

Creating stronger communities

Communities in Greater Minnesota rely on Extension to discover strengths and realize potential



Akeley's Chamber of Commerce knows that small businesses help their community thrive, so they brought Extension classes on digital marketing to small business owners like Sandy Fynboh Andress of Blue Sky Beads.

Rural communities do not have access to the same resources as urban areas and suburbs. Extension helps these communities by providing reliable information and analysis, improving the processes they use to make decisions, and expanding the pool of people ready to lead.

Acting on a vision

Three years ago, the small town of Akeley got involved in an Extension-led effort to help rural communities maximize their use of high-speed internet. Now, the quality of life in Akeley is growing in steady increments, and so is local confidence.

Blue Sky Beads is a seasonal store, nestled among the pine trees just outside of Akeley proper. But with the internet and social media, business doesn't have to exist solely for cabin-goers during tourism season.

Owner Sandy Fynboh Andress wasn't so excited about e-marketing before she took classes from Extension. "The classes were

the key to changing my mindset," she says. "Understanding e-marketing became a foundation for our local businesses, one that we need to keep building on."

Building upon local assets

Perhaps the greatest outcome for Extension's work with Akeley is a revitalized Chamber of Commerce, which works with—and is made of—local businesses like Blue Sky Beads. Its forerunner civic organization had dwindled to only four people.

Today, the chamber has more than 40 active members and a new energy. The revitalized chamber is capitalizing on natural assets while unearthing others. Akeley is at the headwaters of the Crow Wing chain of lakes and stakes a claim as Paul Bunyan's birthplace.

"It's a lot of work and it takes a lot of people," says Peg Davies, chamber board member. "It's been great to work with Extension because of the connections

we've created with other communities and the resources to help us succeed."

In fact, others are now turning to Akeley in hopes of replicating the town's success in efforts such as the Chamber's online shopping site and social media for marketing town businesses.

Meanwhile, Andress will keep using the new knowledge in her business. Selling one-of-a-kind pieces of wearable art has some unique

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challenges, but she's motivated. "I'll have to tweak some things this year," she says. "It's like climbing stairs. We have to keep climbing."

Dissecting the economy

Communities need good data to make good decisions

The dynamics of the retail industry in Greater Minnesota reflect a growing regionalism. Minnesotans often live in one town while they work and educate their children in another. And, they shop in many different communities.

To help retailers understand this dynamic and respond, Extension provides retail trade analyses to towns throughout the state. Extension community economics educators like Bruce Schwartau scrutinize reams of data on spending patterns and help leaders understand how to boost retail business success.

This resulting “deep dive” helps leaders better understand how to optimize spending in their communities. Extension conducted more than 50 applied-research projects in 2013.

Understanding where the dollars flow informs local decisions. “We know that people drive 40 miles or more to shop in places like Fairmont in Martin County,” Schwartau says. “What does that mean for the rest of the region? By examining a host of factors, communities throughout Martin County can work together and choose their plan to share and expand the retail pie.”



Bruce Schwartau, Extension community economics educator, presents an analysis to the Winona Area Chamber of Commerce.

Preparing new leaders

Research backs up what Davies learned in Akeley. It does take a lot of people to lead communities and organizations like a Chamber of Commerce. In fact, one in 34 residents in rural areas must serve in a leadership position, compared to one in every 143 in major metropolitan areas.

Rural leader positions are most frequently filled by older residents, those with high incomes and business owners. Through Extension leadership and civic engagement programs, communities are engaging a wider spectrum of community members, including new immigrants, younger adults and residents with diverse incomes.

“We want those involved to mirror the dynamic demographics of Minnesota’s communities,” says Toby Spanier, Extension leadership educator. “Our civic life has to represent multiple perspectives so that solutions work for everyone.”



Extension helps Minnesota cities and towns of all sizes learn about their strengths and take steps to improve their potential.

CHECKLIST FOR STRONG COMMUNITIES

Communities thrive when leaders and community members:

- Recognize** and understand their situation
- Have greater confidence** that they can manage change
- Act** to move toward a desired vision
- Respond** to opportunities and challenges
- Work through** limitations, differences, interests and other barriers
- Consider** the impact of their actions on the greater community