital in stabilizing the child care situation in many communities.

**The MMIW/MMIR (Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women/Relatives) Action Response.** This effort exemplifies how communities can organize quickly and powerfully around urgent issues. The collaborative efforts between Tribal leaders, nonprofit organizations, law enforcement, and advocacy groups resulted in heightened visibility, stronger policy advocacy, and meaningful cross-sector partnerships. It showcases the potential when action infrastructure is built on trust, shared urgency, and community leadership.

## SETBACKS AND CHALLENGES:

**Reliance on individual leaders and informal relationships.** Many collaborative efforts hinge on the dedication of a few champions or temporary staff roles tied to specific grants. This creates vulnerability when leaders leave or funding ends.

**Capacity gaps in smaller communities and Tribal Nations.** Limited staffing and resources make it harder for some communities to participate consistently in regional efforts. These constraints can inhibit long-term engagement and follow-through.

**Lack of sustained backbone support.** Without dedicated roles or funding for coordination and communication, momentum often fades after initial project phases. Collaborative infrastructure remains underdeveloped across much of the region. Funding for the sustainability of existing efforts remains a challenge, as it is in many parts of the country.

**Need for more inclusive and equitable governance structures.** Current decision-making bodies do not always reflect the full diversity of Northeast Minnesota. Greater intentionality is needed to build transparent, equitable, and representative systems of collaboration.

#### **OPPORTUNITIES:**

- 1. Replicate what works.** The regional broadband and child care initiatives combine many of the elements necessary to move the needle on challenging issues. These efforts have included efforts to build up local capacity and pool funding resources, allowing action-ready communities to leverage resources they would not otherwise have. They have been grounded in research that understands problems and identifies best practices to address them. They have also come with longer-term commitments that last beyond a single funding window, creating the conditions for longer-term change that the Rural Development Hub model exemplifies.
- 2. Establish formal backbone organizations or cross-sector collaboratives.** These entities can coordinate communication, ensure alignment across efforts, and sustain momentum beyond short-term projects. Acting as the “connective tissue,” they prevent duplication and reinforce shared accountability.
- 3. Embed equity-focused leadership within infrastructure.** Leadership roles specifically designed to elevate marginalized voices will ensure that agenda-setting and decision-making are inclusive and representative. This strengthens both the legitimacy and effectiveness of regional collaboration.

#### **FUTURE MEASUREMENT:**

- Infrastructure becomes as strong as the initiatives it supports
- Collaboration outlasts funding cycles and crises
- Greater clarity, trust, and efficiency among partners
- Policy wins and investment follow coordinated action

**MOVING FORWARD TOGETHER:**  
A THRIVING RURAL COMMUNITIES GAP ANALYSIS  
OF NORTHEAST MINNESOTA

# BUILDING BLOCKS:

ACT AS A REGION

N O R T H S P A N



## BUILDING BLOCK: ACT AS A REGION

### ASPEN DESCRIPTION:

Communities persistently analyze, develop strategies, and act together within and across sensible and workable regions to address shared issues, challenges, and opportunities and achieve outcomes at a productive scale.

### MORE DETAIL:

This building block recognizes that the challenges rural communities face are not confined by political or geographic lines. In Northeast Minnesota, communities are interconnected through economies, ecosystems, and cultures, making collaboration not just beneficial, but essential.

Alignment around shared priorities—especially those linked to equity, economic opportunity, and community resilience—is crucial. Acting as a region is not about uniformity; it is about intentionally weaving diverse communities together to create strength, adaptability, and greater influence.

### WHERE WE ARE:

Northeast Minnesota has strong foundations for regional collaboration, shaped by decades of shared economic, environmental, and cultural experiences. Across the region, longstanding initiatives like multi-county planning commissions, workforce development boards, and transportation collaboratives demonstrate that when the stakes are high, communities know how to come together. More recently, issue-specific alliances focused on issues such as broadband access, childcare expansion, housing, and economic diversification, have continued to reinforce the understanding that no single community can tackle these challenges alone.

Many rural leaders already recognize that cross-border coordination is not optional. It is essential to accessing larger funding streams, influencing policy decisions, and building solutions that match the scale of the issues. Whether advocating for federal investment in broadband infrastructure or working to align regional workforce strategies, collaboration has repeatedly proven its value.

### MAJOR ASSETS:

Northeast Minnesota is home to a rich ecosystem of partnerships and initiatives that demonstrate both the desire and capacity to work across borders. These assets span economic development, food systems, public health, and governance—and they form the connective tissue of a region capable of acting collectively to solve shared challenges.

**Economic and Infrastructure Partnerships.** Examples include:

**East Range Joint Powers Board (ERJPB):** A formal collaboration between small communities on the Iron Range to share resources and pursue collective infrastructure and economic development goals and a model for successful pooling of resources across municipal boundaries.

**Regional Sustainable Development Partnership (RDSP):** Drives multi-stakeholder strategies in agriculture and food systems, clean energy, natural resources and resilient communities.

**Mineland Vision Partnership (MVP):** Focused on the reclamation and redevelopment of former mining lands through cross-sector collaboration, balancing environmental, community, and economic priorities. While less immediately action-oriented than some organizations, it creates a forum for addressing issues.

**Food Systems and Agricultural Networks.** Northeast Minnesota may not be the agriculture-dominated rural region common across the Midwest, but its network of relatively small-scale producers has banded together with a series of regional efforts, including:

- **Regional Food Business Center (RFBC):** Strengthening rural food economies by connecting producers, markets, and support systems across counties and Tribes.
- **Northland Food Network (NFN):** A coalition connecting farms, institutions, nonprofits, and businesses to advance local food systems and improve food access.
- **Arrowhead Grown:** A regional initiative supporting and promoting locally produced agricultural goods, strengthening regional identity and economic sustainability.

**Health and Well-Being Collaboratives.** Efforts to address health and social well-being in the region have scaled up to act at a regional level, including such efforts as:

- **Statewide Health Improvement Program (SHIP):** Builds regional health partnerships that address chronic disease prevention through community-driven strategies.
- **Family Collaborative Services Boards:** Facilitate cross-system coordination (education, social services, health, justice) to support children and families across multiple counties.

**Tribal and Local/State-Level Partnerships.** Growing examples of shared governance models where Tribal Nations, municipalities, and state agencies collaborate on economic, health, environmental, and educational initiatives. These partnerships reflect a shift toward mutual respect, shared leadership, and co-created solutions.

## SUCCESS STORIES:

Northeast Minnesota shows growing progress to support regional collaboration. Across the region, there is a strong instinct to build alliances when opportunities or challenges require collective action, and several structures already exist that can be leveraged for deeper, more sustained regional work.

**Comprehensive Economic Development Strategy (CEDS).** The CEDS process has helped establish shared economic priorities across a multi-county area, creating a common framework for identifying projects and funding opportunities. By engaging a wide range of stakeholders, the CEDS process has also built habits of cross-sector conversation that make future collaboration more feasible. The CEDS process is led by the Arrowhead Regional Development Commission (ARDC), which has long served as a backbone for cross-county collaboration, especially in infrastructure, transportation, and community planning. It has created a baseline that future efforts could expand upon.

**Iron Range unity.** Organizations such as the Department of Iron Range Resources and Rehabilitation (DIRRR) and coalitions like the Iron Range Economic Alliance (IREA), demonstrate how regional alliances can lift up specific regions with shared challenges. These efforts model inclusive leadership practices and provide critical pathways for trust-building across communities with distinct governance and cultural systems. They have created a shared Iron Range identity that forms a foundation for advocacy, even as strong local loyalties remain in place.

**Tribal collaboration.** Tribal entities like the Minnesota Chippewa Tribe (MCT) demonstrate how Tribal nations can align their resources to tackle challenges that affect Indigenous people, land, and resources throughout Minnesota.

## SETBACKS AND CHALLENGES:

**A fragile, often piecemeal network.** While the instinct to collaborate is strong, the structures that sustain collaboration are often fragile. Regional efforts in Northeast Minnesota are often ad hoc, driven by specific grants, legislation, or immediate needs. When funding ends, momentum frequently stalls.

**Structures to support collaboration vary.** Some areas have formalized partnerships with dedicated staff and governance, while others rely on whoever has capacity, leading to inconsistent coordination.

**Power and resource disparities create an imbalance.** Larger cities in Northeast Minnesota are more likely to lead initiatives due to greater institutional capacity. Smaller towns, Tribal Nations, and rural areas often end up reacting instead of shaping directions. These disparities can reinforce historic inequities and overlook local knowledge.

**Cross-sector collaboration is still a work in progress.** While strong within sectors such as health care and economic development, broader collaboration across sectors, cultures, and communities remains limited. Advancing equity-centered regional work requires intentionality, trust, and shared leadership.

## OPPORTUNITIES:

Despite the challenges, Northeast Minnesota is well-positioned to deepen and expand its approach to regional collaboration. Communities across the region already recognize their interconnectedness and are increasingly open to finding ways to move beyond isolated, project-based cooperation. By taking intentional steps, Northeast Minnesota can transform this collaborative instinct into long-term, equity-centered infrastructure that strengthens the region as a whole.

- 1. Formalizing and resourcing cross-county collaboratives.** In order to focus on pressing shared priorities such as housing, broadband access, and childcare—issues that no single jurisdiction can solve alone—cross-sector efforts are essential. These collaboratives can be designed to support planning, resource-sharing, and coordinated advocacy, creating efficiency and amplifying impact.
- 2. Embedding equity commitments.** Regional plans and funding strategies are essential vehicles to ensuring that historically marginalized communities are not just included, but actively shaping the region's future. This includes Indigenous, BIPOC, immigrant, and rural low-income communities, whose leadership and lived experience are critical to building lasting solutions.
- 3. Develop shared leadership pipelines.** Northeast Minnesota has room to nurture regional talent across sectors and geographies. Rather than developing leaders within isolated systems, this approach invests in people who understand—and are prepared to lead across—the region's diversity and complexity.
- 4. Expand storytelling and shared identity initiatives.** These efforts reinforce regional pride and interconnectedness. Celebrating collective achievements, cultural ties, and mutual dependence can help shift mindsets from competition to

collaboration.

- 5. Building and sustaining rural–Tribal alliances.** New or strengthened networks rooted in Indigenous sovereignty and mutual respect can serve as a model for inclusive regional development. These alliances can help reframe regional planning in ways that honor Tribal governance, recognize historical injustices, and support shared prosperity.

By investing in these strategies, Northeast Minnesota can evolve from sporadic cooperation into sustained, trust-based regional action—building a future in which all communities, regardless of size or power, have a meaningful seat at the table and a shared stake in the region’s success.

#### **FUTURE MEASUREMENT:**

- **Inclusive Representation:** Regional initiatives will consistently include and reflect the diversity of Northeast Minnesota—across race, geography, Tribal affiliation, sector, and lived experience.
- **Equity in Decision-Making:** Those most impacted by decisions will be actively involved in shaping them.
- **Sustainable Collaboration:** Efforts will move beyond short-term funding and rely on shared staffing, local commitment, and durable coordination structures.
- **Cross-Sector & Cross-Government Trust:** Trust will deepen across county lines, between Tribal and non-Tribal governments, and among historically siloed sectors.
- **Transparent & Respectful Governance:** Decision-making processes will become more inclusive, transparent, and grounded in mutual respect.
- **Regional Connectedness:** People will feel a greater sense of belonging and shared responsibility for the region’s future.
- **Stronger Advocacy & Investment:** Joint advocacy efforts will lead to increased investment, supportive policies, and the ability to scale local solutions.
- **Unified Regional Voice:** Northeast Minnesota will be better positioned to influence policy, attract funding, and build an equitable, thriving future.

**MOVING FORWARD TOGETHER:**  
A THRIVING RURAL COMMUNITIES GAP ANALYSIS  
OF NORTHEAST MINNESOTA

# BUILDING BLOCKS:

BUILD MOMENTUM

N O R T H S P A N



## BUILDING BLOCK: BUILD MOMENTUM

### ASPEN DESCRIPTION:

Communities and regions, no matter their starting points, produce and celebrate the small wins and steady progress that fuel hope and persistence.

### MORE DETAIL:

Momentum is the emotional and relational fuel that powers long-term change. In rural regions like Northeast Minnesota, building momentum means more than launching initiatives; it means showing results, reinforcing hope, and making success visible. This creates a positive feedback loop: as communities see progress, they feel more confident in their ability to shape the future, increasing participation and reinforcing local leadership.

To truly build momentum, communities must have systems in place to capture and tell their own stories, highlighting local solutions, amplifying community voices, and honoring the work already underway. Equally important is the ability to demonstrate progress across diverse geographies, ensuring that both smaller towns and larger centers see themselves reflected in the region's success.

Building momentum also requires structures that connect the dots between projects, people, and places. When stories, data, and energy are siloed, it's hard to build collective belief. But when a region sees shared progress and celebrates it together, momentum becomes contagious.

### WHERE WE ARE:

Northeast Minnesota has several examples that serve as models for generating and sustaining momentum. Cities like Chisholm and Ely have undertaken visible, community-led projects that have sparked local energy that have changed the face of their downtowns. Neighborhoods like Lincoln Park have been revitalized to include shops, restaurants, and housing, and counties are working individually and collectively to tell their story and the stories of the region. These efforts show that, when given the tools and support, even small towns can make bold moves that inspire wider regional action.

However, much of this momentum remains localized or disconnected. Without coordinated storytelling, shared metrics, or region-wide celebration of progress, successes remain isolated. There's an opportunity to knit together these wins into a shared narrative that reflects Northeast Minnesota's creativity, resilience, and forward motion.

### MAJOR ASSETS:

The assets for this building block tend to build on those in others and accelerate them. They include local initiatives with visible results, such as downtown revitalization and community-led housing or infrastructure projects. Key pieces that turn single successes into broader narratives. These can include:

- Cultural pride and identity that create a strong emotional foundation for shared momentum.
- Grassroots leadership and local champions who consistently step up to make change visible and tangible.
- Regional institutions and nonprofits that provide the capacity to document and elevate community stories.

## SUCCESS STORIES:

**Transformed Downtowns and Neighborhoods.** In Duluth, Lincoln Park's transformation from a district of low-cost, often vacant commercial real estate to a bustling hub of local business is a model for revitalization previously unseen in the region. After years of neglect, communities across the area have placed new emphasis on improving downtown cores through rehabilitation and cultivation of small business, and funders such as IRRR have targeted resources to support them. Chisholm, Ely, and Two Harbors stand as clear examples, while places such as Aitkin, Deer River, and Virginia have active groups working to follow suit.

**Regional Trail Expansions.** Investments in outdoor infrastructure that not only enhance recreation but also support rural tourism, health, and connectivity. Regional projects such as the Superior Hiking Trail and Mesabi Trail engage multiple counties and Tribal Nations, reinforcing the value of cross-jurisdiction collaboration. More localized projects also create spillover, as mountain biking networks across the region such as those in Cohasset, Chisholm, Duluth, at Giants Ridge, and along the North Shore have made the region a destination for cycling. Trails serve as a visible symbol of progress and are increasingly seen as assets that connect people and places.

**Inclusion Learning Cohorts.** A Northspan-led initiative to build equity-focused leadership capacity across sectors has helped build community capacity for more welcoming homes. It brings together individuals from government, nonprofits, businesses, and education to learn, reflect, and act on inclusion. The cohort model is fostering deep relationships and shared language around equity, seeding long-term systems change.

**The Forge in Grand Rapids.** This new collaborative space focused on innovation, entrepreneurship, and community gathering represents a shift toward place-based economic development that prioritizes local talent and creativity. Early programming and partnerships are helping connect students, entrepreneurs, and civic leaders in new ways.

## SETBACKS AND CHALLENGES:

While Northeast Minnesota is seeing sparks of progress, several recurring challenges threaten the long-term sustainability of that momentum. Addressing these barriers is essential to ensure that local energy can translate into lasting regional impact.

**A piecemeal effort.** Momentum is often tied to short-term funding or one-time projects. Efforts can be reliant on the commitment of a few key individuals, who in turn risk burnout and may see a limited impact. These individuals may also be more interested in doing the work itself, rather than using the often somewhat different skillset required to tell a broader story.

**Lack of coordinated storytelling.** Many success stories go untold or unnoticed beyond their immediate area, leaving local gems as "best-kept secrets" that do not maximize their growth potential. While broader storytelling efforts are symptomatic of broader rural narrative issues covered elsewhere in this report, the absence of this foundation can blunt momentum.

**Capacity issues.** Some communities struggle with capacity and need support to participate in or sustain momentum-building efforts. Without dedicated staffing capacity, many of these efforts fall short.

## OPPORTUNITIES:

To turn isolated wins into sustained regional progress, Northeast Minnesota can invest in structures that connect, amplify, and align community efforts. These opportunities focus on making progress visible, measurable, and shareable across geographies and sectors.

- 1. Develop a regional storytelling strategy.** A coordinated strategy to showcase wins across communities and sectors, in conjunction with efforts to improve information-sharing more broadly, will have major impacts regionally.
- 2. Create systems for shared measurement.** Using data to show progress helps staff and volunteers step back from the day-to-day work of community and economic development and appreciate how far they've come. It also allows partners to see how local initiatives contribute to broader regional goals.
- 3. Peer learning networks and leadership exchanges.** Investment in forums to spread energy and ideas across the region can spur a desire to replicate other communities' efforts. Greater awareness can lead to resource-sharing, business expansion, and even a healthy sense of competition among neighbors.

## FUTURE MEASUREMENT:

- More communities report a sense of pride and progress.
- Increased visibility of local projects and leaders across the region.
- Greater participation in regional initiatives and networks.
- Shared progress indicators used by communities to track and celebrate small wins.
- A growing sense of regional identity rooted in shared stories and successes.

**MOVING FORWARD TOGETHER:**  
A THRIVING RURAL COMMUNITIES GAP ANALYSIS  
OF NORTHEAST MINNESOTA

# BUILDING BLOCKS:

READY RURAL CAPITAL ACCESS & FLOW

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## BUILDING BLOCK: READY RURAL CAPITAL ACCESS AND FLOW

### ASPEN DESCRIPTION:

Public, private, and philanthropic financial capital and durable funding streams are reliably available, easily accessible and affordable, and consistently and strategically invested in rural people, places, organizations, and economies.

### MORE DETAIL:

This building block recognizes that access to capital is essential for project development in Northeast Minnesota, and that these funding tools require alignment with rural realities. Having the opportunity to access capital from various sources allows communities in northern Minnesota to leverage different funding streams to create positive economic change, including:

- Public capital from government funding, grants, and programs to stimulate economic development
- Private capital from bank loans, venture capital, and angel investments
- Philanthropic capital from foundation grants, program investments, and mission-driven funding
- Community capital from local investment, cooperative financing, and funding mechanisms from residents

### WHERE WE ARE:

Northeast Minnesota has a range of traditional and non-traditional financing mechanisms, including a broad collection of financial institutions, numerous public and philanthropic tools, and established networks of cooperation between them. Many communities in Northeast Minnesota have also attempted to improve capital access in recent decades by launching new loan funds. Success rates vary and have been dependent on relationships with lenders, awareness of funding opportunities, capacity to pursue varied systems of lending applications, and overall alignment of what available capital is present to meet our rural needs.

### MAJOR ASSETS:

**Non-Traditional Lenders Forum and network.** Locally based non-traditional lenders in Northeast Minnesota hold regular forums across the region to highlight their offerings. These efforts bring together over 20 regional financial institutions and development organizations to address capital access barriers and highlight coordination between alternative and traditional financing. Resources highlighted include grants, loan products, loan guaranties, and other tools. Their approach has secured funding for many rural and Native American-owned businesses, and the lenders regularly coordinate to structure deals together and find solutions for area businesses.

**Department of Iron Range Resources and Rehabilitation.** IRRR is a unique financing tool that has no clear analogue in other parts of the state or nation. With revenues from a mining production tax and its own investments over 75-plus years, IRRR has the financial capacity to support economic development projects in Northeast Minnesota that other organizations cannot match.

**Blandin Foundation and Philanthropic Partners.** Like many rural areas, Northeast Minnesota has a healthy array of philanthropic resources to drive investment across parts or all of the region, including the Northland Foundation, Boreal Waters Community Foundation (and the associated community foundations it manages), Lloyd K. Johnson Foundation, and Ordean Foundation. One particularly unique asset is the Blandin Foundation, which is based in Grand Rapids and has always explicitly focused on rural communities. Northeast Minnesota, and the Itasca area in particular, have benefitted substantially from its presence.

**Local Initiatives Support Corporation (LISC).** With its community investment vehicles, LISC has a Duluth-based office that manages a focused approach on northern Minnesota and the Duluth area for funds towards affordable housing, revitalization improvements, and business support that also includes underserved areas, including Tribal communities.

**Tribal SSBCI Loan Funds.** The Fond du Lac, Bois Forte, and Grand Portage Bands have established lending programs with State Small Business Credit Initiative (SSBCI) funding, creating funds in Northeast Minnesota totaling nearly \$3 million. These programs offer below market interest rates of 2-3% while incorporating Tribal priorities for ways to offer support in lending while carrying a culturally appropriate process for working with Tribal enterprises and individual businesses.

**Local revolving loan funds.** Communities with active Economic Development Authorities have established revolving loan funds that allow them to provide gap financing for businesses and other supports. These funds can be more flexible in their requirements and create revolving capital that supports our local businesses, and they can also target specific desired businesses such as child care or businesses that help revitalize buildings in need of upgrades. Examples include the 1200 Fund (Duluth Economic Development Authority), Forge Fund (Itasca Economic Development Corporation), and loan funds for communities such as Cloquet, Hibbing, Two Harbors, East Range Joint Powers Board, and more.

## SUCCESS STORIES:

**Entrepreneur Fund.** Created in the 1980s in a moment of significant economic need, the Entrepreneur Fund has served to date over 25,000 entrepreneurs, created or sustained 33,000 jobs across the region, and provided over \$165 million in total lending. It has dedicated capital programs for historically underserved entrepreneurs, and its Opportunity Impact Fund specifically addresses barriers faced by BIPOC entrepreneurs and women business owners in accessing suitable financing.

**A long series of deals.** Partners associated with organizations such as the Entrepreneur Fund, Northland Foundation, Arrowhead Regional Development Commission, IRRR, utility partners, and other non-traditional lenders have a long history of working collaboratively with lending institutions to make countless deals to support area businesses and boost the regional economy. These partners have also banded together in times of crisis, such as during the Covid-19 pandemic, to make sure communities have the resources they need.

## SETBACKS AND CHALLENGES:

**Consolidation of financial institutions.** As financial institutions have consolidated, many rural communities have lost their local bank branches and relationships with those locally who understand the limited context. Decisions made in distant headquarters often rely on standardized metrics and algorithms that limit investment in rural areas, and the physical distance creates obstacles for relationship building.

**Missing middle.** The size of capital needed in rural communities often falls into a problematic middle ground where the capital ask is too large for microlending programs but too small to appeal traditional investment, creating a “missing middle” that leads to financing gaps for potential viable projects. Rural investments can be looked at as a higher risk than their urban projects and this perception often comes from a lack of known actual performance data around rural loan performance.

**Capacity limitations.** The potential for capacity issues with administrative burdens for rural management of multiple funding sources and this can be overwhelming to smaller organizations and individual entrepreneurs who do not have the dedicated staff to manage these tasks.

## OPPORTUNITIES:

**Advocate for tools that recognize rural and tribal realities.** Federal and state resources face serious shortcomings, and regional partners can continue their efforts to ensure more equitable outcomes. Federal cutbacks are falling heavily on rural communities, while Minnesota's current political climate, while generally more favorable for public investment, is dominated by Metro-based interests, particularly in an era when the party that has tended to be in power has very few rural legislators left in its caucus. Historically, the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) has served as a model for prioritizing these areas. Mobilization to maintain and grow resources is essential.

**Pooling resources.** The potential to pool resources across multiple area funders, communities can then address larger capital needs and reduce the burden on applicants to piece together, stack, the financing from numerous sources. These collaboratives can create standardized applications and better coordinate due diligence processes.

**Create rural or Tribal specific underwriting criteria and practices.** A variety of tools could present alternative approaches to assess risk that better reflects rural and Tribal businesses. Creating investment options with longer timeframes and more flexible terms could better match their realities, including interest-only payments during certain time periods for seasonal businesses. These could be structured and prioritized by local foundations, non-traditional lending partners, potential public-private partnerships, or community-based trusts.

**Expand Tribal SSBCI Loan Funds.** Expanding this pool would further demonstrate the potential for culturally appropriate lending. Growing these models and adapting lessons learned will help serve other underserved populations and could create more inclusive capital for Northeast Minnesota.

## FUTURE MEASUREMENT:

- Rural businesses and organizations reporting improved access to capital that meets their local needs
- Shrinking gap in accessing capital between rural and urban areas
- More products and approaches that are specific to our rural and Tribal contexts

<https://ruralinnovation.us/resources/reports/rural-americas-struggle-to-access-private-capital/>

**MOVING FORWARD TOGETHER:**  
A THRIVING RURAL COMMUNITIES GAP ANALYSIS  
OF NORTHEAST MINNESOTA

# BUILDING BLOCKS:

RURAL DATA FOR ANALYSIS & CHANGE

N O R T H S P A N



**NORTHLAND  
FOUNDATION**

## BUILDING BLOCK: RURAL DATA FOR ANALYSIS AND CHANGE

### ASPEN DESCRIPTION:

Federal and state governments collect and provide a wide range of readily available critical data on rural and Native place, economy, and population conditions and outcomes at the sub-county level — down to census tracts.

### MORE DETAIL:

This building block is fundamentally focused on the availability of quality data, but its value emerges in communities' efforts to analyze and act on it. It considers the area's infrastructure for making use of data and some of the shortcomings of available information.

### WHERE WE ARE:

There is a wealth of data available on Northeast Minnesota from state and federal sources, and some local assistance is available to help people navigate it. Regional partners regularly use this information, though full adoption remains hit or miss. Some questions about data quality in rural regions linger, particularly for the region's Tribal Nations, and federal funding cuts could further limit partners' ability to understand what is happening in the region. Future efforts in this building block could dedicate resources to streamlining data-related supports and addressing gaps when they cause challenges for area partners.

### MAJOR ASSETS:

**Regional partners understand the value.** With the threat of losing a representative in Congress if population growth is not adequately tracked, there has been more advocacy around quality federal data tools in Minnesota than in most places. Groups such as Minnesotans for the American Community Survey have worked with politicians across the spectrum to emphasize the importance of funding for data tools and accurate counts. Minnesota led the nation in Census self-response rates in 2020, and while the rate was somewhat lower in Northeast Minnesota, it was still stronger than in many states.

**DEED labor analyst.** Minnesota offers robust support for different regions of the state and tracks data specific to the seven-county northeast region. DEED provides a regional labor analyst based in Northeast Minnesota who is able to assist with inquiries related to state (and, if necessary, federal) data. This human touch is greatly appreciated by economic development partners who may not have the time or knowledge to navigate complex data tools.

### SUCCESS STORIES:

**Data is plentiful, available, and increasingly accessible.** The US Census (and its American Community Survey annual updates), Minnesota Department of Employment and Economic Development, Minnesota State Demographic Center, and numerous additional federal and state agencies have a plethora of data tools that allow for substantially easier access to information than existed in previous decades. Data tools, while sometimes difficult to use, have grown somewhat more accessible, and third-party

organizations such as ESRI, Social Explorer, and Minnesota Compass have developed tools that improve data visualization or accessibility, and at times provide projections for statistics not explicitly reported by official agencies.

**Local analyses build on state and national data.** At times, regional organizations use state and national data in conjunction with their own tools to provide a richer understanding of the region. Community Needs Assessments (CNAs) have become standard tools for community action programs in the region, and Community Health Needs Assessments (CHNAs) similarly strive to marry outside data sources with local surveys and analyses that provide valuable context. The Department of Iron Range Resources and Rehabilitation has invested in data tools for its wide-ranging service area, including a specialized dataset from Minnesota Compass, and has funded unique tools such as the University of Minnesota's Minnesota Natural Resource Atlas that catalogues some of the region's unique assets. Many other regional organizations have supported the development of stronger data specific to their needs, from area Realtor associations to business and industry groups seeking to understand economic impacts.

## SETBACKS AND CHALLENGES:

**Inaccurate data, particularly in small rural areas.** As noted in the Rural Development Hubs overview section of this report, Census Bureau practices that aim to protect takers' identities have led to intentional alteration of data. This practice is most common in small, rural areas, which harms its usefulness as a tool of analysis in Northeast Minnesota. Local researchers have also noted significant variations over time in data related to the region's Native American population, throwing some question on its accuracy. Regional partners in agriculture and food systems have flagged a serious undercount in the USDA Census of Agriculture in Northeast Minnesota, as the region's farms often operate on a different scale and use different methods than large monocultural operations common in other parts of the country. Additionally, there is growing concern that cutbacks in federal resources could further limit the quality of the data going forward.

**Geographic complications.** Even in an era of incredible data availability, the resources available cannot always answer pressing questions. St. Louis County's considerable size lumps together communities with diverging characteristics and can obscure more granular realities. The My Tribal Area data tool from the Census, while providing valuable data on the inhabitants of Native lands, does not subdivide data between Native and non-Native residents of these areas and misses band members who live off-reservation. Other, more mundane challenges stemming from where boundaries are drawn are not limited to Northeast Minnesota but can distort perceptions.

**Overload of tools.** At times, regional analysts can feel like they are drowning in data. The sheer array of tools, and the skills necessary to use them well, can require a degree of time and investment that is hard to maintain, especially in a smaller, rural community. State and federal programs often use different indicators to determine funding eligibility, creating a confusing mix of overlapping resources. "There are too many equity maps!" one participant in the engagement process declared. The volume of tools can also make it challenging to parse out the most valuable ones from those that offer less robust information.

**No systematic analysis of gaps in data.** While regional partners speak to specific data points they would like to have, no one in Northeast Minnesota has undertaken an effort of any substance to compile a full list of data issues they encounter. Such an effort could create a shared foundation for addressing any issues.

## OPPORTUNITIES:

**Improved understanding of growth opportunities.** Data-driven economic development will allow Northeast Minnesota to target industries and expanding businesses that make the most sense for the region. It can allow for more systematic analysis of weaknesses that may be holding it back, including zoning regulations that can limit housing development, tax structures that may not privilege Northeast Minnesota, and identifying sub-areas within the region that are struggling in specific ways.

**Creation of a centralized, independent home for regional data and analysis.** Northeast Minnesota could use additional direction on where to go for regional data, particularly when beyond the scope or capacity of the DEED labor analyst. Northspan has played this role in an ad hoc capacity in the past and could do so in the future, particularly if there is support for proactively addressing areas with identified shortcomings in available information. Without this sort of intentional effort, Northeast Minnesota may not know where else it can address significant questions regarding data quality and availability.

## FUTURE MEASUREMENT:

- Less community skepticism of federal and state data
- More regional partners report confidence in using data and accessing relevant information
- Region has a system to deal with gaps identified in regional data
- Tools are consistent in the data they provide

**MOVING FORWARD TOGETHER:**  
A THRIVING RURAL COMMUNITIES GAP ANALYSIS  
OF NORTHEAST MINNESOTA

# BUILDING BLOCKS:

REGIONAL ANALYSIS AND ACTION

N O R T H S P A N



## BUILDING BLOCK: REGIONAL ANALYSIS AND ACTION

### ASPEN DESCRIPTION:

Public and private policy, investment, and incentives encourage and stimulate collaborative regional action and the capacity for regional efforts to address shared cross-community challenges and opportunities.

### MORE DETAIL:

This building block builds on the “Analysis and Change” building block to move from understanding of the regional situation to action. Policies encourage regional activity, rather than divergent efforts, and investments by government and philanthropy follow the same pattern. It attempts to align incentives toward cooperative economic development, rather than pitting different communities in Northeast Minnesota against each other or leaving them to scrape for their own resources when a regional approach could be stronger. Successful efforts will leave the region with the capacity to address shared challenges at a regional level.

### WHERE WE ARE:

Northeast Minnesota has a long history of aspirations to regional action, with many organizations that have attempted them and a history of strong advocacy and political influence. However, research efforts have been scattered and often topic specific. Despite frustrations about the slow pace of some research efforts and the halting efforts to turn their results into action, several regional pushes have been successful. Together with the Regional Development Hub model developed by the Aspen Institute, they create foundations for a more effective regional planning and action infrastructure.

### MAJOR ASSETS:

**A history of cooperative efforts.** As detailed elsewhere in this report, Northeast Minnesota has produced a laundry list of efforts at intentional regional action. The Arrowhead Regional Development Commission covers the seven counties and has regularly produced a Comprehensive Economic Development Strategy (CEDS) to guide regional action and support applications for funding. An economic downturn in the 1980s spurred the creation of organizations such as the Entrepreneur Fund, Northland Foundation, Northspan, and the Arrowhead Regional Arts Council across the whole area. Regional programs administered by Northspan, the creation and evolution of APEX, and groups like the Arrowhead Growth Alliance or Iron Range Economic Alliance (IREA) have all emerged to create avenues for coordinated work. While success rates and sustainability have varied, there has been a consistent desire for and effort to advance regional action. At an economic development practitioner level, the connections and wherewithal for regional cooperation generally exist when opportunities arise.

**Political advocacy.** Historically, Northeast Minnesota has typically punched above its weight in its ability to attract statewide attention and drive its agenda. Even as a generation of very well-connected legislators has exited the stage, the infrastructure they built remains an asset. The Range Association of Municipalities and Schools (RAMS) drives Iron Range advocacy for funding structures that meet community needs, and it has helped sustain a conversation around housing issues.

**Some attempts at regional analysis.** Many regional partners have undertaken analyses of all or parts of Northeast Minnesota that get beyond local boundaries, at times explicitly emphasizing them (for example, in a push to show the interconnections between the industrial economies of Duluth and the Iron Range). This report clearly qualifies; the desire for data tools exhibited in the

previous building block also supports the case. These efforts have not always been systematic or particularly well-publicized (in part because the results are not always flattering), but there is a general interest in data-driven decision-making.

## SUCCESS STORIES:

**IRRR regional efforts.** IRRR has its origins in efforts to ensure the tax benefits of mining operations are spread fairly and in a manner that supports regional wellbeing. Since then, it has often been a vehicle for regional collaboration. At times, it has funded simultaneous cohorts of communities to address issues such as broadband and housing, thereby creating a shared understanding and the necessary capacity to pursue funding from both IRRR and other sources. These topic-specific collaborations can generate stronger momentum within working groups than efforts that prioritize collaboration for its own sake. IRRR's presence has also fed the creation of other regional groups such as RAMS and IREA.

**Philanthropic pushes.** Regional foundations have often used their broader scopes to reach across boundaries. The Northland Foundation, in its role across the seven counties, has frequently served as a regional convener. The Boreal Waters Community Foundation has brought in noted national researchers to provide a framework, and the Blandin Foundation has likewise funded regional programming that creates connections across communities. Philanthropy is somewhat insulated from the political swings that can alter government funding and may be more able to sustain some regional efforts.

**Northspan programming.** As a nonprofit consulting firm, Northspan is a unique organization in Northeast Minnesota that has nimbly responded to emerging issues using its programming arm. In cooperation with regional partners, it has created and sustained programs in response to needs and priorities. These efforts include:

- Arrowhead Business Connection/Northland Connection – created in the 1980s to support site selection and economic development-related data
- Upper Minnesota Film Office – created in the 1990s to facilitate the regional TV and film industry (now its own organization, the Upper Midwest Film Office)
- NORTHFORCE – created in the early 2010s to support workforce development efforts and connections between jobs and talent
- Minnesota Opportunity Collaborative – operated for several years to provide education and connections related to a 2017 federal tax incentive
- Welcoming Community – created in 2020 to help support inclusive dialogue and capacity building in regional communities
- Driving Access to Wealth and Networks (DAWN) – created in the 2020s to support entrepreneurs in Northeast Minnesota; has since become the umbrella for past Northspan programs with related efforts

## SETBACKS AND CHALLENGES:

**Finding the right balance of inclusion and action.** Not all attempts at regional action are created equal, and some include inherent trade-offs in who participates and in how they are able to drive action. The matrix below lays out four possible directions for regional action and inclusion and relates some of the strengths and weaknesses of each approach.

**FIGURE 16: INCLUSION-ACTION MATRIX IN REGIONAL COOPERATION**

Quadrant	High Inclusion, Low Action	High Inclusion, High Action
Purpose	Educates participants	Builds collective action
Strengths	Builds connections across organizations; creates positive environment	Genuine buy-in for change; can feel groundbreaking
Weaknesses	Can grow repetitious or linger on problems instead of solving them; some participants may expect more	Hard to coordinate and sustain; disagreement on best steps
Examples	Iron Range Economic Alliance, Mineland Vision Partnership	Recharge the Range
Quadrant	Low Inclusion, Low Action	Low Inclusion, High Action
Purpose	Informs leaders	Drives specific agenda
Strengths	Strengthens connection among leaders or practitioners; can lead to shared agenda	Provides clear agenda; results measurable and achievable
Weaknesses	Limited participation may skew perspectives; direction may be unclear	Agenda may not reflect broader community needs; community buy-in may be low
Examples	Arrowhead Growth Alliance, Arrowhead Regional Development Commission (at times) and Metropolitan Interstate Council	Itasca Project in the Twin Cities, RAMS, APEX, Arrowhead Regional Development Commission (at times)

This report makes no sweeping statements on the value of each quadrant, as there may be times and places for all courses of action. In general, however, the economic development landscape has shifted to recognize the value of greater inclusion, and with the Recharge the Range example now a somewhat distant memory, there is a gap for renewed effort in the high inclusion, high action quadrant. More inclusive institutions for regional action could build broad-based support and create a vehicle to advance many of the building blocks in this report.

**Funding formulas, program design, and grantee expectations.** At times, Northeast Minnesota has been noticeably underrepresented in some state funding programs, at times because the funding criteria privilege more urban areas, and at times because the complexity makes resources difficult to access and administer in small communities with limited staff capacity. Even some largely beneficial and accessible programs can operate in silos; for example, if several neighboring communities face questions about their sewer systems, public utilities funding may simply pour money into existing facilities rather than critically analyzing regional solutions that may offer a better allocation of resources. Some IRRR programs and federal funding under some Biden Administration era programs (e.g., the Build Back Better Regional Challenge) have created some incentives for regional cooperation, but they remain somewhat inconsistent.

**Political obstacles.** There is an enduring Duluth-Iron Range divide, and diverging political priorities have only underscored this gap. Ideology is not the only barrier, however: patronage politics can lead legislators to bring home resources for well-connected communities, which can provide quick results at the expense of a more thoughtful allocation of resources aligned with long-term goals. The simple existence of municipality boundaries and path dependent budgets often prevent cooperation between communities, and there are few mechanisms to unsort the tangled tax incentives that can get in the way of arrangements that may prove more effective over the long term.

## OPPORTUNITIES:

**Starting anew.** The economic development, community development, and philanthropic infrastructure of Northeast Minnesota has undergone significant changes over the past decade. Many of the leaders who founded and shepherded the system from its 1980s expansion have retired or moved on, and long running groups such as the Arrowhead Growth Alliance no longer exist. In general, organizations have also become less hierarchal, with more opportunities for staff to contribute ideas and attempt new things. Moreover, substantial cuts and rearrangements of federal funding during the second Trump Administration, while challenging for many organizations in this report, could open doors to new ways of thinking as old power structures crumble and locals look to build something fresh amid the ruins, perhaps with an intentional eye toward independence from the tumult of federal politics.

**Duluth area or other sub-regional groups.** Notably, most of the examples in this description either cover the entire seven-county region or are specific to the Iron Range. (The lone exception cited is the Metropolitan Interstate Council, a Duluth-Superior area organization whose scope is limited to transportation planning.) For all the ups and downs of collaborative efforts on the Range, the IRRR and its partners have developed a robust infrastructure around common goals. More efforts that cross political boundaries but maintain a manageable scope could prove beneficial, especially when communities have distinct opportunities and challenges. For example, these efforts could include dedicated groups to tackling housing in the greater Duluth area, a similar effort on the North Shore, and diversification efforts in communities dominated by tourism.

## FUTURE MEASUREMENT

- Identifiable efforts to increase inclusive, collaborative action
- State and federal funding awarded in the region is proportionate to population and need

**MOVING FORWARD TOGETHER:  
A THRIVING RURAL COMMUNITIES GAP ANALYSIS  
OF NORTHEAST MINNESOTA**

**PART 5:**

**COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT AND  
FINALIZED ACTION AREAS**

**N O R T H S P A N**



## PART 5: COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT AND FINALIZED ACTION AREAS

Following the completion of the draft report in summer 2026, the Northland Foundation and Northspan began a series of public engagement sessions around the initial findings. The two organizations convened sessions in each of the seven counties, plus a second in St. Louis County to cover its large land area. Additional closed sessions were held with the Northland Foundation board of directors and a group of staff working in community and economic development with the region’s Tribal Nations.

**FIGURE 17: FALL 2025 ENGAGEMENT SESSION SCHEDULE**

Date	County	Location
October 27	Carlton	Cloquet Public Library, Cloquet
October 27	South St. Louis	Public Defender’s Office Training Room, Duluth
October 29	Lake	Two Harbors Community Building, Two Harbors
October 29	Cook	Cook County Higher Education, Grand Marais
November 19	North St. Louis	Mt. Iron Community Center,
November 19	Koochiching	Cobblestone Hotel & Suites,
December 4	Itasca	Timberlake Lodge, Grand Rapids
December 4	Aitkin	Aitkin County Government Center, Aitkin

The Northspan website hosted a webpage that included links to the full report, a shorter executive summary, a video of an overview presentation, and a feedback survey for anyone who could not attend the engagement sessions or had follow-up thoughts after they had attended one.

## ENGAGEMENT STRUCTURE

The 1.5-hour sessions began with an introduction of the Thriving Rural Communities concept and the intent behind bringing it to Northeast Minnesota by Northland Foundation President & CEO Tony Sertich. Northspan Vice President Karl Schuettler then expanded on the framework, shared additional background and regional research, and explained the eight action areas identified through the analysis. Northspan staff then facilitated a group discussion on themes in the presentation, followed by a gallery walk in which all participants had the opportunity to prioritize each action area and add additional considerations to each.

## ENGAGEMENT SESSION THEMES

The eight engagement sessions provided wide-ranging insights into the action areas and their impact on regional community and economic development. They drew many professionals who work in spaces related to topics in the report, along with elected officials, interested citizens, and others seeking to influence their communities in a variety of ways. With over 250 attendees, they provided a strong community voice to influence the direction taken on the action areas.

In general, feedback in the sessions was very positive. Participants appreciated the complexity of the framework and saw it as a useful tool to help understand and analyze the region. Many hoped it would serve as a real foundation for regional action and found the work ahead daunting, given the scale of some of the action areas identified. At no point in the process did any participants express real opposition to the project or its overall methods. Instead, they contributed thoughts specific to their communities or perspectives and helped pull out insights that strengthened regional understanding of the action areas. This section includes brief summaries of the eight in-person engagement sessions and their themes.

## CARLTON COUNTY

Participants in Carlton County said housing rose to the top as a key action area, with interest in a broad approach that includes renovation of existing housing and multigenerational options. Some wondered about how businesses rolling back work from home opportunities might affect migration numbers and talked about integrating resident recruitment into the overall concept. This fed into discussions about efforts to foster belonging, which were an area of emphasis in the county.

When asked what was missing, small business development and a generational shift for businesses came up as a discussion topic. The role of schools and education also received mentions, along with transportation and food access.

Several participants said that coordination was the ultimate issue, and that facilitating it would be the solution. Opportunities to get information to the grassroots level and into communities through intentional networking would prove valuable, and people need to come with open minds and a willingness to work together.

## SOUTH ST. LOUIS COUNTY

At the South St. Louis County meeting, participants' immediate reactions to the presentation focused on the need to escape existing silos. "There's more commonality in Northeast Minnesota than we might think," one person noted. Demographic trends and class equity challenges struck attendees as overarching themes, while others noted a chicken and egg problem for child care and housing. Others also lamented a perceived drift away from an interconnected region toward more siloed organizations and units of government.

When discussing what was missing, participants emphasized the role of small businesses as solutions to regional problems. Food sovereignty and sustainable agriculture received mention as vital components of a thriving region, with access to land an important component of achieving those goals.

Participants appreciated the framing of the housing issue as an effort to address one big topic to achieve visible movement. Questions also bubbled around intersectional work that could support housing and address the many ancillary issues that can move in tandem with it. One person suggested strategic planning for how community and economic development organizations interact, in addition to the plans they develop for themselves.

## LAKE COUNTY

Lake County participants saw a need for greater coordination, connection, and interrelation across the region. The demographic shift under way grabbed their attention, especially when coupled with socioeconomic trends that raise the question of how a region can have a middle class.

Participants appreciated a desire for win-win opportunities such as the NRRI green steel initiative, and state and federal land ownership limiting developable land came out as a unique challenge for parts of the region. The distinct but related tension between the tourism economy and longtime residents also resonated on the North Shore. One participant noted that the tension between two long-term visions for the region has a deep history dating back to the founding era of many Northland communities.

Among the action areas, a sense of belonging was important to the Lake County session attendees. Participants emphasized the need to avoid duplication and doubled down on housing, noting that developers were “begging for support” and discussing the complex implications of an aging population on the market. Participants suggested that transportation and entrepreneurship could have a larger role in the framework, along with adjusting the economy to the reality of remote workers.

## COOK COUNTY

Cook County participants acknowledged the sheer size of and variety within Northeast Minnesota and appreciated the desire to get to root causes. They noted the county has made real progress on housing with several recent projects, though they understood the scale of the problem and wanted to see continued movement. Compared to other counties, Cook County participants saw more value in regional economic development research and planning efforts. There were no “not important” votes on any of the action areas from participants, underscoring the interconnection between all these efforts.

Wanting to see the next generation of leadership resonated with participants, who saw some changes happening the county and noted the importance of a volunteer culture that pushes against troubling trends identified by Robert Putnam’s *Bowling Alone* analysis a quarter century ago. They noted that identity is now sometimes built more around groups, complicating traditional notions of how it works. In Cook County there is a geographical component to this as well, as many people must travel frequently for their jobs or if they have children in sports. Participants suggested an intern fund with Duluth area colleges that could bring people to Cook County and build a new base of civically active community members.

Participants also noted the speed of change and how it was affecting communities, including federal shifts that have implications for food access, the role of AI, and international trends in media. The debate between environmental and large-scale economic development interests resonated in Cook County, as did the role of Tribal Nations within that dynamic.

## **NORTH ST. LOUIS COUNTY**

Participants in northern St. Louis County emphasized the importance of overcoming silos, regional thinking, and collaboration. They saw value in research for regional direction and strategy in ways that did not always come out in other sessions. Some frustration about one regional leadership initiative that had recently been downscaled to just the Duluth area bubbled out in this session, showing the emphasis some place on regionality.

Changes in jobs and employment trends came out as a potentially missing piece. The role of broadband in supporting remote work and resident recruitment also emerged, though some noted the region has made substantial progress and could consider this a not-quite-complete but real success story. Broader economic forces, including economies of scale, along with automation and cheap commodity production, received mentions as systemic forces affecting workforce and livable jobs. The role of the arts and humanities also came forward as a topic.

Participants saw building up the next generation of leadership as a leading priority. “Leadership roles are daunting and pathways are lacking,” one participant said. Belonging efforts and economic development capacity also rose to the top as action areas worthy of attention. There was also substantial discussion around importance of collaboration with Tribal Nations, particularly given some recent, visible conflicts over proposed mining and forest product-related projects.

## **KOOCHICHING COUNTY**

In Koochiching County, participants noted limited infrastructure for local decision-making, limited communication, and the effects of trends that start in the Duluth area permeating across the region. This fed directly into the action area around local information-sharing. People are connected within different networks and have preferred contact methods, and anyone trying to get word out about a local event or issue is trying to compete with algorithms beyond their control. Participants saw it as both the most important and the most difficult action area.

Questions of belonging were also an area of focus. A disconnect between age groups and community involvement was a major source of concern, and the foundational nature of the connections necessary to bridge that divide came out as a strong theme. Participants saw a relationship between belonging efforts and the rural-Tribal alliance, noting that there are many well-intentioned actors in this space, but they are not always coordinated. They saw fostering belonging as a potential answer to the broader demographic trends. Other participants recognized the prominence of distinct cultures across communities in Koochiching County and the entire region and underscored the importance of engagement beyond the county seat in International Falls.

Participants noted that the analysis did not dive deeply into shifts in the area economy between industries or changes in workforce culture. This led into discussions on how few decisions related to the conflict between large-scale economic development and environmental concerns are made in the region. Participants were somewhat less interested in regional economic development research capacity and planning infrastructure than those in other workshops.

## ITASCA COUNTY

The Itasca County group discussed the value of regional action for communities to learn from each other and find middle ground on complex issues. In their opinion, regional information-sharing sets the stage for many of the other action areas and plays an important role in building public will for change. Participants identified a lack of spaces where people can come together across many different divides, including class, race, and sensitive topics. Culture is the common language that can get people into the same room.

The regional research and cooperation action area had several more vocal champions in this session than in others. Each town having its own infrastructure and staff “bakes in competition for scarce resources,” said one participant. The impact of fiscal disparities on local communities was also a source of concern.

Local information-sharing and housing, while perhaps the most important action areas, were simultaneously viewed as the most daunting. Lifting up local developers and giving them incentives received support as steps that could begin to address housing challenges. Compared to other communities, the Rural-Tribal alliance and economic development research and planning capacity scored highly. Building the momentum necessary to take a big step and finding people who are willing to do it was seen as foundational. From there, communities can strengthen capacities in specific skills that are often missing in smaller, rural areas.

## AITKIN COUNTY

Aitkin County participants noted how divisions in the community affected people’s ability to communicate. The demographics and aging population hit home; while many were generally aware of the trend, they were surprised by the extent of the wave. Younger people are slowly becoming more engaged in the community, but it often takes more intentional connections to move people toward action.

One participant noted the need for greater education around tax structures. There was further discussion about how rural areas’ lack of unity could leave them shut out of political decision in St. Paul, and how funding for rural areas can be difficult to access, even when it exists. There was also significant support for greater grassroots effort. “If you have good ideas, and people and groups behind them, the money is there,” one participant said.

Housing and investing in the next generation of leadership rose to the top in discussion, along with rebuilding local information sharing systems and confronting the silos and echo chambers that have emerged. Investing in the next generation of leadership also scored well in the engagement exercise. Dialogue on the environmental and large-scale economic development divide received attention as one of the most difficult issues facing the region; while important, some participants were pessimistic about action on it. Strengthening a sense of belonging, a rural-Tribal economic and community development alliance, and rebuilding regional planning infrastructure scored comparatively lower.

## REVISING THE ACTION AREAS

Based on the input gathered, Northspan and the Northland Foundation made the following decisions around the action areas:

Prioritized the two foremost action areas, Simplified, Supercharged Housing and Invest in the Next Generation of Leadership. These two are now referred to as “Priority Action Areas.”

Identified a third, Rebuilding Local Information Sharing Systems, as an area for further exploration.

Renamed the action area that had been called “Welcoming Work 2.0” as “Strengthening a Sense of Belonging” to clarify some confusion expressed in engagement workshops.

Merged the two regional research and planning-related action areas into one single action area named “Rebuilding Regional Research and Planning Systems.” While still important, Northspan and Northland Foundation recognize they are less public-facing than many of the other initiatives and will explore building this capacity for the organizations and individuals who are involved in them.

This portion of the report now walks through the seven action areas and highlights the successes, challenges, and potential specific actions recommended by engagement session participants. While not an exhaustive account of the possible approaches to address the identified gaps, they provide actionable starting points for each.

## PRIORITY ACTION AREAS

### ACTION AREA 1: SIMPLIFIED, SUPERCHARGED HOUSING

Action Area 1, titled “Simplified, Supercharged Housing,” received overwhelming support from process participants. No one thought housing was not important, and while the level of urgency varied somewhat by location, there was widespread acknowledgement of how much housing prices have skyrocketed and how difficult it can be to find a quality housing options in Northeast Minnesota, with deep implications for population growth and household well-being.

### SUCSESSES

The housing situation across Northeast Minnesota is not uniform, and some communities have made incremental progress. Cook County participants noted the success of their HRA, which from 2023-2025 saw more projects and units move forward in a brief timeframe than it had in many years prior. There has been additional progress toward regional housing conversations, such as a regular group convened by RAMS, and APEX has recognized the importance of housing to its overall mission. There has also been increasing interest in research to understand housing challenges, ranging from higher-level debates about housing stock and “move over housing” for seniors coming from the University of Minnesota Extension to on-the-ground housing studies and grant-funded community planning efforts coordinated by North Shore Development Company.

Several nonprofits such as 1Roof, a community land trust based in Duluth that has also undertaken developments elsewhere in Northeast Minnesota, received mention as both a success story and an opportunity elsewhere in the region. Habitat for Humanity, LISC, and the Arrowhead Economic Opportunity Agency all have roles in new housing development, financing, and rehabilitation, respectively. Smaller enterprises ranging from Hamilton Habitat in Cook County to several new builders in the Duluth area have worked to tackle housing challenges directly.

## CHALLENGES

The engagement process affirmed the myriad challenges facing the housing market. Divergent definitions of affordability and debates over desirable housing types are present across Northeast Minnesota. Recognition of the role of zoning in constraining development received numerous mentions, along with inconsistent permitting costs across the region. The availability of quality, buildable lots was a frustration in numerous communities. In places that have not seen as much growth, some participants worried that adding new stock now would simply lead to more empty units later, especially in light of demographic trends. Communities with strong tourism economies worried about incentives toward converting units to short-term rentals. A need for help with upkeep, particularly in communities with older housing stock, surfaced repeatedly. Concerns about absentee or negligent landlords also emerged in several sessions.

## POTENTIAL ACTIONS

**STAGE-SETTING SMALL WINS.** The future of housing is a daunting issue, but there are a series of small steps that can make its development or maintenance easier that could set the stage for future development. Many of these innovations have been discussed in regional groups and by people in the housing field, and some communities have already taken steps forward. A non-exhaustive list of such efforts includes:

- **Reforming zoning codes.** Many zoning codes across Northeast Minnesota are copies of other locations that have been added to over time without any comprehensive revisions, and as a result, many are unnecessarily complicated, do not reflect community realities, and limit development potential. Addressing these issues now can make future development much easier. Several communities are already undertaking such processes, and sharing information across the region could provide valuable understanding and perhaps create competition or an incentive to keep up with places that are making housing development easier to do.
- **Accessory dwelling units (ADUs) and multigenerational housing.** An opportunity related to zoning reform comes through allowing accessory dwelling units. These units provide additional housing options on existing lots and may better meet some households needs, e.g., allowing an aging parent to live on the same property as a child to allow for some continued independence while also having help near at hand.
- **Low-hanging fruit properties.** The City of Duluth has had some success issuing requests for proposals for small, unused lots and seeking developers with creative concepts for them. Identifying such properties that already have city services and low barriers to development, rather than blanket pursuit of development on all parcels, will better align communities for success.
- **Rehabilitation programs and funds.** Numerous communities have created funds to help people upgrade dated home infrastructure, improve energy efficiency, and address environmental concerns such as asbestos, mold, or septic systems. These programs should prioritize ease of access and use so that processes are intelligible for homeowners, understood by local realtors, and widely known and utilized.

- Pooled funding and partnerships. Bringing together many organizations to create large capital stacks is a common practice in piecing together housing project funding, but creating a more unified system of collaborative entities so that the onus of compiling the pieces does not always fall on strapped city or HRA staff could make it more accessible to small, rural communities.

**BUILDING LOCAL DEVELOPMENT CAPACITY.** A clear path toward housing solutions comes from dialogue directly with people in the housing development field and those who aspire to join it. Such a process includes exploration of new financing tools in the vein of the region’s non-traditional lenders who support business development, and through building funds at a regional scale rather than creating a series of small community-based housing funds that are limited in scope and may not fully address regional needs. By tailoring funding to sticking points in the system and operating at a meaningful level, the region may be able to create more profound change.

**UNDERSTAND THE OPTIONS.** As in many community and economic development initiatives, most recommendations in this section follow trends and best practices within the field to set up communities to pursue available money. While a valuable course of action, truly supercharging a housing effort requires some time and effort looking into less obvious solutions that may change the current paradigm. Such efforts could include:

- Research methods used in other countries
- Large-scale modular housing, e.g., using innovative wood products such as cross-laminated timber
- Public sector contractor support
- Exploring implications of the “moving over” research conducted by the University of Minnesota Extension encouraging seniors to transition to units that better fit their needs and generally aligning products with different generations’ desires

## **ACTION AREA 2: INVEST IN THE NEXT GENERATION OF LEADERSHIP**

The need to cultivate a new generation of leaders inspired strong interest among engagement process participants across the region. While some relevant programming exists, it is almost never regional or comprehensive, and it rarely operates at a scale large enough to make a large difference for a community.

### **SUCCESSSES**

Engagement process participants recognized many successes in efforts to build up regional leadership. Youth-targeted programs such as 4-H, a Grand Portage mentoring program, Mentor Duluth, Youth in Philanthropy, Youth in Government, and other school-based groups that put students in active leadership roles. Several programs and awards targeting young professionals help uplift their work, including AmeriCorps and Lead for America opportunities, Chamber of Commerce young professionals groups and leadership training, the Duluth News Tribune 20 Under 40 awards, and, when it was a regional effort, the Minnesota Young American Leaders Program.

Numerous community-specific and topic-specific groups exist across the region, including the Unbound group for women leaders in Itasca County, Sugar Lake Lodge’s Leadership Lodge, and the Ely for Ely networking and professional development series. Regional colleges, universities, and institutions like Cook County Higher Education also create spaces where emerging leaders gather. As some engagement session attendees noted, the “next generation” of leadership does not necessarily need to be youth, but could be someone at any stage of life who is willing and able to come forward and serve.

## CHALLENGES

Many participants noted generational barriers that inhibit community involvement. Learning how to coordinate across boundaries and create opportunities that succeed even as younger people build families and careers is essential to building a strong base for a committed community. These challenges are compounded by generational differences in values, communication styles, and understandings of psychological or personal safety. Opportunities for youth voice on boards and employer support for their employees' involvement help create easier pathways into leadership positions.

Socioeconomic concerns and geographic limitations also create substantial barriers. People looking to build careers and raise families may spend long hours on more immediate concerns, making it harder to find the free time to give back. "Too many jobs don't provide upward mobility," shared one observer of the Northeast Minnesota economic climate; such limited options create several barriers to leadership, from limited skill capacity to financial precarity.

The region's large size and rural nature can make it hard to participate in events or build critical masses necessary to keep some initiatives going. Travel time also consumes precious hours that could be spent in community. The sheer logistical challenge of coordinating a regional group underscores a need for localized training.

## POTENTIAL ACTIONS

**BLANDIN LEADERSHIP PROGRAM-TYPE RELAUNCH.** There was a large appetite for something akin to the dormant Blandin Leadership Program, which previously supported cohorts to build capacity in communities across the region. However, several people noted that the model could include some updating for current realities, including accommodations for people with children and some intentional thought dedicated to how future generations of leadership may look different from those that already exist. These programs also have the benefit of networking engaged community members and building lists of potential volunteers who can support community initiatives long after the cohort formally ends.

Northspan's Elected Leader Learning Cohorts (ELCs) are an example of this sort of education targeted to elected leaders. They are likely to continue and will fill some of this gap, but there is also a substantial opportunity to support non-elected community leaders who play vital roles in a wide range of formal and informal functions.

**PROGRAMS TO SUPPORT LEADERSHIP TRANSITIONS.** Entering a new leadership role can be daunting, whether it means learning to navigate organizational politics, finances, or putting in long hours to sustain and grow an organization or initiative. Providing some supports to ease these transitions could be valuable, particularly as a large Baby Boomer cohort retires and transitions out of key community roles. This could include funding to plan for expected retirement, training for people who are new to volunteer leadership, and a support network of fellow volunteers or people in similar roles so that emerging leaders feel less alone and do not develop a sense of burnout.

**CONTINUED PATHWAYS FOR YOUTH ENGAGEMENT.** The importance of engaging youth, meeting them where they are, and giving them the tools to understand how they can influence their communities was a regular theme in engagement sessions. These efforts could include educational internships or funding to support internship or mentorship programs.

## ACTION AREA FOR FURTHER STUDY

Based on high levels of positive input and its importance to resolving other regional challenges, one additional action area rose up above the areas as one for immediate further study.

### ACTION AREA 3: REBUILDING LOCAL INFORMATION SHARING SYSTEMS

Local information-sharing systems, whether in traditional media or in efforts to spread the word and create spaces for less formal community discussion, have faced real headwinds in rural regions over recent decades. In Northeast Minnesota, many participants saw these systems as foundational to creating cohesive communities and addressing many of the other action areas.

#### SUCSESSES

Northeast Minnesota has a robust network of small, local news sources that have attempted to fill the information void. Local public radio and public access television have a devoted core following and have intentionally sought to fill areas of need. While some local newspapers have cut back amid a challenging economic climate, other print and written digital media sources have appeared to fill gaps left by shrinking legacy newspapers or offer additional community resources. Such success stories include the Pine Knot, Timberjay, Hometown Focus, Ely Times, and Lake County Press, among others. The openness of the internet allows for nontraditional media sources such as the Duluth Monitor or open forums such as Reddit to open discussions that might not have found their way into the public in previous eras. The new media environment makes it easier for voices who dissent from orthodoxy to find an audience, which can have a variety of effects that are potentially positive or negative or both all at once, depending on one's perspective.

Actors beyond local media have stepped up to fill gaps and revive local communication. Minnesota has a chapter of the national Press Forward initiative, a movement to strengthen local journalism that has harnessed philanthropic resources to offer support and funding through a collaboration with Minnesota Council of Foundations. Some communities in Northeast Minnesota have lively social media pages or platforms that spur discussion locally.

#### CHALLENGES

Engagement session participants found the scale of the information-sharing challenge intimidating. Even local news sources that are alive and well do not have the ubiquity of the newspaper delivered to every door or the nightly news broadcast on one of four channels that used to provide clear, consistent messaging.

With so much of people's attention captured by platforms that have little to no economic incentive to funnel local content to them, breaking through to provide local information is a challenging proposition. The profusion of fake news, AI-generated content, and an increasing blurriness between virtual and real worlds all complicate efforts to share timely, accurate information. Reaching youth was an area of particular angst for engagement session participants who are accustomed to certain modes of information-sharing. Broadband connectivity, while substantially better than it was a decade ago, can still be a real gap in parts of Northeast Minnesota.

## POTENTIAL ACTIONS

**CONDUCT AN INFORMATION NEEDS ASSESSMENT.** This recommendation, proposed by an engagement session participant, seeks to elevate information-sharing to the level of an issue such as public health or housing, where public-private partnerships regularly assess the current landscape in their communities to understand how people are accessing services and what their greatest needs are. Such an effort could help communities move past the speculation and anecdotal data that often predominates in this space to better learn where people get their information, how they could get more, and how to reach people who may not be well-connected in the current environment.

**USE THE NEW TOOLS.** Some local media sources barely play the social media game, or do so only on specific platforms where they feel comfortable. Broadening reach could help develop a following among new demographics. Well-used AI could be a method to capture and compile local stories of interest, perhaps bringing scattered media sources together into a common offering. While still subject to algorithmic biases, AI can provide a more neutral-seeming vehicle for collecting public engagement and interpreting it without pre-formed conclusions.

**BUILDING LOCAL MARKETING CAPACITY.** In small communities that have no dedicated marketing function, applying some basic principles in the field can make a world of difference. Some cities in the region have reported some success by beefing up their marketing efforts, recognizing they need a dedicated person or firm to share their message and break through to communicate. Local arts and humanities groups and student writers received mentions as potential conduits for creative messaging.

## FOUR ADDITIONAL ACTION AREAS

The remaining action areas remain in this report as topics for discussion, activity, and action planning.

### ACTION AREA 4: BUILDING A SENSE OF BELONGING

#### STRENGTHS

Whether explicit or subtle, a dense network of local groups in Northeast Minnesota work diligently to build connections within community. From farmer's markets to ATV and snowmobile groups, many organizations are rooted in the region's land, waters, communities, and broader culture. Local arts and humanities focused festivals and organizations, regular community events, and civic groups are dedicated to the betterment of their community; a diverse range of organizations such as Revive Virginia, Boundary Waters Connect, and the International Falls Rotary fill this function in different places. The region has developed a network of groups that support resident recruitment and support upon arrival, including Hello Range!, Thrive Up North, Naturally Better, and aspects of programming of tourism-focused organizations like Lovin' Lake County and Visit Cook County. Organizations such as the Minnesota Discovery Center and county or local historical societies have developed programming that recognize the region's history and seek to build on it where possible. Both K-12 and higher education play an important role in welcoming younger residents, and some large employers have entered this space as they seek to attract and retain a strong workforce.

Nevertheless, many communities and organizations across Northeast Minnesota have identified a need for intentional programming in this area. Inclusion Learning Cohorts (ILCs) managed by Northspan and funded by the Northland Foundation have provided numerous communities with opportunities to intentionally explore themes around belonging and undertake projects that help build a sense of community.

## CHALLENGES

The divisions within Northeast Minnesota are real, and engagement process participants often emphasized that it is a uniquely difficult time; several argued that building welcoming cultures takes explicit effort, not just common courtesy. Divides in politics, faith, wealth, age, racial and ethnic groups, and other distinctions between identities can harden and grow harder to bridge in a difficult media environment. Many other divisions are not necessarily rooted in an identity marker, but simply a reality of rural life in a region that has seen limited population growth over the past quarter century: existing networks of people are well-established, and breaking in to the social, civic, or economic life in a Northeast Minnesota community can take real time, effort, and finesse. Some participants expressed disappointment that the people who attend intentional efforts to build belonging (e.g., ILCs) are those who are already very receptive to the message.

Nuances of a tourism-focused and seasonal economy add another wrinkle to questions around a sense of belonging in Northeast Minnesota, as the region hosts many seasonal residents and regular visitors. Some new or seasonal residents express they are not always welcomed, while one engagement session attendee groused about “visitors who think they own communities.” The seasonal economy also affects the regional labor market, as some parts of the region see an influx of workers for certain months who face similar challenges of integration. Bridging these divides requires mutual respect, with seasonal residents or newcomers respecting the lifeways of longtime residents and longtime residents appreciating the contributions of those who have come to enjoy Northeast Minnesota either more recently or on a part-time basis.

## POTENTIAL ACTIONS

**RENEWED GROUNDING IN THE VALUE OF BELONGING.** Many people who value the concept of a welcoming community view its value as self-evident, but not everyone necessarily shares this view. Some well-intentioned efforts to foster community can have unintended consequences; “focusing on difference can be alienating,” wrote one respondent to the online survey. Discussions that work through what it means to have a welcoming community, and how that might manifest itself in different cultures and settings, can open the door to ensure these efforts have the desired effect.

**WELCOME WAGONS.** The concept of a welcome wagon had strong support among engagement session participants. Whether run by a chamber of commerce, local realtors, or a new resident group such as Hello Range!, early-stage efforts to welcome new residents and connect them with local resources can increase a feeling of belonging and recognition that a community is in fact supportive.

**REGIONAL INFORMATION-SHARING.** Many groups that operate in this space act in relative isolation. While there are some informal networks and occasional crossover at events, there is limited central coordination. The region now also has numerous past ILC groups and other initiatives that built momentum for some time, but these participants may not have obvious direction or places to turn for resources upon the completion of their cohorts. A dedicated regional organization or individual who

can help share resources across these groups, and convene them as necessary, could help take these efforts to the next level.

## **ACTION AREA 5: INTENTIONAL DIALOGUE ON THE REGION'S MOST DIVISIVE TOPIC**

The region's most divisive topic for community and economic development, the division between large-scale economic development and environmental concerns, was considered a serious but daunting challenge for Northeast Minnesota. Comments were sometimes vague, reflecting the sometimes-paralyzing scale of the challenge. Still, people on all sides of this divide saw the value in mutual engagement involving patience, education, common sense, and civility.

### **STRENGTHS**

Despite the challenges in creating productive dialogue, Northeast Minnesotans have been maneuvering through this divide for generations. Northeast Minnesota has a strong history of brownfield remediation and addressing legacy challenges. Some former industrial lands have been restored to a healthy natural state; examples abound from the St. Louis River corridor cleanup to the creation of mountain bike and OHV parks on former minelands. Other legacy sites have been turned to economic development purposes, including the Atlas Industrial Park in Duluth and Aurora Industrial Park, among many others. The University of Minnesota's Natural Resources Research Institute and its Midwest Industrial Transformation Initiative seeks to harness technology to create environmentally friendly industry; organizations such as St. Louis County and the Arrowhead Regional Development Commission have led efforts to secure funding for work in this area. Community-based media and civic groups, including StoryCorps and WTIP radio's One Small Step initiative, help elevate narratives that move beyond binary divisions.

### **CHALLENGES**

The fundamental challenge associated with this action area is obvious: supporters of large-scale economic development projects and environmental concerns in Northeast Minnesota are deeply passionate and have real, values-based differences that are not easy to bridge. A long history of mutual distrust deepens these divides. The presence of non-local actors in this space further compounds the issue; economic development advocacy groups lament the intrusion of activists from the Twin Cities or beyond inserting themselves into Northeast Minnesota questions, while environmental advocates decry the financial interests of large, non-local companies funding or profiting from projects. The organized dialogue that does exist is usually filtered through state permitting processes, which tend to be more interested in collecting testimony and incentivize forceful advocacy rather than working through differences.

### **POTENTIAL ACTIONS**

**FUTURE ECONOMIC DRIVERS.** Many emerging economic development projects seek to help both the economy and the environment, and while there are many details on these projects that require wrangling, they do at least open the door for good-faith discussion. The Natural Resources Research Institute's green steel initiatives seek to blend environmental and economic development goals by strengthening industry using environmentally friendly methods to source steel supply chains in Minnesota. Additional projects look to reuse mine tailings or employ innovative processes to profit from remediation work. Addressing regional brownfield sites is a potential win-win for environmental cleanup and economic development. On a somewhat smaller but still potentially very meaningful scale, regional food systems offer both economic opportunity and environmental sustainability.

Northeast Minnesota has a small-scale but broad and resilient network of groups working to build such systems.

**LOCAL CONVERSATIONS BETWEEN LOCAL ACTORS.** Several participants recognized the value in dialogue between people and groups based in Northeast Minnesota. Some groups such as Mining Minnesota, Better in Our Backyard, Friends of the Boundary Waters, and Save the Boundary Waters have missions directly related to this divide, while many more are clearly in spaces where they will be discussed, including the Range Association of Municipalities and Schools, Iron Range Economic Alliance, and Boundary Waters Connect. The Braver Angels group that spearheads dialogue across political divides is one vehicle that could drive the discussion, while one participant suggested using a restorative justice type framework to structure a dialogue. Others noted that the lack of conversation spaces relates directly to Action Area 3 and the challenges to find strong local information-sharing systems.

**LEARN FROM ELSEWHERE.** Northeast Minnesota is not alone in addressing conflicts between large-scale economic development and environmental concerns, and the region could potentially learn from other states or neighbors such as Canada. A more concerted effort or research project to understand other locations' processes and successes could yield insights to bring back to Northeast Minnesota. Ideally, any learning effort would be undertaken by a group of people from different organizations and backgrounds to avoid a perception that it is slanted toward a particular outcome.

## **ACTION AREA 6: CREATION OF A RURAL-TRIBAL ECONOMIC AND COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT ALLIANCE**

Engagement session participants were broadly intrigued by the idea of greater collaboration between Tribal Nations and their non-Tribal neighbors and saw value in a consistent forum, not one motivated by specific projects or interests. Understanding on how to proceed, however, was not always obvious; non-Tribal participants were understandably sometimes unsure what role they could play in these discussions, while Tribal Nation staff saw benefits but had questions over how such a group would come to be and function in practice.

### **SUCCESSSES**

In recent decades, Tribal Nations have increased their visibility among non-Tribal residents of Northeast Minnesota and moved to exercise their sovereignty through a variety of channels. More people understand the role of treaty law thanks to organizations such as the 1854 Treaty Authority, the Treaties Matter exhibit put on by several state and national groups, and some expanded education programming. Collaboration between Tribal and local officials has led to the creation and sustainment of organizations ranging from Fond du Lac Tribal and Community College to the Grand Portage Coast Guard. The state of Minnesota has increased tribal relations training and embedded Tribal Liaisons in its departments. On a more local level, individual communities have begun dialogue with Tribal neighbors, and foundations, public health departments, full-service community schools, and local historical societies have taken steps to better reflect and coordinate with the diversity in the communities they serve.

### **CHALLENGES**

Many participants appreciated the gravity of the concerns that led to the creation of this action area. Generations of conflict, abuse, and mistrust cannot be healed overnight. Many participants suggested that they, as individuals, did not know where to start in these discussions. Any successful engagement would require clear, valuable outcomes for the Tribal Nations themselves; they cannot just be vehicles for non-Native participants to achieve their goals. One respondent stated that efforts would require

“kindness, patience and grace,” while another said that efforts would need to “move at the speed of trust.”

## POTENTIAL ACTIONS

**SPACES TO TALK.** Many engagement session participants recognized that a general need for more conversation and learning, even at a very informal level that builds relationships, appears crucial to building understanding. Coordination around education and activities for kids received mention as a low-pressure way to build connections, and community festivals such as Wild Rice Days in Deer River can incorporate different cultures in inclusive ways. Educational resources and intentional engagement, while basic, align with contact theory, suggests that sharing spaces and engaging in shared goal-oriented projects with people can improve understanding and help build a sense of community.

**COORDINATE TO ADDRESS SHARED ISSUES.** Any number of individual topics in community and economic development could provide spaces for dialogue. Both Tribal and non-Tribal residents of rural areas need help addressing housing, transportation, and child care issues, and food sovereignty is a shared area of interest across communities. Deeper research could also shed more light on areas for potential cooperation, though non-Native actors must also recognize the importance of data sovereignty for Tribal Nations and appreciate that a partnership with a sovereign nation will look different from a collaboration across small municipalities.

**LEARN FROM OTHERS.** Opportunities for shared learning from other communities abound. The experiences of Canadian First Nations, communities across the country, and places in the region that have long histories of navigating relationships between Native and non-Native people, including Deer River, Cloquet, and International Falls/Fort Frances, all could provide something to regional efforts. A shared learning effort by both Tribal and non-Tribal actors could provide beneficial outcomes for all involved.

## ACTION AREA 7: REBUILDING REGIONAL RESEARCH AND PLANNING SYSTEMS

The final action area considers how institutions in Northeast Minnesota work together to create a system to address community and economic development-related issues. Compared to some of the other topics, these now-merged action areas sometimes felt insider-focused, though people directly involved in the field were passionate about them. A network of organizations in the region can and sometimes does come together to address shared issues, but turning into a long-term vehicle for regional action requires explicit commitment.

## SUCCESSSES

Northeast Minnesota has myriad organizations that can provide community and economic development-related research and planning capacity. Most enjoy cordial relationships and do work together somewhat regularly. Maneuvering the regional economic development ecosystem, however, is a constant question of collective action and how to find the right roles for each player. Organizations with a stake in the process include city and county-level groups, multi-community collaborations such as the East Range Joint Powers Board, and larger organizations that act at a regional scale, including the Minnesota Department of Employment and Economic Development (DEED), Minnesota Housing, University of Minnesota Extension, Arrowhead Regional Development Commission, APEX, RAMS, Northspan, foundations, and others in a long list of agencies and acronyms that all directly or indirectly operate in this space. The organizations to do the work exist; the question lies in how to align their missions and collaborate effectively.

## CHALLENGES

Many participants noted the need for greater coordination among Northeast Minnesota communities instead of leaving them to compete for a dwindling pool of resources. This is especially valuable for infrastructure, staffing, or other important services when a more regional approach could lead to substantial savings. Collaborative efforts often face real obstacles, from the practical questions of how to partner or combine in ways that distribute resources fairly to a sense of loss of identity when local institutions change. Incentives from funders that foster cross-community collaboration can help drive better coordination.

“What can we stop doing” is a valuable question for the region as it seeks to avoid duplication or commitment to outdated strategies and structures. The recent dissolution of the Arrowhead Growth Alliance is an example of a move in this direction; though some participants found value in the organization, others raised questions about its operating methods and impact. In general, this action area requires actors to break out of a bureaucratic mindset of turf protection and orient strategic efforts across their organizations.

## POTENTIAL ACTIONS

**CULTIVATE A RURAL DEVELOPMENT HUB.** Part 1 of this report details the Aspen Institute Community Strategies Group’s vision for a Rural Development Hub, a network of organizations that collaborates to take action on long-term regional issues. Starting fresh can shed some of the stigma of past efforts that may have been perceived as unsuccessful, or perhaps featured a strong planning phase but fizzled out during implementation. Such efforts inevitably will encounter some political difficulties and bumps in the road, but the benefits of success far outweigh the tradeoffs. A clear refresh that is more inclusive and more action-oriented than past efforts can only provide benefits to the region. This report has identified numerous areas for further research, from housing development to methods of Tribal and non-Tribal government cooperation, that could use a hub’s research capacity to unleash action on important issues.

**ADDRESS TAX STRUCTURES.** One area with limited public knowledge that substantially affects economic and community development capacity is the tax system in which Northeast Minnesota communities work. Unique complications to the region include taxation policies for non-homesteaded properties (i.e., a “cabin tax” that applies different rates to different properties and can limit local resources); the Department of Iron Range Resources and Rehabilitation, which has substantial financial horsepower but is tied into the complexities of mining revenue and state-level directives; fiscal disparities within the Taconite Assistance Area; and state local government aid. Better educated regional leaders could push for tax changes that reflect the realities of Northeast Minnesota and provide equitable resources.

**FOSTER SUB-REGIONAL COORDINATION.** At times, Northeast Minnesota is too broad a geography for regional work. There is opportunity for greater collaboration at a sub-regional level, whether that is in Greater Duluth, the Iron Range, the North Shore, or other potential areas that may not match existing jurisdictional boundaries but nonetheless share common economies, commute sheds, or particular challenges.

## WHAT'S NEXT?

This report is only the beginning of a journey toward thriving rural communities in Northeast Minnesota. As we conclude the analysis phase, it's time to dive in to action.

**NORTHSPAN AND THE NORTHLAND FOUNDATION ARE ALREADY WORKING TO ADDRESS SOME OF THE ACTION AREAS.** Northland Foundation has made a new foray into supporting regional housing by contracting with North Shore Development Company to help communities across the region build their capacity to address housing-related challenges. It has also funded Northspan to build leadership capacity through its Elected Leader Learning Cohorts and foster a sense of belonging through Inclusion Learning Cohorts, regional network-building, and a revived regional equity summit concept. These efforts will expand, and other initiatives may follow.

**ACTION-ORIENTED ENGAGEMENT WILL CONTINUE.** Northspan and the Northland Foundation will convene another series of engagement events in spring and into summer 2026. This will include events in each county of the region, meetings with individuals and groups who can drive the effort, and likely days of action around specific topics to move it all in the same direction. We are committed to spurring this project forward.

**WE NEED MANY OTHERS TO COMMIT TO ACTION.** As we have emphasized throughout this report and engagement series, the Northland Foundation and Northspan cannot tackle all these action areas alone. Decision-makers will need to make decisions around resources they control, and community members will need to encourage them to do so. Success cannot be solely grassroots or top-down; it requires buy-in at all levels. We encourage you to reach out, join us, and figure out how to move actions forward.

**TOGETHER, WE CAN BUILD A NORTHEAST MINNESOTA WHERE WE CAN ALL THRIVE.** We call this region home for a reason: it is filled with natural and cultural amenities, creative and resilient people, and growing appreciation for the value of regional action. We have the capacity to take many matters into our own hands and move the needle on many of the issues we face. Through coordinated action, we can build some version of the thriving future envisioned in this report. Let's get to work.

## FURTHER READING

This report provides a general overview of the Aspen Institute's Thriving Rural Communities framework, but it does not go into great detail on the research that went into its creation. This section provides some additional resources for those interested in further background information:

[Aspen Community Strategies Group](#): The main page for Aspen CSG

[Barriers to Federal Investment in Rural Communities](#) from the West Virginia Community Development Hub, an Aspen Institute partner

[Collaborative Strategies for Rural Health and Economic Prosperity](#) by Aspen CSG

[Rural Development Hubs: Strengthening America's Rural Innovation Infrastructure](#) by Aspen CSG

[Measure Up: A Call to Action](#) by Aspen CSG

[Measuring Community Capacity Building: A Workbook-in-Progress for Rural Communities](#) by the Aspen Institute Rural Economic Policy Program

Center on Rural Innovation: A national thought leader providing frameworks for thinking about innovation and tech-based economies in rural areas

Center for Rural Policy and Development: A Minnesota-based nonprofit that conducts research and provides policy recommendations that support the state's rural regions

Minnesota Compass: An economic and demographic research effort driven by the Wilder Foundation

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