

# Bridging Brown County Case Study

## Connecting Communities and Finding a Future

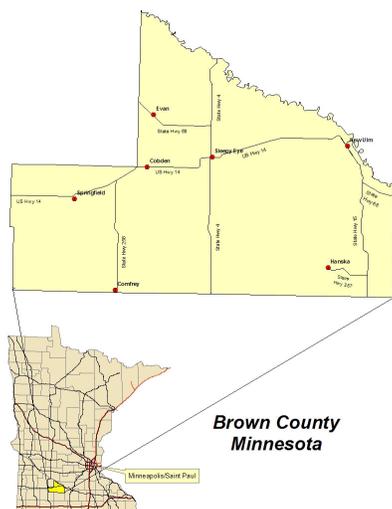
### Summary and Background

Communities in the rural Midwest typically understand that they must evolve wisely to adapt to changes in agriculture-based economies, to globalization, and deal with demands on local government. However, traditional allegiances to home town—and even rivalries among towns—may not serve that goal.

Can traditionally disconnected communities be convinced to communicate, collaborate and solve unique issues facing rural communities? In Brown County, Minnesota, the community developed an organization committed to creating active citizen leaders and to connecting people and resources throughout the county. This organization, *Bridging Brown County (BBC)* has found a way to bridge cities and towns of different sizes and characters, link rural and urban interests, and create a vision for all of Brown County that will take them into the future.

#### Key Terms:

- ✓ Leadership
- ✓ Civic Engagement Capacity
- ✓ Collaboration
- ✓ Networking
- ✓ Community Vitality
- ✓ Social Capital



### Brown County Demographics (2000)

**County Population:** 26,911  
**Largest City:** New Ulm, pop. 13,594  
**Land area:** 610.9 sq. mi.  
**Industries providing employment:**  
Manufacturing (23.4%),  
Educational, health and social services (20.1%),  
Retail trade (11.3%).  
**Median household income:** \$39,800

*“Many of us think of our ‘community’ as only the town in which we live. But we also belong to a larger rural community: the community formed by all residents of Brown County. We are a neighborhood of communities that share common challenges and opportunities.”*

~ Katie Rasmussen

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## History

A convergence of events and conversations highlighted to Katie Rasmussen, University of Minnesota Extension Educator, that “something wasn’t working” among the towns in Brown County.

First, in 1998 a tornado caused severe damage in parts of the county. As Katie assisted groups and coordinated volunteers to assist in field clean up efforts in the communities of Hanska and Comfrey, she learned that many Brown County residents did not even know that Comfrey was located in Brown County!

Later, Katie dealt with a county fair board issue. People from the west side of the county were concerned that the board recruited only members from New Ulm—the largest city in the county. Meanwhile, she received a request from the fair board for recommendations of individuals from the west side of the county who might be interested in sitting on the board.

And then, a business owner from Springfield noted that no businesses from Springfield advertised in the *Brown County Reminder* (the county-wide newspaper.) Investigating this, Katie learned that a request for business addresses had been sent to Springfield City Hall, which replied with a letter saying that Springfield businesses only advertised in their local newspaper.

This convergence of events led Katie Rasmussen to convene an informal meeting of five individuals involved in the events to discuss the east/west and urban/rural divide. The group agreed that the divide was a problem, and discussed what they as individuals from different sides of the county envisioned as a different future for their communities and for the county as a whole.

This small group decided to share their vision with others. They recruited additional members by sponsoring a county-wide workshop supported by the Southern Minnesota Initiative Foundation called “Working Collaboratively.” The purpose of the workshop was to: 1) identify common issues or concerns in the county, and 2) explore future interest in developing a program that would create bridges across the towns of Brown County. Seventy-five (75) people attended, and over two-thirds identified a “top concern” that communication issues weakened relationships among the communities in Brown County. It was clear that a program to bring leaders of the communities could be successful.

## The Organization

The vision of a connected county became an Extension educational program that later became an organization called *Bridging Brown County*. The BBC program involves representatives from the communities, private and public organizations, businesses, education, media, youth, retired citizens, elected officials from county, cities, school districts and townships and legislators. As of 2006, the organization has involved over 600 people, and has dramatically improved connections and shared vision throughout the county.

Bridging Brown County is led by a twelve-person board of directors selected to represent all geographical areas of the county. They meet regularly to share information, plan and implement the organization’s many activities, identify issues and discuss future goals. The board is deliberate about having a diverse membership. When new associates are selected, age, gender, occupation and other connections are considered.

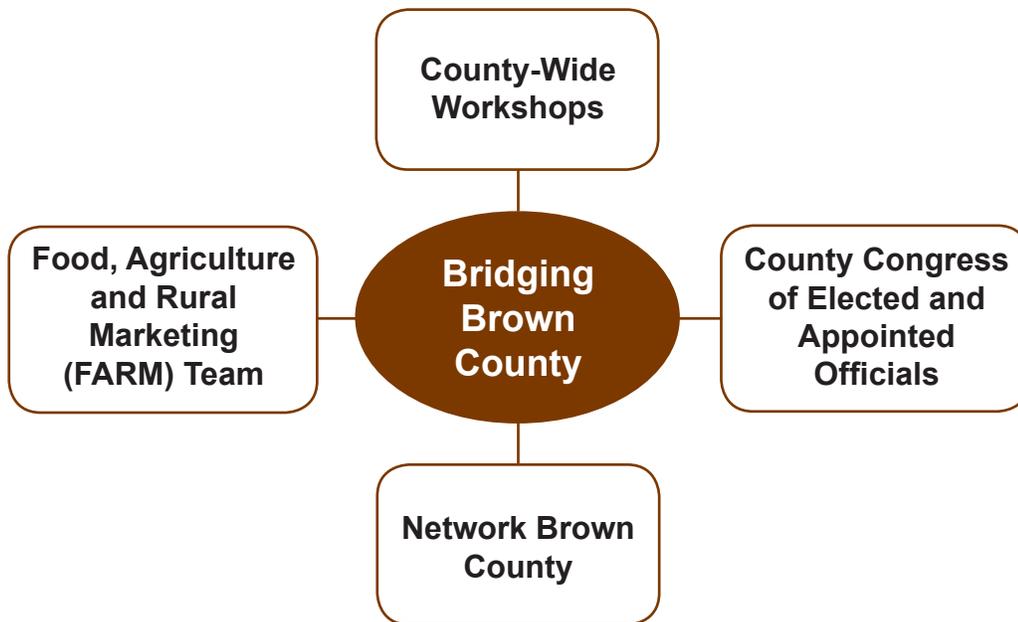


The goals of Bridging Brown County are:

1. To foster better communication among communities.
2. To raise awareness of the interdependency among communities.
3. To promote the county area’s quality of life.
4. To support economic development throughout the county.
5. To nurture and support individual community traditions.

**Program Components**

Bridging Brown County’s activities fulfill its mission: strengthening the Brown County community by bridging relationships of understanding and communication.



Bridging Brown County

## Strategy 1: Community Workshops

Community workshops are a cornerstone offering of Bridging Brown County. Workshops engage and educate citizens on a wide variety of issues. They provide knowledge that builds community capacity while they promote discussion, networking, sharing of resources and exchange between leaders and citizens. The table below provides a sampling of workshops in the Bridging Brown County Program.

**Table 1. Sampling of workshop topics in Brown County**

Workshop	Purpose
Looking Into the Future: Preparing for a Changing Workforce in Brown County	To consider how future trends will affect the county in the areas of housing, health care, education and agriculture.
Building Bridges in ‘Rurban’ Communities	Citizens explored how connections between rural and urban communities could create a more vital county.
From the Ground Up: Growing Local Products, Improving Local Economies and building Local Support	Issues discussed were the impact of buying local food and the challenges of local producers and consumers. A “food fair” followed the workshop to allow networking between producers and consumers.

The workshops result in more clarity about the county’s issues and needs, expanded personal and professional networks and an increase in other countywide efforts. Evaluations showed that 89% of participants thought workshops helped the county identify and address issues.

## Strategy 2: The County Congress of Elected and Appointed Officials

At the very first workshop, someone suggested that BBC gather all elected leaders for a forum. This was accomplished in May 2000—the first of many “Congress of Elected and Appointed Officials”. Representatives from the county, cities, school districts and township associations were invited to discuss key issues affecting Brown County with local legislators.

The first event was a huge success. Twenty-eight officials and all five legislators that represented the county attended. The overwhelming consensus was that forums should be held quarterly so that officials can discuss issues of common concern. Since then, the participant list has expanded. It now includes the county administrator, the county board chairperson, city managers, city council chairpersons, mayors, city clerks, superintendents, school board chairpersons, youth representatives, township officers, Soil and Water Conservation District supervisors, economic development directors, local legislators, staff of congressional representatives and Bridging Brown County members.

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Typically, thirty participants attend the forums. Forums in January and June provide a dialogue with the county's legislators before and after the year's legislative session. Forums in March and September provide knowledge and resources to address countywide issues.

Topics of past County Congress forums include:

- ✓ Legislative updates
- ✓ Identification of key issues to create a county wide legislative platform
- ✓ Demographic changes and their effect on the workforce
- ✓ Recruiting employees and retaining residents
- ✓ Economic development efforts in local communities
- ✓ Presentations by representatives of key organizations in the area such as the Southern Minnesota Initiative Foundation, Region Nine and the Minnesota Valley Council of Governments
- ✓ Changing technology and the impact on workforce, education, housing and public services.

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*"Bridging Brown County has broken down barriers and taken away some of the competitiveness among communities. It also helps representatives of the various government units better understand each other's spending needs and financial challenges."*

~ City Council President

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The County Congress helped officials consider the perspectives of other jurisdictions, facilitated the sharing of important information and, ultimately, created a unified County agenda on legislative issues. Participants feel the program has increased community connectedness, created stronger relationships among officials and increased understanding across the county about current political issues, opportunities and challenges.

At least one citizen of Brown County believes that local government is more productive and responsive because of the County Congress. Officials involved feel they are now more progressive in looking to the future, better at networking to share recourses and find solutions and more knowledgeable about Brown County.

Results of the County Congress include:

- ✓ City managers meet monthly to discuss common issues
- ✓ City EDA directors collaborated on a JOBZ application for the county
- ✓ An all-Sleepy Eye Schools Committee was created to identify opportunities to work together
- ✓ The county board has voted in support of community specific projects (a city bike trail, use of the county dredge for a city lake)
- ✓ The county continues to fund the Bridging Brown County program despite a tight county budget

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*"We're developing a deeper understanding and empathy for the needs of other organizations and finding where we can partner together."*

~ School Superintendent

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Bridging Brown County

### Strategy 3: Network Brown County

Network Brown County is a leadership education program that brings together groups of 15–20 Brown County residents from a variety of communities and backgrounds for nine one-day sessions. Participants meet new people, discover new places in the county, gain personal and community leadership skills, build networks, broaden their knowledge of community resources and services and increase understanding and awareness of issues facing the county.

Beyond leadership education, the program offers visits to make more residents aware of some of the economic drivers of the county. Some of the businesses toured for the session in Brown County included Delmonte Foods, AMPI butter plant, Christensen Farms, Fredin Brothers Beef, Heartland CoOp, dairy operations, a turkey farm, and a tree nursery. Participants also are given materials from such agricultural groups as MN Soybean Growers, MN Corn Growers, MN Farm Bureau, Brown County Dairy Association, U of MN Extension Service, and others.

### Strategy 4: The Food, Agriculture and Rural Marketing (FARM) Team



At a Blandin Foundation community leadership training that BBC brought to the area, participants were asked to identify an asset in the community that could be tapped to promote economic development. Agriculture was selected because it was an asset that had touched the lives of all the team members. The team set out to increase opportunities for local food producers to market their products and increase consumer awareness of the benefits of purchasing local products.

The activities of the FARM team are likely to increase revenue for farms on the team while they provide a higher profile for Brown County entrepreneurship.

- ✓ A marketing study of thirty producers and 300 commercial and residential consumers identified challenges and opportunities.
- ✓ A marketing brochure and web site listed local producers and farmers markets.
- ✓ *Ground to Gourmet* is an opportunity for community members to sample products from local producers in gourmet cooking and network with local producers. Ground to Gourmet has participated in 14 area community events.
- ✓ More than twenty young people marketed products at local farmers markets.
- ✓ An online farmers market is being created.



***If Brown County households spent just \$10 per month on local foods, \$100,000 would stay in their local economy!***

## Other Bridging Brown County Activities

Bridging Brown County is involved in a number of other activities around the county:

- ✓ They supported the Brown County 150th Anniversary Task Force.
- ✓ They distributed over 1200 brochures marketing Brown County's quality of life.
- ✓ They promote countywide tourism.
- ✓ They maintain a website featuring Bridging Brown County activities and links to communities, schools, and resources.
- ✓ They've ushered in the Blandin Foundation's Community Leadership Programs.
- ✓ They produce semiannual newsletter covering Bridging Brown County events and providing information on collaboration and community building.

## The Organization's Resources

A key element of the success Bridging Brown County is the large number of collaborative partnerships it has created among levels of government, the private sector, non-profits and individuals. The University of Minnesota Extension Service played a key role by providing educational workshops and training. The Blandin Foundation training has been essential to building the leadership capacity of Brown County citizens to assist in getting Bridging Brown County programs off the ground.

### Support for Bridging Brown County

- ✓ Membership and tuition fees
- ✓ Funding from local governments – counties, townships and municipalities
- ✓ Grants for FARM Team projects
- ✓ Grant dollars for BBC projects
- ✓ Blandin leadership training (value of over \$80,000)
- ✓ Volunteers – over 800 hours of work towards the organizations mission (\$137,000 value to the county)
- ✓ Donations of goods & services
- ✓ Fundraising events

Funding is always an issue in sustaining such grassroots efforts. BBC generates its yearly budget every year through contributions from local governments, grants, and in-kind donations. (See above) In 2003, they added an annual fundraising dinner to the funding effort. This has become a special way to raise \$5 – 10,000 by creating an event that brings the entire county together for fun. The dinner features locally grown foods, local chefs and celebrity waiters and waitresses (who serve as elected officials and business people during the day.) A tip competition among the celebrity waiters and waitresses add a lot of fun. They get tips by pulling pranks on tables—for example, stealing silverware and making guests pay to get it back. In turn, tables pay the celebrities for special favors and embarrassing performances.



### Bridging Brown County Events Timeline

#### 1999

April 29, 1999 –  
First Meeting  
Propose mission, vision and goals; Work on funding and program ideas.  
Bridging Brown County name selected

#### 2000

First County-wide Workshop – “Working Collaboratively”  
First County Congress of Elected and Appointed Officials – Legislative Update w/ local senators and representatives  
Strategic Planning Session

#### 2001

County Congress – Created County wide Legislative Platform  
Web page up and running.  
Workshop – “Dealing with Community Change”

#### 2002

First Class attends Blandin Community Leadership Program  
Workshop – “Preparing for a Changing Workforce”

#### 2003

Initial 501c3 process and preparation of articles of incorporation  
First class participates in Network Brown County Program  
FARM Team starts work

#### 2004

Certificate of Incorporation issued, Bylaws and Articles approved  
Workshop – “Building Bridges in Urban Communities”  
Program Assistant hired  
First BBC Newsletter  
Second class participates in Network Brown County  
First annual fundraiser dinner

The event also has an auction of gift baskets which feature items donated from each of the communities. Two local groups provide musical entertainment for the guests throughout the evening. About 100 people are served at this annual event including the celebrity wait staff and musical guests.



## **Outcomes and Impacts**

Evaluation of the leadership education activities in the program are evaluated by using the University of Missouri's Community Leadership Survey. The evaluation has shown that participants found that participants in the program:

- ✓ Scored high on the factors of civic engagement and shared future/purpose
- ✓ Experienced personal growth and a greater sense of being able to make a difference
- ✓ Obtained greater knowledge of needs, resources and policies in their community
- ✓ Felt better working together toward shared visions and purpose
- ✓ 44% took on an active role in at least one new organization
- ✓ 15% increase in leadership positions in their community

Specifically, participants report that, as a result of the program they

- ✓ Know the steps needed to obtain broad-based support
- ✓ Understand the importance of building agreement
- ✓ Have knowledge of local, county, and state resources
- ✓ Feel they have a good understanding of public issues
- ✓ Have a sense of mission
- ✓ Understand how new ideas are adopted
- ✓ Consider themselves to be well qualified for public issues
- ✓ Regard change as a source of vitality
- ✓ Move out of their comfort zone
- ✓ Aim to improve consensus-building skills
- ✓ Articulate a convincing vision of future of community
- ✓ Seek out different perspectives
- ✓ Use their leadership skills in different situations
- ✓ Improved their public speaking skills
- ✓ Know how to assess and tackle problems
- ✓ Have a strong sense of community ownership

Those involved in Bridging Brown County have observed that the real impact of the program as striving to improve the communication within the county. It is helping people to step outside of their box and get involved with their community. Many participants shared that they are proud of what the program has done for the county and proud to be part of it.

**Direct results of the new community connections can be visibly seen throughout the community.**

- ✓ The Brown County Historical Society and Veterans Services united to create a **WWII exhibit** that honors the entire county and attracts visitors.
- ✓ ProKinship and 4-H partnered to create **summer youth programming**.
- ✓ The community rallied to **donate furniture** to the Schoenstatt Retreat Center.
- ✓ In Springfield, a **youth mentoring program** started that engaged the entire county to work with youth.

These results, along with joint marketing efforts in business and joint decision-making in government, show the tangible results of five people gathering to solve a problem in 2002.

## **The Future: Facing Challenges and Keeping the Vision**

While Bridging Brown County is an immensely successful program, it is not without challenges that must be overcome to maintain the vitality of the program.

- ✓ **Resources:** As of late, many government entities and non-profit organizations have experienced stagnant resource flows. This has greatly impacted Bridging Brown County in the amount of resources dedicated to the activities of the organization.
- ✓ **Time:** Time, whether that of volunteers or elected officials, is very precious and affects participation in Bridging Brown County events.
- ✓ **Demographics:** Demographic changes are presenting a specific challenge to Bridging Brown County since most of the traditional leaders in the community are baby boomers who are less likely to place high priority on long-term volunteer commitments.
- ✓ **Awareness:** Despite the success of the program, raising awareness of its offerings and benefits is still a challenge for the organization.
- ✓ **U of MN Extension:** Changes in the University of Minnesota Extension Services have reduced the amount of coordination time directed to Bridging Brown County. These lost resources stimulated more local volunteer time and the hiring of a part-time staff member.
- ✓ **Staying within mission:** As with any organization with a loosely defined mission of improving communication and leadership in the county, Bridging Brown County must be careful only to take on activities which it is capable of managing. It is tempting for outside entities to try to direct the activities and resources of the organization for alternate purposes.

Bridging Brown County has worked as a non-profit organization with established visions and goals.

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## ***Our Future Vision for Bridging Brown County:***

- ✓ A group that is well known to all communities ... that any community feels free to use as a contact point
- ✓ A group that continues to be a conduit for springing ideas and merging concepts. An incubator for collaborative projects
- ✓ In 2010, BBC will be a one stop shop for leadership, community projects and one voice speaking for the entire county with input from a cross section of its citizens
- ✓ Developing leaders throughout the county communities that always look how to collaborate with the other communities
- ✓ Provides a forum for discussion of issues that affect multiple communities or multiple sectors
- ✓ Hub for information exchange and collaboration
- ✓ Resource of diverse information, people, go to for ideas
- ✓ BBC will be a support group, a resource group, with a large membership
- ✓ The organization that elected leaders look to get the input from both citizens and government entities
- ✓ BBC will have become a model that is replicated by others.

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*“With redistricting and reduced representation in many rural areas, it’s more important than ever for an entire county to set priorities and speak with a unified voice on legislative issues.”*

~ State Senator Dennis Frederickson

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## ***Future Goals:***

- ✓ Foster a collaborative group each year
- ✓ Launch a massive campaign for citizens to learn about the organization (i.e. host community coffees, advertising, radio spots, create a BBC voice)
- ✓ Start a Network Brown County for youth
- ✓ Focus on increasing interest and quality in the County Congress of Elected and Appointed Officials
- ✓ Promote Brown County Tourism
- ✓ Project to support local businesses
- ✓ Expand the County Congress to the general public
- ✓ Farm Team creates an on-line purchasing

Bridging Brown County

## Conclusion and Advice to Communities

Community members involved in Bridging Brown County believe that several elements have made the initiative successful. They point to how a need in the community was identified and a solution was created. In the early stages, movers and shakers in Brown County were identified and involved in the organization, but so were ordinary citizens. Bridging Brown County generated enthusiasm from the group's activities. Community members also point to the importance of having someone whose job it was to keep the organization going. Despite a great deal of community support, having someone constantly tending to the organizational needs and keeping the group focus and moving toward their goals was vital to the rapid growth and viability of the organization. This function was filled by Extension, but could be done by any local coordinator or organization in other communities.



Bridging Brown County is an initiative that has united a county, created a shared vision, nurtured leadership, encouraged communication and enhanced the resources of individual communities. The creators and supporters of Bridging Brown County have shown that creativity, resourcefulness and collaboration go a long way in developing a cohesive community. While there are still challenges ahead, Bridging Brown County has impressive plans for expansion and exciting goals for future activities to serve the needs of Brown County.

Those involved with Bridging Brown County note that the program was a cost effective way to put together forums, programs and opportunities that benefited the whole county. Their advice to a community attempting to build a similar program would be:

- ✓ “Take it step by step and not stretch resources too thin.”
- ✓ “Don’t take on every request, focus on the key goal and get your mission statement out there.”
- ✓ “Look at values and goals...”
- ✓ “It is important to invest in your community.”

**For educational programming on these subjects, contact Extension and visit us at: [www.extension.umn.edu/community](http://www.extension.umn.edu/community).**

Bridging Brown County

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