



Assessing the Impacts of Sustainable Tourism Programming in Small Communities

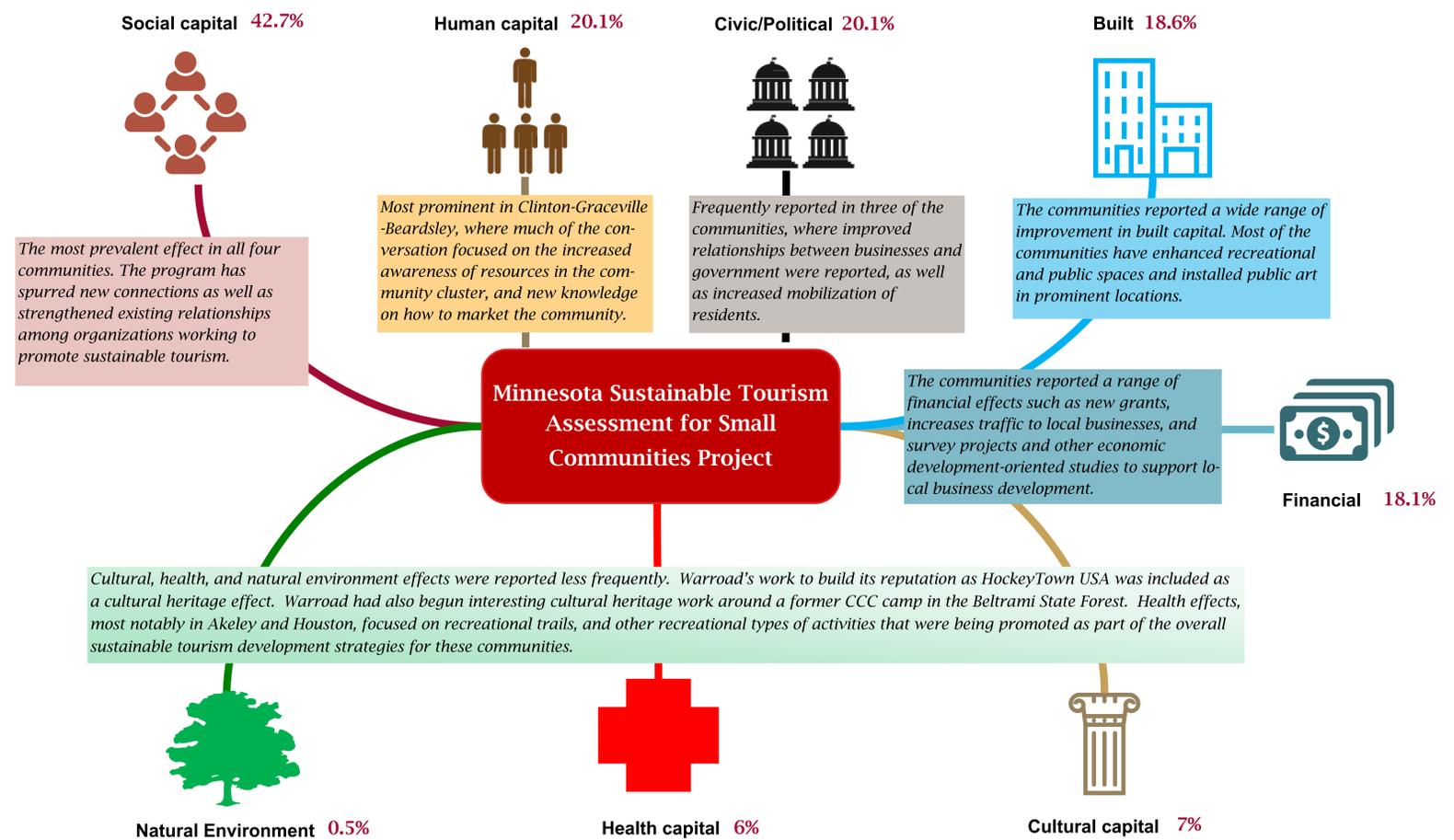
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Background

- The *Minnesota Sustainable Tourism Assessment for Small Communities project* (MSTASC) was launched in 2013 to help small, non-metro communities identify, develop and enhance local and regional tourism assets that will attract more visitors or keep them longer in the region.
- Five communities or community clusters, with populations under 1,500, were selected to participate in the project (see map).
- This poster highlights accomplishments of each community's tourism development efforts to date, largely as a result of the MSTASC project.
- Data for this study were collected by using a participatory group evaluation process known as *Ripple Effects Mapping*.



Findings Across Communities



About Ripple Effects Mapping

About REM: Ripple Effects Mapping (REM) is an evaluation method that engages program stakeholders to retrospectively and visually map the chain of effects resulting from a program or complex collaboration. To start the process, participants interview each other in pairs using the following questions:

Appreciative Inquiry questions:

1. What is a highlight, achievement, or success you had based on your involvement in tourism development in the past 18 months?
2. What unexpected things have happened as a result of your involvement in this tourism development work in the past 18 months?
3. What connections with others - new and/or deepened - have you made as a result of the work happening in tourism development in this community in the past 18 months?

Methods

Data Collection: - 3 Ripple Effects Mapping sessions in Houston, Akeley and Clinton-Graceville-Beardsley
- 4 phone interviews with key community members in Warroad and the Extension educator working with the community.

Recruitment: Participants were recruited by the local leadership teams. To qualify, they must be:
1) active core team members
2) other community stakeholders who had knowledge of the program but were less directly involved.

Selected Findings From Each Community

Warroad

Largely as a result of the program, stronger relationships have been built with University of Minnesota, Crookston, as well as with Extension. With Extension, the community is hoping to conduct an economic impact analysis of hockey-related activities. A survey project to examine the needs of existing businesses in Warroad is underway. The community has engaged with the state Department of Natural Resources to open up new trails in the Beltrami State Forest, and is also working on a project funded by the Northwest Regional Sustainable Development Partnerships to gather oral histories of homesteads in the Norris Camp area of Beltrami State Forest.

Akeley

As a result of the program, the community applied for and received Community Assistantship Program support for a university student to examine trail design to connect the Heartland Trail to downtown and Main Street. Several investments have been made to improve the municipal campground, including a new vending machine and ice machine, new grass, and a new online registration system. Participants also described improvements at Memorial Corner, near the Paul Bunyan statue and museum, and a continued commitment to a community garden near the school.

About the Authors

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Clinton-Graceville-Beardsley

Most conversation focused on the theme of "working better together" as a result of the program. Several grants were received by various organizations in the community by working together, including a grant from the Blandin Foundation to support the MNBump website, and close work with the telecommunications company to connect tourism development with the installation of fiber optic internet. Other collaborations are poised to enhance tourism in the area, such as collaboration with the King of Trails group all along U.S. Highway 75, collaboration with ArtPlace to weave the arts with economic development, and efforts to bring group tours to farms in the area.

Houston

The community has created a tourism brochure, and is updating signage as well as Internet presence for both public organization and private businesses. One of the restaurant owners in the community has done particularly well with her Facebook page and in drawing breakfast customers to the community. The community has also hired a marketing intern through Winona State University to support marketing and branding activities. The owl theme has been strengthened as a key branding element for the community.