Central Mississippi River ~ Regional Planning Partnership

Creating a shared regional vision and goals, then working together to accomplish them

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The Framework 2030 regional planning framework includes a broad vision for the future of the region, 12 supportive strategies to move the communities forward, and 28 action items (and explanatory text) to advance the strategies. The vision, strategies, and action items were formally adopted by the Partnership in April-May 2021. More: CMRP website.

FRAMEWORK 2030
partnering for the future

Regional Vision

We -- the communities of the Central Mississippi River Regional Planning Partnership -- are a strong and dynamic region.

We are made prosperous through our network of assets and proactive leadership, made distinct through our vital and connected places, and made home by our welcoming people and communities.

Land Use: Strategies and Actions

L1. Leverage the region's unique parks, trails, and natural resources

- In addition to serving as a major gateway to recreation opportunities "up North," the region and Partner communities enjoy a wealth of their own natural assets
- These include the Mississippi River, multiple lakes, the Sherburne National Wildlife Refuge, and numerous community parks and trails
- These resources are unique when compared to more developed areas closer to the Twin Cities and represent a tremendous asset

L1A: Promote the expansion of bicycling and walking infrastructure throughout the region

The region is rich in natural beauty and outdoor amenities that are increasingly connected through multi-use trails and paths. While trails exist throughout each of the communities, they are not all connected to one another in a larger, regional network. There is an opportunity to fully network the system and provide connections within and around communities.

L1B: Develop a regional parks website

While each local government operates its own parks system, community members and visitors often benefit from the assets located outside their particular place of residence. By creating a centralized website to share information about programming, places, and events, the Partnership could magnify the efforts of each community and establish a stronger regional identity based on its natural features

L1C: Commission a regional trails and greenways map and plan

The region is bisected by more than 60 miles of mixed-use trails. These are major assets for the region and can be better organized and shared. A comprehensive and dynamic regional greenways map would inventory and map key trails based on location, size, and amenities, etc.

L2. Promote life-cycle housing

- Fewer residents both live and work in the region and the majority of workers live outside the Partnership communities
- This may suggest opportunities to address issues with job quality and housing affordability or availability
- This trend limits the region's competitiveness related to the workforce and increases the potential long-term tax burden on residents

L2A: Present an annual report and presentation on housing trends and development

Up to, and accelerated through 2020, the communities of the region have experienced significant increases in housing costs and average sales price. With rising demand and dynamism in the market, a regular study and report on key housing trends would benefit the communities individually and the region as a whole.

L2B: Create a regional housing market dashboard

In a dynamic housing and regional housing market, up-to-date data and information is critical for policy development and decision making. Tracking this data over time will also give valuable insights and can inform future planning since housing is so closely connected to other topics like employment, education, land use, transportation, infrastructure, and others.

L2C: Facilitate community conversations around strategic growth areas

The two-county region can expect increased development pressure over the next decade. There is a need to engage communities in an ongoing discussion around key development corridors and nodes. This is a proactive measure that will ensure growth that occurs in the region enhances the quality of place, quality of life, and the quality of opportunity.

L2D: Develop a regional housing strategy

This strategy is a logical outgrowth of the meetings, collaboration, and data collection facilitated by the Partnership. It will reflect on changing demand, share ideas about how to respond to growth, and define the market area and various housing products. It may also address topics such as workforce housing, needs and opportunities post-pandemic, and housing incentive tools.

L3. Invest in placemaking
- Residents of the region love their communities and see even greater latent potential
- Investments in downtowns, neighborhoods, parks, and trails, and elsewhere should focus on authentic expressions of the community and cultivate a better sense of place
- These initiatives will work best when the ideas and creativity are locally sourced

L3A: Host a regional placemaking committee

Placemaking is a creative and proactive approach to connecting people with the public places they share. Responsibilities of the committee would include inventory and seek grant funding for placemaking projects; support or sponsor community events; develop a regional public art plan; create a regional public art map; administer the micro-grant program; and more.

L3B: Commission local public art in regional gateway and wayfinding signage

Arts-based placemaking is an effective way to promote a sense of place in the communities as well as increase cultural diversity and civic engagement. Involving local artists also gives each community the opportunity to provide its signature on the region at large. It will be important that funded projects maintain a consistent visual relationship and display the regional brand.

L3C: Launch a placemaking micro-grant program

With oversight from the placemaking committee, the micro-grant program would invite non-government actors to apply for $500-$1000 grants to support small placemaking projects in their communities. Rather than a single, centralized, and large-scale project, this program promotes neighborhood scale efforts all across the region.

L4. Improve regional communication to support local land planning and management
- The "small town feel" is a shared and treasured value across each of the region's diverse communities,

and can be attributed to the scale and character of development (or the lack of it) in each place
- The multi-year trend of strong growth in jobs and people will continue over the coming decades
- To maintain the region's character while also enabling the benefits of good growth, communities in the region will need to communicate their plans and policies to work in concert with one another

L4A: Identify key regional corridors for coordinated planning

Corridors in the region present an opportunity to collaborate on land use decisions, transportation considerations, and placemaking strategies. Although multi-jurisdictional planning is complex, it is also an effective way to build a collaborative spirit, facilitate smart growth, and promote positive economic outcomes.

L4B: Develop a regional conceptual development strategy

The aggregation of relevant existing plans in the region would help to identify points of friction and areas of redundancy, unnecessary competition, or gaps in planning. The communities of the partnership could then discuss how to address some of these findings in a regional strategy.

Economic Growth: Strategies and Actions

E1. Expand on the quality and variety of employment opportunities
- The region has the opportunity to expand employment opportunities into emerging industries while strengthening the quality of jobs in the local economy
- By investing in small business and private sector job growth, the region builds resiliency through a broader array of employment industries and increasing career opportunities with current employers

E1A: Facilitate expansion of high-speed internet access across the region

Broadband internet is necessary to support business growth and will be essential to improving and increasing employment opportunities in the region. The Partnership can help the region expand the reach of broadband across the planning area by collecting and sharing key information on the expected roll-out of state and federal programs and by mapping focus areas or areas with limited or no high-speed coverage.

E1B: Maintain a regional industrial land inventory

A collaborative approach to industrial land marketing and management could mitigate vacancies and promote economic synergy among the Partnership communities. With an understanding of the different employment sectors in terms of their land, transportation, and service needs, the Partnership could identify the most strategic locations for new industrial clusters based on types of activity and create and share a regional map.

E2. Increase the pool of skilled labor in the region
- As the region continues to transition from one economic era to the next, there will be an increased need for skilled and adaptable labor
- Right now, most regional employees commute in from outside the region, while most regional residents commute out of the region for work -- and this gap will continue if unchecked
- Quality local jobs for prepared local applicants would allow people to both live and work in the region

E2A: Initiate discussions with higher-education institutions

Increasing and strengthening the workforce requires strong relationships between communities and a wide variety of educational institutions. Building stronger connections between the secondary and post-secondary opportunities in the region can enhance opportunities for students and produce a stronger, more competitive workforce. In turn, this strategy could support and attract new employers and generally provide better opportunities for residents overall.

E2B: Facilitate partnerships between businesses and schools

The region is home to just over 14,000 primary jobs, but less than half are held by residents. The Partnership can leverage the connections of its members to convene conversations among major employers and secondary education. Through

stronger connections between businesses and students, there is an opportunity to forge lasting partnerships that encourage students to continue working in the region beyond graduation.

E3. Network the response to economic disruptions

- Economic disruptions are being felt throughout the region; some are unique to this area and others are national
- Some of these were spurred by the COVID-19 pandemic and related to the economic shutdown; others were well underway, such as decommissioning the SherCo Generating Station and eventually the Xcel Nuclear Generating Station
- One of the most effective responses to economic disruptions is regional collaboration and coordination on the region's growing and emerging industries

E3A: Commission a regional fiscal analysis of land use

The fiscal productivity - or the net community benefit - varies across the region based on the land use. Understanding the net impact of costs and revenues on government finances can help decision-makers identify which types of land use to encourage and those to approach with caution. Beyond a point-in-time study, regularly tracking the net fiscal effects of land use could become a valuable tool for evaluating decisions made at a regional scale.

E3B: Create and manage a regional commercial property vacancy database

Providing accessible and centralized commercial vacancy information may reduce barriers to filling these holes and avoiding long-term blight and disinvestment. As the Region seeks to attract employers and new businesses, a centralized database of commercial vacancies would provide easy access to information for potential tenants, and it may influence the communities' understanding of the need for additional commercial land.

E4. Measure impacts of action locally and regionally

- Measuring the success of any initiative requires logical measures of progress such as dashboards, which provide leaders with information necessary to mark success, adjust strategies, and extend or build on key efforts
- This region -- through this collaborative Framework 2030 effort -- is committed to marking progress across a wide range of topics, and identifying a set of key metrics to measure community progress is critical to long-term success

E4A: Establish and update regional indicators dashboard

Successful dashboards collect and monitor pertinent data points over time and present the information in a clear and compelling way. Information such as job growth, population change, graduation rates, and housing starts provides important insights into the trajectory of the region and will be regularly made available to the public.

E4B: Establish and monitor progress criteria for all Framework actions

Effective implementation of this plan will depend on benchmarking and monitoring the advancement of each of the actions. While implementation is a collective effort with many involved parties among the communities, the Partnership will be responsible to ensure that the actions advance as intended. Benchmarking progress will be key to the Partnership's value proposition.

Interconnections: Strategies and Actions

I1. Create a clear and compelling regional identity to advance collaborative work

- With the Partnership being a relatively new organization, the region doesn't yet have a clear and distinct identity
- The Partnership's work on Framework 2030 is a crucial first step, and richer regional collaboration would further build a regional identity and unlock new opportunities for resources, action development, and successful implementation

I1A: Develop a regional brand and identity

Creating a brand that embraces the distinctive characteristics and visions of the communities will give a sense of unity and identity to the region. A recognizable brand can leave a memorable impression on visitors and connect or associate places with one another. The regional brand should seek to celebrate the individuality of the communities while also collecting those places into the demonstrated regional market area.

I1B: Integrate branding with placemaking initiatives

Applying the regional brand to local placemaking initiatives will provide a common thread that links the efforts of each community. While every placemaking project or event should be unique, attaching the regional brand to each of them displays how the communities are part of something larger than themselves.

I2. Enhance connections between our communities

- The physical and non-physical connections across the region play a key enabling role for local and regional economic activity
- These corridors are the unifying factor for the region and help to define (and in some cases protect) its character

I2A: Continue ongoing conversations with MnDOT and the counties regarding special projects

Major transportation and infrastructure investment into the region has, in most cases, been the result of a collaborative process between communities, counties, and the state. The complexity, cost, and multi-jurisdictional coordination of these projects well exceed the capacity for any individual community to complete. As the region continues to grapple with challenges related to growth and related congestion it will be essential to be "at the table" as major investments are considered and prioritized.

I3. Share talent, time, and information

- The region today is a collection of small cities and smaller townships (based on population)
- One advantage of this scale is the ability to foster community connections and reinforce the "small town feel" -- but this scale also limits capacity
- Working collaboratively, communities can enhance their capabilities by sharing time, talent, and information to take advantage of larger-scale opportunities and solve complex challenges

I3A: Establish an annual "State of the Region" forum

With time and maturity, the group will continue to grow its perspective and understanding of regional issues. As major "holders of the information," it will be important to establish a regular sharing opportunity with partner and non-partner communities alike. The event should convene government and non-government actors from around Sherburne and Wright Counties and prioritize engagement and participation.

I3B: Hire staff, contractors to orchestrate action

As the Partnership considers its initial priorities for action, the group will need to quickly address the challenge around capacity. A staff person can help the group extend its effort and take on daily tasks, building regular progress from month-to-month. An effective director would be an initiator, communicator, convener, and advocate for the Framework 2030 plan.

I3C: Pursue a regional lobbying effort, "Our fair share"

The Partnership is the principal advocate for the communities and the region and can lobby for their needs at the state and federal levels. With major funding being released through the American Rescue Plan and the potential for increased federal infrastructure spending the next decade, the region must ensure it receives its "fair share" of this investment. As a unified region, the Partnership can leverage its size and perspective in a way that the individual communities cannot.

I4. Continually address regional vulnerabilities and emerging opportunities

- Framework 2030 should result in an ongoing process by the communities in the region to identify areas of weakness or vulnerability
- The project was initiated in 2020, a year of profound disruption -- and this churning is expected to continue for some time
- The region must commit to an ongoing evaluative process, fueled by curiosity and urgency

I4A: Study social service opportunities that may benefit from regional coordination

A full inventory of existing social services in the region would provide a clearer understanding of the coverages, gaps, and redundancies in the network. Some of the hundreds of mission-minded organizations could benefit from an "economies of scale" approach. The Partnership and communities can work together to identify if certain services would be more effective if coordinated regionally rather than in each of the individual jurisdictions and convene discussions to initiate this collaboration.

I4B: Convene ongoing discussions on energy plant closures

The SherCo coal-fired power generation plant and Xcel's nuclear power generation plant account for hundreds of jobs and a significant tax base in the region. As both plants are tentatively scheduled to be decommissioned, it will be imperative for the partner communities to coordinate their response. The decommissioning will leave significant power generation infrastructure in place and may present opportunities for major capital investment.