

# Comprehensive Economic Development Strategy

Region 5  
North Dakota  
2024 - 2028



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# Introduction

## **What is a CEDS?**

The Comprehensive Economic Development Strategy (CEDS) is meant to coordinate planning amongst the private, public, and nonprofit sectors in order to create a roadmap aimed at solving the challenges preventing broad-based, inclusive economic growth. This CEDS is for six counties in southeast North Dakota - Cass, Ransom, Richland, Sargent, Steele, and Traill - defined as "Region 5" by the North Dakota Legislature in the early 1970s. Lake Agassiz Regional Council (LARC) is the Economic Development District (EDD), as designated by the Economic Development Administration (EDA), serving those six counties.

Having an up-to-date CEDS is a prerequisite if organizations in our region wish to obtain financial assistance under EDA's Public Works and Economic Adjustment Programs. While this document summarizes development priorities, its effectiveness as a planning tool is dependent on the leadership taken by local governments, organizations, and businesses. Other than the control LARC exercises of its own staff and operations, this CEDS is strictly advisory in nature. Various cities, towns, and economic developers have done their own strategic planning efforts. Where applicable, we drew upon these plans so as to integrate the findings and action steps into this document.

## **Preparing the CEDS**

Public engagement consisted primarily of one-on-one conversations held with 52 individuals and organizations. Of that total 52% was with stakeholders in the private sector; 33% was with the public sector while the remaining 15% was with representatives from nonprofits. Conversations centered around their priorities and initiatives as well as unmet needs and who is best suited to fulfill them. We are thankful for those participants sharing valuable input and ideas.

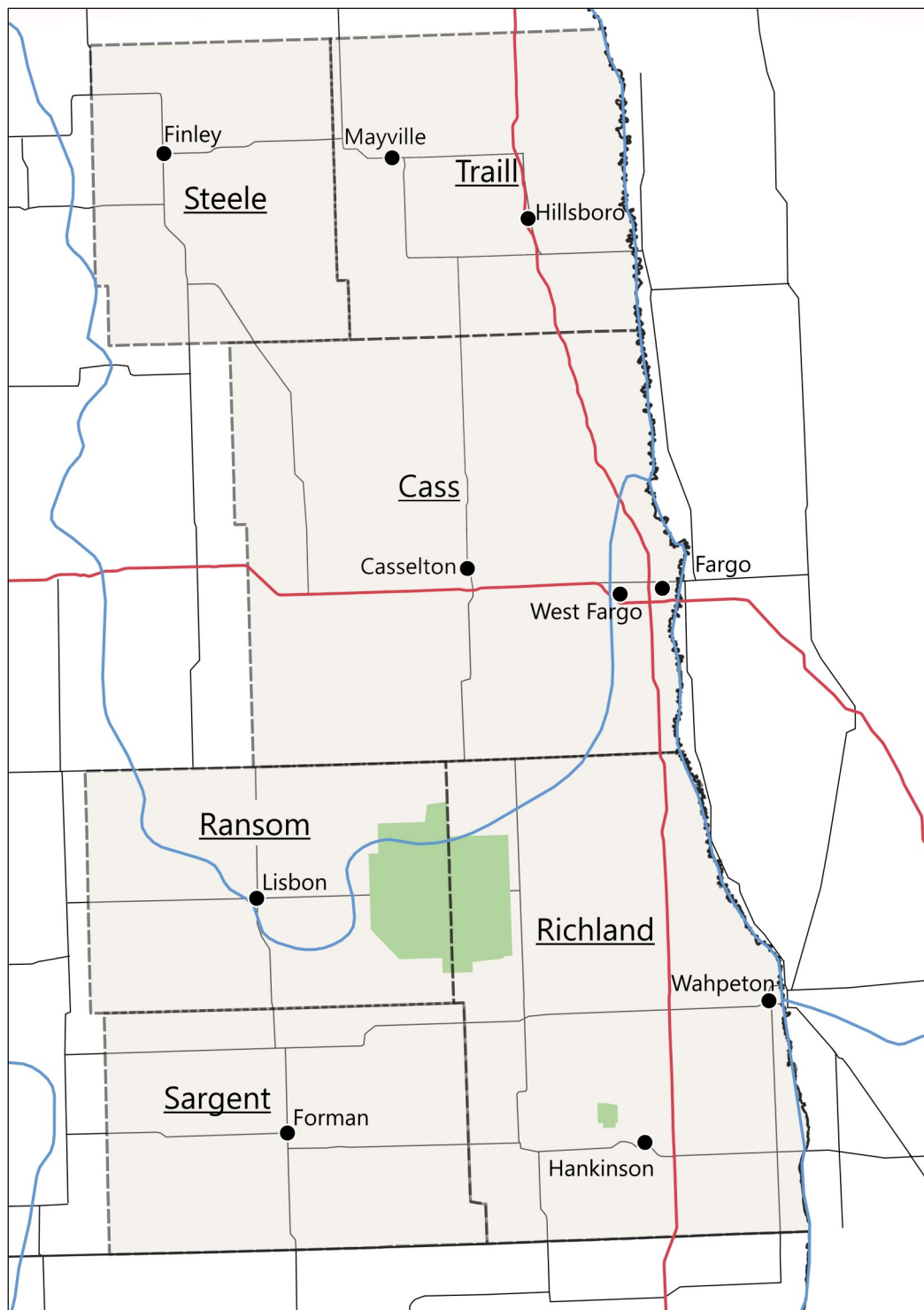
We are also very grateful to the Advisory Committee members listed in Appendix A. These professionals shared their time and expertise to provide an independent assessment of the CEDS, thus ensuring it accurately reflects the region's conditions and that the five year action plan is ambitious yet attainable.

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# Description of Area

The region is found at the southern end of the Red River Valley, a flat expanse of land that formed following the recession of the Laurentide Ice Sheet and the draining of the ancient Lake Agassiz less than 10,000 years ago. Accumulated biomass and silt deposits created highly fertile topsoil to depths of up to sixty feet. Sugarbeets, corn, soy, and small grains are the principal crops grown. The flat terrain, poor drainage, and timing of snowmelt can easily lead to widespread areal flooding. The following map shows the six counties constituting Region 5.



Our region overlaps with the traditional lands of the Oceti Sakowin (Dakota, Lakota, Nakoda) and Anishinaabe Peoples. European settlers were drawn to the area starting in the early 1800s. Immigration from Germany and the Scandinavian countries took off in earnest following the passage of the Homestead Act and the railroad companies' westward expansion.

The valley's continental climate causes a wide range of temperatures throughout the year from the notoriously frigid and snowy winters to the potentially hot and dry summers. Between two-thirds and three-quarters of the 6,522 square miles are under agricultural production in a given year. A little over 5% has been developed with the vast majority being Fargo and its suburbs and bedroom communities. Protected habitats are found across several wildlife management areas and the over 135,000 square mile Sheyenne National Grassland sited principally in Richland County. It is among the largest area of tallgrass habitat remaining in the country.

Profiles of each county are found later in this CEDS.



*Agriculture has long been the bedrock of North Dakota's economy. Several local companies are at the cutting edge of technological advancements in agricultural production and value-added processing. Given the fact the world's population is anticipated to grow by 2 billion people by 2050, our region has a role in discovering novel methods to feed an ever growing planet. (Image courtesy of the State of North Dakota)*

# Priorities and Action Plan

This section presents the seven goals applicable to the entire service area. These emerged out of the quantitative analyses and input from stakeholder conversations. Under each goal are a series of strategies intended to help guide activities over the next five years. Strategies are presented in no particular order of prioritization. LARC itself will not have a role to play for most of these actions. However, it may assist whenever it can according to its capacity and expertise. LARC may pursue solutions benefiting multiple jurisdictions if it proves to be more cost effective to do so.

You will notice the action plan containing only a few items that could be considered part of the first-wave method of economic development whereby companies were attracted to an area providing financial assistance (a.k.a. “smokestack chasing”). Nowadays, the focus is on talent attraction and retention. Instead of people going to where the jobs are, companies will create jobs only where there are the people to fill them. Thus, developers are now devoting significant time and effort to enhancing their communities’ amenities and quality of life.

## GOALS

- [1] Diversify the Economy***
- [2] Support Small Business Owners and Entrepreneurs***
- [3] Grow and Develop the Workforce***
- [4] Build and Preserve Cost-efficient Resilient Infrastructure***
- [5] Improve Housing Options***
- [6] Strengthen and Leverage each Community’s Quality of Life***
- [7] Build Local Capacity and Resiliency***

# [1] Diversify the Economy

## Call to Action

An economy which is heavily reliant upon the health of one or a few sectors is inherently susceptible to the ups and downs of those sectors. A sense of complacency can easily seep in when times are good. However, when conditions turn sour the impacts can be deep and long-lasting. It is not reasonable to expect all counties to be well-positioned for diversification strategies as of this moment. It is of great importance efforts can be taken to create the appropriate conditions necessary for a more stable and resilient economy.

## Context

- Our rural counties are more vulnerable due to a reliance on production agriculture. Countries putting up trade barriers, shifts in global commodity prices, weather and crop disease are among the challenges that can arise anytime. These events have knockoff effects as farmers may hold off purchasing new equipment as well as spending less at stores in town.
- Sizable investments in value-added agricultural processing facilities in the past few years will increase demand for corn and soybeans. Prices paid to farmers should increase as a result.
- The Fargo metropolitan area has seen growth in the number and size of tech businesses in the realm of bioscience, agricultural tech, and uncrewed aerial systems (UAS). While fewer in number, jobs created in these industries tend to be higher paid.

## Strategies

- Keep abreast of technological advancements within nascent industries so as to obtain the “first mover advantage.”
- Undergo an Area Sector Analysis Process (ASAP) or similar model that identifies and elucidates a jurisdiction’s preferences for economic development and compares it to industry needs and critical factors affecting companies’ decision on where to locate operations.
- Have technical studies done on sites with development or redevelopment potential, obtain documents to show if the site is shovel ready, certify with site selector programs, and promote to new or expanding companies, and utilize the region’s subscription to LocationOne Information System (LOIS).
- Advocate for incentives and policies that facilitate innovation and formation of startup companies.



- Ensure there is adequate infrastructure and capacity to serve new or expanding value added agriculture processors and biofuel production facilities
- Write grant applications for establishing cluster focused innovation and commercialization hubs. New opportunities are available through EDA, National Science Foundation, Small Business Administration, and the State of North Dakota (e.g., Bioscience Innovation grant).
- Support existing incubators, co-working spaces, proof of concept and makerspaces. Consider establishing new ones to fill a geographic need or specialized facilities targeted to specific industries.
- Expand the research and development capabilities at NDSU through updated facilities and equipment. Attracting and retaining researchers and support staff is critical for the institution's competitiveness for research funding through the federal government, foundations, and the private sector.



*Research and development is an essential driver of economic growth as it spurs innovation and drives technological change. R&D funding is highly competitive. In order to continue NDSU's high standing in agricultural research, the university is constructing the \$85 million Peltier Complex that will house the Agricultural Products Development Center. In addition to its research capabilities, the facility will provide an enhanced learning environment that will allow students to be prepared for careers in agriculture and food industries. (Image courtesy of NDSU)*



## [2] Support Small Business Owners and Entrepreneurs

### Call to Action

A robust rate of new businesses starts is indicative of an economy that is more productive, innovative, and capable of creating jobs. We found that inadequate planning, an inability to access startup capital, finding employees, supply chain disruptions, and inflation are the main challenges facing small business owners today. Factors on the personal level such as high health care costs and shortage of affordable childcare also present barriers to people opening new businesses. Alleviating these impediments to success will require cooperation among the stakeholders who are currently or who are able to deliver the relevant programming.

### Context

- The Small Business Administration defines a “small businesses” as a manufacturer with less than 500 employees and non-manufacturers with average annual receipts under \$7.5 million. These companies are the workhorses of the economy. Nationally these companies create nearly 63% of all new jobs and generate a third of the nation’s exports.
- Racial and ethnic disparities in wealth and income persist. In North Dakota, the median income of Black households is 57% of white households. For Native Americans it is 50%. Among those born outside the US, it rests at 45%. Entrepreneurship is one avenue by which to bridge this gap.
- Those living in rural areas can easily face greater hurdles when it comes to the availability of customers, suppliers, financing, and support resources.

### Strategies

- Support the organizations who are building the area’s “entrepreneurial ecosystem” - which is defined as the blend of social, financial, cultural, and political components within a given area that are working in synch to create an environment conducive to entrepreneurship. Organizations contributing to the entrepreneurial ecosystem include the Small Business Development Center, ND Women’s Business Center, Emerging Prairie, Veterans Business Outreach Center of the Dakotas, and the Immigrant Development Center.
- Evaluate the structure and performance of the entrepreneurial ecosystem to determine how to better serve diverse populations (e.g., BIPOC, New Americans, women, LGBTQ+, justice involved individuals)
- Look into SBA’s Small Business Investment Company program which issues debt to venture funds, private equity funds, and other vehicles who invest in small and scalable businesses.
- Utilize LADG’s suite of loan programs—e.g. microloan, IRP, SBA 504, Richland County JDA, EDA, and the defederalized RLF sourced originally by EDA.

- Utilize existing gap financing options or create new ones that meet the varying needs across business types, industries, and borrowers. Partnerships between a unit of government, most commonly through their economic development authority, and banks or credit unions are vital for the success of these programs.
- Increase the number and scale of investments by national CDFIs. It is necessary to bring projects to their attention given the history of this part of the country being passed over. Assuming there is an adequate deal flow, the aggregation of impact capital from multiple foundations, anchor institutions, and private investments can be done through a collaborative investment fund. A national organization called CDFI Friendly can assist with this process.
- Have a feasibility study conducted to examine whether a new CDFI specific for the region is warranted. Such an organization would be capable of compiling resources from the public, private, and philanthropic sectors to craft financing solutions tailored to the region's needs.
- Assist in the development of local investor groups to increase access to capital. This will help fill the unmet need for venture capital.
- Tap into SBDC's partnership with Mainvest—a platform that allows unaccredited investors to identify and select small businesses to invest. In lieu of a traditional interest rate, returns to the investor are based on a revenue-sharing model with the business.
- Provide succession planning options for owners approaching retirement age. Consider a replication of the RedTire model at the University of Kansas whereby graduating students are connected with owners in the rural portions of the state.
- Aid in the formation of new cooperatives of different varieties (e.g., retail, worker, producer, and service).
- Connect rural business owners with USDA's Rural Energy for America Program. Grants and loans through this program help with implementing energy efficiency measures as well as installing renewable energy generation and battery storage.

## **[3] Grow and Develop the Workforce**

### **Call to Action**

The most common stated priority among stakeholders is the acute shortage of people to fill open jobs. This is felt across the spectrum from the lesser skilled entry level positions to the more highly skilled professional, technical, and managerial positions. Health care and manufacturing are two sectors experiencing this crunch the hardest. Solving this issue will require a multipronged approach that includes upskilling incumbent workers, helping people with mid-career transitions, and positioning the region to better compete in the game of attracting and retaining new residents.

### **Context**

- As of August 2023, there were only 38 unemployed persons per 100 open jobs in Region 5.
- Unemployment rates have been under 4% since September 2020.
- The lack of available and affordable childcare spots has kept many parents at home taking care of their children instead of working.
- Misconceptions about careers in manufacturing need to be cleared up in order to entice young people. Manufacturing is no longer necessarily a dirty, laborious, lowly remunerated job that is exclusively the purview of white men. Instead, there are high tech, clean, and well-compensated jobs held by a diverse workforce.
- The rural counties have all experienced a negative net migration over the past fifty years. Cass County is the only one to have had more people move in than move out over the same timeframe.

### **Strategy**

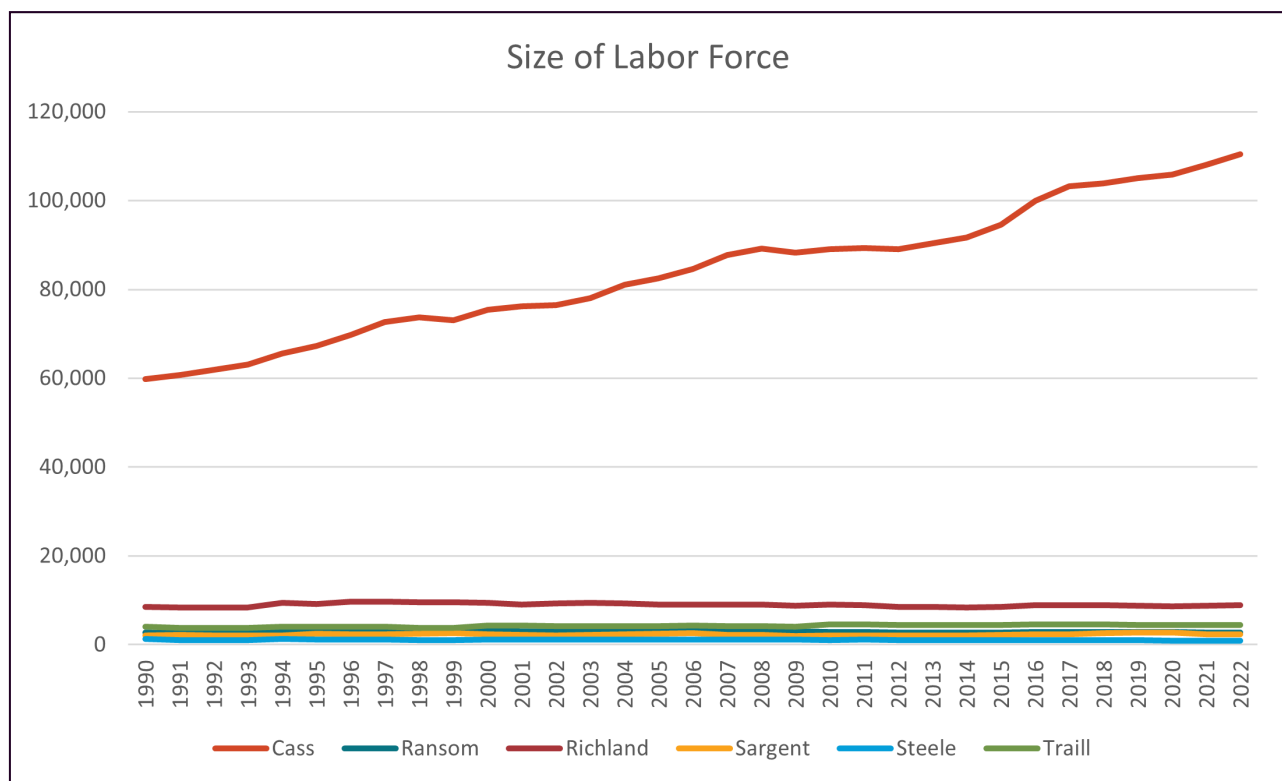
- Continuation of the talent attraction marketing campaigns currently being led by Greater Fargo Moorhead Economic Development Corporation and the State of North Dakota. Assist rural jurisdictions in taking advantage of these marketing efforts. Consider partnerships with entities across the Red River Valley for greater exposure.
- Continue the Community Concierge program currently being led by the Fargo Moorhead West Fargo Chamber of Commerce. This program allows for local volunteers to make personal connections with prospective residents and to help answer outstanding concerns about moving to Fargo. This program is replicable for the rural counties too.
- Research the factors affecting peoples' decisions to move to a new place without having prior experience and/or familial ties to the area. Narrowing down these findings by looking at people working in the high-demand occupations necessitates surveys and focus groups.
- Support F5 Project's work with justice-involved individuals in obtaining employment. On the other side of the equation, they work with employers to allay concerns they might have about hiring such individuals.

- Increase awareness of career opportunities in high-demand fields among K-12 students. One example is that of veterinarians specializing in livestock. If the State's efforts to grow the animal agriculture industry are to succeed, more veterinarians are needed to not only replace those who are retiring, but also to respond to the expected higher demand.
- Increase the number of childcare spots and improve the financial sustainability of existing providers. Local job development authorities can offer space at a reduced rate to help with cash flow.
- Conduct a study to quantify the economic impact resulting from the childcare shortage. When parents are unable to take a job offer because of the high cost and/or unavailability of childcare, there are repercussions in terms of business income, household income, and tax revenue. Such a study will inform policy makers and assist in determining appropriate strategies.
- Examine the labor utilization rates across socio-economic groups and help those with a higher rate of unemployed or underemployed with job training programs. It has been proven pairing job training with wraparound services—e.g. housing assistance, childcare, transportation, counseling, etc.—improves program completion rates.
- Undertake "digital equity" programming to train those from marginalized groups for tech jobs such as computer programming. The Emerging Digital Academy is a full-stack coding bootcamp run by Emerging Prairie. Increasing participation by BIPOC, women, and low-to-moderate income individuals will prepare them to apply for tech jobs that are currently available.



*There has been an uptick in the number of cities and states undertaking marketing campaigns in order to attract new residents. Some campaigns provide financial incentives for covering moving costs. All, however, have promoting the jurisdiction's quality of life and amenities, as well as available jobs, as its core. (Image courtesy of GFMEDC)*

- Utilize apprenticeship programs and similar earn-and-learn models that combine classroom instruction with on the job training. This model is particularly effective in the skilled trades.
- Encourage private company participation in ND Career Builders. This program provides matching funds for employers who offer scholarships and/or loans to new employees in high-demand occupations.
- Focus on retaining college students through networking opportunities, mentoring, career exploration, and similar programming as is being implemented by CampusFM.
- Reinforce the region's strengths and cultural identity through fully funding placemaking and related physical improvements aimed at quality of life factors. Extensive public engagement is the foundation for successful revitalization efforts. Resource partners from across the nation have created a myriad of tools to meaningfully engage all segments of the population.
- Complete the interior build-out of NDSCS's Career Innovation Center in south Fargo. As of writing, this facility is under construction and is slated to open prior to the fall 2025 semester. Due to inflation, NDSCS and its partners had to keep portions of the building as a core and shell for future fit-up once additional funding has been secured.
- Find a sustainable model for transit service meant specifically for underserved populations that connect them to areas with jobs. For example, the industrial parks in north Fargo are distant from parts of town with residents who can benefit from taking the higher paying jobs found there.



*Not surprisingly, the size of the rural counties' labor force has, at best, remained stagnant over the years. "Labor force" is defined as the estimate of all civilian noninstitutionalized persons ages 16 and over classified as either employed or unemployed but actively seeking work. (Data courtesy of the Bureau of Labor Statistics).*



## **[4] Build and Preserve Cost-efficient Resilient Infrastructure**

### **Call to Action**

Fiscal constraints make keeping infrastructure in a state of good repair, let alone investing to increase service capacity, a constant endeavor for our communities. Inadequate infrastructure can easily serve as a limiting factor to economic development. The challenge will only grow as the worsening impacts from climate change increases the stress placed upon the region's infrastructure, thus threatening the health and safety of the public.

### **Context**

- Climate change models predict an increase in precipitation during the colder months to the tune of 10% to 15% by 2050, thus exacerbating the risk from spring time floods. The projected increase in the frequency and intensity of extreme precipitation events will strain municipalities' stormwater systems.
- The total cost of Region 5's priority projects in the ND Department of Water Resource's 2023 Intended Use Plan is approximately \$290 million.
- Infrastructure in lightly populated areas is less cost effective to build and operate given the small tax base and distance between users. Similarly, small towns have a tougher time in building a sizable enough financial reserve to cover emergency repairs when infrastructure fails.
- Increases in federal appropriations through the Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act (aka Bipartisan Infrastructure Law) should help jurisdictions catch up on replacing outdated infrastructure.
- The Spiritwood, West Fargo, Page, Milnor Channel, and Hillsboro aquifers have all been identified by the ND Department of Water Resources as being inadequate for additional industrial uses.
- The region is served by two Class I railroad companies—Canadian Pacific and BNSF— and two Class III (a.k.a, shortline) railroads with Red River Valley & Western and Dakota Missouri Valley & Western.

### **Strategies**

- Utilize the state's Agriculture Infrastructure Grant Program for improvements to roads, bridges, and utility services necessary to accommodate value-added agriculture businesses.
- Advocate for a state funded program to replace how the Community Development Block Grant was used previously for emergency repairs.
- Proactively plan for context sensitive and compatible deployment of renewable energy generation, transmission lines, and other energy infrastructure.

- Financially assist construction of rail spurs that will serve developable industrial lots.
- Obtain FEMA grants to construct public storm shelters. The ND Department of Emergency Services has been pushing for more shelters to be constructed, especially for vulnerable locations like parks and manufactured home parks.
- Assist townships and cities in updating zoning ordinances and building codes in order to become compliant with the National Flood Insurance Program. Areas in Ransom, Sargent, and Steele counties are not in compliance as of this writing. This should be paired with engaging in public outreach to increase awareness of flood risks and the importance of flood insurance.
- Conduct pre-disaster recovery planning that will guide local leaders' policy decisions after the response phase of a disaster has ended.
- Examine the feasibility of "resiliency hubs" located in areas with underserved populations who are exposed to higher risks from natural disasters. While these facilities can serve as community centers during the year, these are built and equipped to handle acute emergency needs—e.g. serving as temporary trauma center; providing shelter for evacuees; distributing food, water, and other supplies; and being the central hub for local, state, and federal response teams.
- Tap into federal funding for installing renewable energy and efficiency improvements at government buildings.



*Our region is blessed to have the Red River and its tributaries. These rivers are not only a source of drinking and irrigation water, they also offer recreational opportunities through canoeing, kayaking, and fishing. Conversely, these rivers, coupled with the flat topography, are a source of consternation. Significant investments in flood protection have been made over the decades to protect communities up and down the valley. (Image courtesy of the State of North Dakota)*

## [5] Improve Housing Options

### Call to Action

Housing production has not kept pace with the formation of new households. Supply chain disruptions, inflation, interest rate increases, and the stagnate number of construction workers are contributing factors. Rural areas with low sales prices and relatively few prior sales of comparable homes cause an appraisal gap making new construction or rehabilitation to not pencil out. Efforts to increase the housing stock will need to reflect changing demographics of the region.

### Context

- Across the counties, between 10.6% and 40.4% of renters are cost-burdened (defined as spending more than thirty percent on gross monthly income on housing related costs). Amongst households earning less than \$50,000 it reaches as high as 64.4%.
- Median home values range between \$107,880 in Steele County up to \$301,330 in Cass County (as of Q1 2023).
- The share of non-family households—includes those with only one person as well as those consisting of unrelated individuals—has been increasing. So has the number of elderly led households. Demographic changes necessitate a reexamination of the adequacy of the housing stock to meet diverse needs.
- The housing stock in rural areas has not increased; rather, it has declined in some counties. It becomes difficult to attract new workers to the community if there simply are no homes available that are in good-condition, safe, and fits the needs of the household.

### Strategies

- Analyze the housing market dynamics for either individual communities or on a region-wide basis. The purpose of the study is to examine how many new homes are needed, where these should be located, and what features and price points are homebuyers looking for. This data should help private developers understand what market potential exists.
- Encourage construction of additional workforce housing in rural communities through concessional capital options, tax incentives, and improvements to public infrastructure for new subdivisions. Subsidies fill in the financing gap and reduce the risk for developers. “Workforce housing” is defined as those affordable to middle income workers (i.e., between 80% and 120% of Area Median Income).
- Build new and preserve existing affordable housing that is reasonably priced for those earning under 80% of AMI. Preserving properties originally built with USDA’s Section 515 funds that are now aging out of the program is critical to maintaining access for low-to-moderate income and/or elderly residents.

- Consider the feasibility of novel ownership models like resident-owned manufactured home parks, multigenerational housing, coliving arrangements, pocket neighborhoods, shared equity, *Baugruppen*, and accessory dwelling units. Incorporating new technologies into construction methods - such as hempcrete and 3D printing - may reduce costs and increase the scale of housing production.
- Demolish blighted structures in preparation for newly built infill housing.
- Boost resources available to the nonprofit organizations who rehab homes for LMI persons. Limited funding and restrictions associated with government grants makes it difficult to respond to the need for housing rehabilitation. Especially when it comes to making homes accessible for the elderly and for those with disabilities. Removing lead based paint is vitally important for occupants' health. However, the process to do so is expensive and requires certified contractors. There are only a handful of contractors in the region with this capability.
- Determine whether employer-assisted housing is a viable model for the larger employers in the region.
- Ensure long-term affordability through the community land trust model whereby the trust retains ownership of the land while the houses are sold to income qualified buyers.
- Establish a regional housing trust fund that is modeled after the successful experiences in Iowa.
- Incentivize the rehabilitation of vacant upper-story space within main street buildings into residential units.



*The rate of new housing starts is more or less mirroring national trends. Underproduction is particularly prevalent in rural areas where fundamental economic conditions deter private homebuilders. There are differing opinions about the extent of government's role, if any, in spurring housing construction. (Image courtesy of The Fargo Forum)*

## **[6] Strengthen and Leverage each Community's Quality of Life**

### **Call to Action**

Amenities, such as recreational opportunities, social and cultural activities, good schools, and transportation options are now seen as being bigger contributors to a healthy local economy compared to the traditional "business-friendly" measures of low taxation, low unionization rates, or fewer regulations. The tight labor market is currently the region's most pressing issue. It is unreasonable to expect success in attracting talent if the community cannot fulfill peoples' preferred lifestyles. Folks may be willing to pay higher housing process and/or accept lower wages if the community's quality of life is good enough to justify the sacrifice.

### **Context**

- Certain cities in the region are fortunate to have a strong cadre of volunteer leaders who spearhead those critically needed community projects. However, there is a need to develop the next generation of leaders, if not create a culture of volunteerism in those towns where it is absent.
- Rural hospitals, clinics, nursing homes, and related medical facilities are at greater risk of closing due to inability to obtain economies of scale as well as lower reimbursement rates through government insurance programs.
- A 2023 survey done by the National Association of Realtors found 79% of respondents said being within an easy walk to shops, parks, and other places is very or somewhat important. 78% of those said they would be willing to pay more to live in a walkable neighborhood.

### **Strategies**

- Replicate the Rural Access Distribution Coop pioneered in northeast ND. Multiple independently owned grocery stores order from the same supplier. It is delivered to one store and from there is dispersed to the other ones. This model overcomes the higher costs associated with the distributors' minimum order sizes and the time and fuel spent for them to drive long routes. Groceries can also delivered to food lockers in towns without a store.
- Leverage our area's great broadband coverage and speeds in attracting remote workers.
- Make it easier and safer for people walking, biking, and rolling throughout town. Safe Routes to Schools, Complete Streets, and Universal Design are standards and best practices which inform local leaders on how the public right-of-way should be designed for the comfort and safety of non-drivers.
- Develop tourism destinations that local residents may also enjoy. One example that is underway is a science museum in south Fargo. There is also potential for packaging agritourism experiences that highlight local growers. Tourism can be a fruitful mechanism to expose people to our area for the first time.



- Help local leaders plan and carry out concerted efforts to make their community welcoming and inclusive to new residents, by partnering with the newly formed Office of Legal Immigration. Companies can work to improve their internal culture in terms of diversity, equity, and inclusion to better attract and retain new employees.
- Implementation of the Red River Greenway Master Plan which aims to create a trail and recreational facilities around the FM Diversion. This may include a new park at the diversion's outlet with the Red River.
- Apply for brownfields grants from EPA to assess and cleanup abandoned contaminated properties in preparation for redevelopment.
- Make it possible for people to age-in-place in their hometowns by examining how housing, transportation, medical services, recreational facilities, social connections, and fulfillment of daily needs can all be improved and made more accessible to the elderly.
- Create a thriving arts and cultural scene with many ways for participation. Adding art to public spaces can be a key contributor to revitalizing downtowns and neighborhoods.
- Build new and/or increase capacity of existing campgrounds and RV parks. ND Parks and Recreation have identified modern camping with amenities as being one of the primary recreational needs in Region 5. A co-benefit would be to create additional spaces for transient laborers who come to the valley during sugarbeet harvest season.
- Assist in developing local food businesses across the value chain by actively participating in the North Central Regional Food Business Center through 2028.



*A community's quality of life is dependent upon the conviviality of its people. Coming together at events, like Hankinson's Oktoberfest seen here, is a key contributor towards creating that positive social environment. People who feel welcome and accepted are much more likely to stay in a town for the long term. (Image courtesy of Wahpeton Daily News)*

## [7] Build Local Capacity & Resiliency

### Call to Action

Many communities across the region are fortunate to have enthusiastic and civic minded residents who are willing to devote significant sums of time and energy towards improving their communities (whether it be in a paid or volunteer position). At times, there is a need for assistance and additional resources, especially for unique issues where there is minimal to no prior experience. Where there is insufficient capacity commonly found across the region, it may make sense to pursue a regionwide solution.

### Context

- Economic development is inherently a collaborative affair that crosses jurisdictional lines, areas of expertise, and available resources. Maintaining lines of communication and keeping stakeholders informed of developments should be a high priority. To that end, an ad hoc group of stakeholders in southeast North Dakota have been meeting on a quarterly basis to keep the region updated on developments as well as to talk through collaborative solutions.
- Our rural communities are often reliant upon a core group of volunteers who lead efforts to get projects done. This is also true, albeit to a lesser extent, in the Fargo metropolitan area. These individuals can easily burnout. In addition, the typical age of those volunteers underscores the importance of incubating leadership traits of younger residents. Beginning this during their K-12 years could assist in retaining them upon graduation.

### Strategies

- Convene quarterly meetings of the economic development stakeholders found in southeast North Dakota. The purpose of these meetings are to share updates and to facilitate collaboration on common issues.
- Obtain proprietary data and tools that local economic developers can use in their day-to-day work. For example, credit card transaction data is one method to gauge the health of a community's retail sector.
- Cooperation among cities to jointly hire building code enforcer in order to address nuisances and blight.
- Encourage volunteerism as a method of capacity building and ensure there is a succession plan for community groups (whether those be formally or informally organized).
- Train local volunteer groups about effective methods of fundraising for community projects.
- Advocate for the allocation of sufficient funding and resources to business support organizations.
- Partner with the Sisseton Wahpeton Oyate on economic development projects occurring on the North Dakota side of Fort Traverse Reservation.

- Encourage collaboration among Economic Development Districts across the state as well as up and down the Red River Valley.
- Support leadership training programs such as NDSU Extension's "Rural Leadership North Dakota" program.
- Employ the WealthWorks approach in designing and implementing developmental projects. This model aims to elevate a community's existing assets in order to create locally controlled wealth, in a broadly conceptualized sense, rather than wealth which is merely extracted from the community.
- Assist cities and townships in updating zoning ordinances in response to emerging issues such as solar energy, wind energy, confined animal feeding operations, home occupations, self-storage facilities, farmland preservation, and so on.
- Have a study conducted examining the intergenerational transfer of wealth and the potential for significantly growing the area's philanthropic endowment funds.
- Ensure each county's Multi-Hazard Mitigation Plan is up-to-date.
- Quantify the region's economic vulnerability by measuring the number of businesses and jobs located in flood zones, total and by industry, and the number of critical facilities in flood zones.
- Create a rapid response playbook in the event of a major employer downsizing or closing their operations. Such a playbook will delegate roles to organizations; plan how to immediately assist those who lost their jobs; and lay out the next steps for long-term recovery and diversification.
- Keep in communication with local, regional, and state industry associations to stay on top of issues. There are numerous agricultural, manufacturing, and energy associations in the area who advocate on behalf of their members.



*An engaged citizenry—as seen here at a meeting in Forman, ND—is a key ingredient in crafting and implementing solutions to the community's most pressing problems.*

# SWOT Analysis

The questions of “where are we now”, “what problems are we facing”, and “what do we possess to help us solve the problems” can all be answered via a SWOT analysis. The following tables contain the most common and/or relevant observations shared by stakeholders and the advisory committee. These are presented in no particular order.

Strengths <i>Relative competitive advantages</i>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Railroad connectivity</li> <li>• Interstates 29 and 94</li> <li>• Broadband internet coverage</li> <li>• High number of financially healthy community-based banks and credit unions</li> <li>• Highly fertile prime farmland</li> <li>• Growing presence in biotechnology, agricultural technology, and uncrewed aerial systems</li> <li>• Competitive business taxation rates</li> <li>• NDSU’s status as a R1 institution with research strengths in agriculture and engineering</li> <li>• Mayville State University and ND State College of Science (including new Career Innovation Center)</li> <li>• Short commutes</li> <li>• People are more educated compared to the US at large</li> <li>• Low natural gas and electricity rates</li> <li>• Well-regarded public school districts</li> <li>• Bank of North Dakota’s financing programs for businesses and municipalities</li> <li>• Minimal land constrictions preventing development—e.g. flat topography, few protected areas.</li> </ul>

Opportunities <i>Chances or occasions for improvement or progress</i>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Recent investments in value-added agricultural processing facilities</li> <li>• Grand Farm’s role in growing the AgTech sector</li> <li>• Tourism asset development</li> <li>• Increasing angel fund and venture capital investments in startups</li> <li>• Encouraging return migration for those in their late 20’s to 50’s via remote work (a.k.a. “brain gain”)</li> <li>• Improving entrepreneurial ecosystem</li> <li>• Creating shovel ready lots conducive for industry</li> <li>• Participation in the North Central Regional Food Business Center</li> <li>• Main Street and downtown revitalization</li> <li>• Reshoring supply chains</li> <li>• Fargo-Moorhead Diversion and the Red River Water Supply projects currently under construction</li> <li>• Removal of regulatory barriers and infrastructure deficiencies preventing new animal ag.</li> <li>• Attracting more immigrants and refugees</li> <li>• Improving the public image of the Red River Valley</li> </ul>



## Weaknesses

### *Relative competitive disadvantages*

- Not enough people with certifications and skills necessary for in-demand jobs
- Shortage of adequate and affordable housing
- Inadequate and unaffordable childcare
- Aquifers approaching withdrawal limits for industrial users
- Rural economies overly dependent on production agriculture
- Outflow of younger people—especially from rural communities
- Unwillingness to take risks
- Lack of opportunities for “trailing spouses”
- Difficulties meeting grant match requirements
- Remoteness from major population centers
- Low amounts of seed and venture capital
- Perceptions about North Dakota not always positive

## Threats

### *Chances or occasions for negative impacts or decline*

- Floods and droughts worsening due to climate change
- Federal Reserve’s interest rate hikes
- Business owners retiring without succession plans
- Farmers getting older and significant barriers to younger folks entering the profession
- Additional barriers to free trade being instituted
- Declining enrollment in higher education and in rural K-12 districts
- Aging infrastructure needing to be repaired or replaced
- Closure of rural healthcare providers and difficulties staffing and funding rural EMS
- Diminishing amount of grant funding
- Declining number of volunteers in rural fire and ambulance districts



*Minn-Dak Farmers Cooperative located in Wahpeton is an example of a longstanding, successful value added processor. Since 1972, MDFC has taken beets from its members and sliced and processed into sugar that is bought by large and global corporations, as well as the packaged sugar used everyday across the country. (Image courtesy of MDFC)*



# Evaluation Framework

Progress will be measured and communicated through two ways. First are the proxy indicators from secondary data sources. The following is a non-exhaustive list that can be tracked to monitor changing conditions.

<i>Businesses</i>	
• Number of startups and survivorship rate	• Venture capital investments
• Entrepreneurship among marginalized groups	• R&D expenditures and patents

<i>Employment</i>	
• Job creation	• Degree & certification attainment for high-demand jobs
• Unemployment & underemployment rates	• Labor force participation rate

<i>Income</i>	
• Per capita and household income growth compared to inflation rate	• Prevalence of "Asset Limited, Income Restricted, Employed" (ALICE) households
• Poverty rate	• Income disparities across racial, ethnic, and gender categories

<i>Housing</i>	
• Jobs-housing balance and fit ratios	• Housing cost burden
• Number of housing units for seniors and/or special needs populations	• Building permits issued

<i>Capacity &amp; Resiliency</i>	
• Awareness of flooding and other natural disaster risks	• Hachman Index of economic diversification
• Economic Development Capacity Index (see Appendix C)	• Innovation Index (via Economic Development Administration)

<i>Hard Infrastructure</i>	
• Progress made in fulfilling Capital Improvement Plans	• Amount of aged and/or dilapidated infrastructure that is replaced
• Replacement of lead service lines	• Flood protection via dikes, diversions, and buyouts.

<i>Soft Infrastructure</i>	
• Number of affordable child care spots	• People taking on community leadership roles
• School enrollment trends	• Competitive local elections

The second method is to evaluate the success of individual projects. Measuring outputs and outcomes will vary according to the specific initiative in question. Communicating these results is vital for future advocacy efforts.

Comparing Lake Agassiz to peer regions exhibiting similar characteristics can be yet another fruitful method of evaluation. The following benchmark regions were identified with the help of an online tool provided by EDA. These regions are similar in terms of population, per capita income growth, percent of the population with a bachelors degree, unemployment rates, poverty rates, prevalence of production agriculture as a main economic sector, presence of a research university, being in the Midwest, and having a single larger city surrounded by rural areas. Not all regions possess all of these characteristics, but nonetheless still serve as useful comparables.

Economic Development District	State
Greater Egypt Regional Planning and Development Commission	Illinois
Iowa Northland Regional Economic Development Commission	Iowa
First District Association of Local Governments	South Dakota
Region 9 Development Commission	Minnesota
Western Illinois Regional Council	Illinois
Omaha-Council Bluffs Metropolitan Area Planning Agency	Nebraska and Iowa
Central South Dakota Enhancement District	South Dakota
Lewis and Clark Development Group	North Dakota
Red River Regional Council	North Dakota
South Eastern Council of Governments	South Dakota
Bi-State Regional Commission	Illinois and Iowa
Northeast Nebraska Economic Development District	Nebraska
Northern Kentucky Area Development District	Kentucky
West Central Initiative	Minnesota
Mid-Iowa Planning Alliance for Community Development	Iowa
East Central Iowa Council of Governments	Iowa
Mid Missouri Regional Planning Commission	Missouri
Flint Hills Regional Council	Kansas

Not surprisingly because of its size, social and economic activity tends to gravitate towards Cass County and the Fargo-Moorhead metropolitan in particular. Therefore, a special focus on that community will help us better understand its ability to attract talent and investments. To find peer cities to benchmark against, a tool created by the Chicago Federal Reserve was used to identify other cities with alike characteristics when it comes to demographic and economic factors across the following four themes.

### **Equity**

*Outcomes across racial lines as viewed through geographic segregation, income disparities, overall income inequality, poverty rates, educational attainment, and their trends over time.*

- Bend, Oregon
- Colorado Springs, Colorado
- Duluth, Minnesota
- Lexington, Kentucky
- Madison, Wisconsin
- Nashua, New Hampshire
- Pittsfield, Massachusetts

### **Resilience**

*The prevalence of quality jobs that pay well as seen in employment levels, share in manufacturing, family incomes, and their trends over time.*

- Boise, Idaho
- Eau Claire, Wisconsin
- Lincoln, Nebraska
- Sioux Falls, South Dakota

### **Outlook**

*Demographic vitality and prospects as viewed through foreign born population, families with children, share of population in the prime working age, and the their trends over time.*

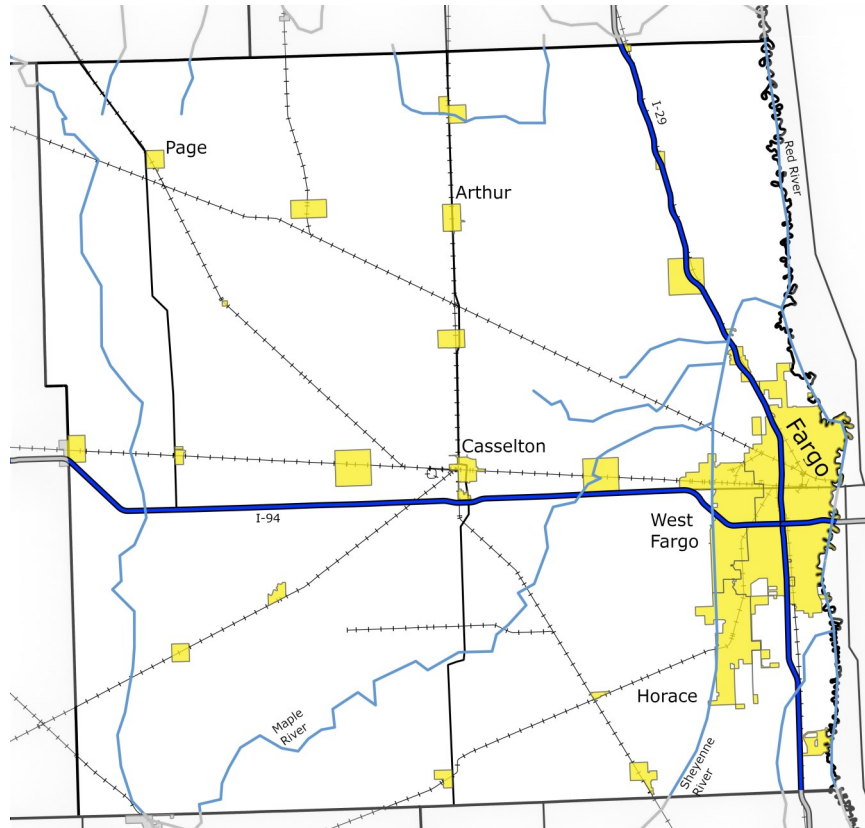
- Auburn, Alabama
- Chico, California
- Columbia, Missouri
- Fayetteville, North Carolina

### **Housing**

*The quality and affordability of the housing stock as demonstrated by the percent built before 1980, vacancy rates, median home value to median income ratio, homeownership rate, and percent of households who are cost burdened.*

- Austin, Texas
- Grand Forks, North Dakota
- Reno, Nevada

# Cass

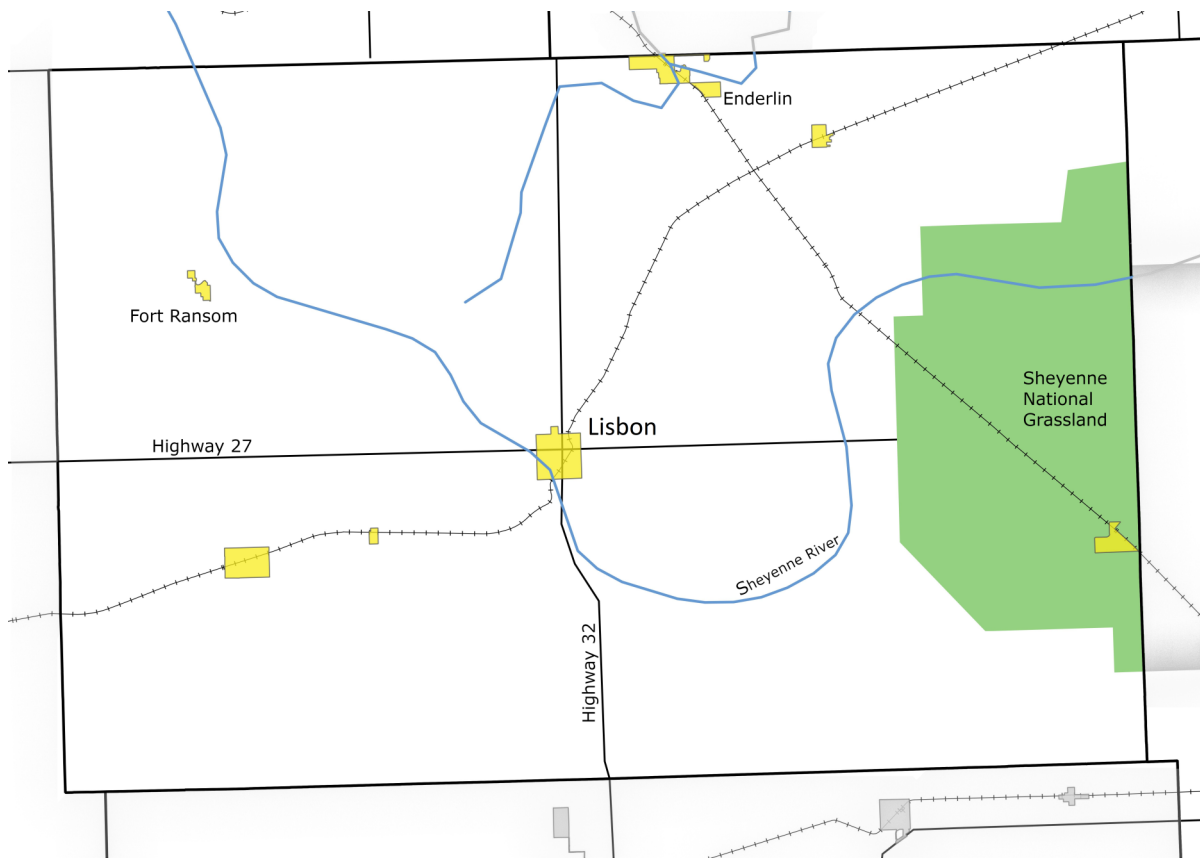


Population	182,992
Population Change since 1990	+ 80,118
Population Projection to 2050	308,793
Median Household Income	\$66,747
Unemployment Rate	1.8%
Poverty rate	13.0%
Post-Secondary Degree Attainment	57.4%

Gross Domestic Product	\$11.6 billion
GDP Change since 2001	83.8%
Labor Force Participation	87.0%
Number of Housing Units Built (2008-2022)	26,733
Owner-occupied Housing	53%
Employers with less than 10 employees (including owners)	65.8%

Industries with High Employment LQ by NAICS	5619 Other Support Services 5411 Legal Services 5415 Computer Systems Design and Related Services 333111 Farm Machinery and Equipment Manufacturing
Industries with High Annual Wage LQ by NAICS	6211 Offices of Physicians 5192 Web Search Portals, Libraries, Archives, and other Informational Services 5415 Computers Systems Design and Related Services
Largest Private Employers by Number of Employees	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Sanford Health (health care)</li> <li>2. Essentia Health (health care)</li> <li>3. Marvin (wood product manufacturing)</li> <li>4. Cash Wise Foods and Hornbachers (food and beverage retailers)</li> <li>5. Noridian Healthcare Solutions (insurance carrier)</li> <li>6. CNH Industrial America (machinery manufacturing)</li> <li>7. Scheels All Sports (sporting goods retail)</li> <li>8. Wex (insurance carrier)</li> </ol>

# Ransom



Population	5,679
Population Change since 1990	- 242
Population Projection to 2050	4,662
Median Household Income	\$67,480
Unemployment Rate	1.7%
Poverty rate	11.2%
Post-Secondary Degree Attainment	33.4%

Gross Domestic Product	\$2.4 billion
GDP Change since 2001	25.5%
Labor Force Participation	83.5%
Number of Housing Units Built (2008-2022)	62
Owner Occupied Housing	75%
Employers with less than 10 employees (including owners)	81.6%

Industries with High Employment LQ by NAICS	623 Nursing and Residential Care Facilities 712 Museums, Historical Sites, and Similar Institutions 48-49 Transportation and Warehousing
Industries with High Annual Wage LQ by NAICS	311 Food Processing Sector 237 Heavy and Civil Engineering Construction 42 Wholesale Trade
Largest Private Employers by Number of Employees	1. Archer Daniels Midland (food manufacturing) 2. CHI Lisbon Area Health Service (health care) 3. SMP Health Maryhill (nursing and residential care facility) 4. Plains Grain and Agronomy Cooperative (merchant wholesaler of nondurable goods)



# Richland

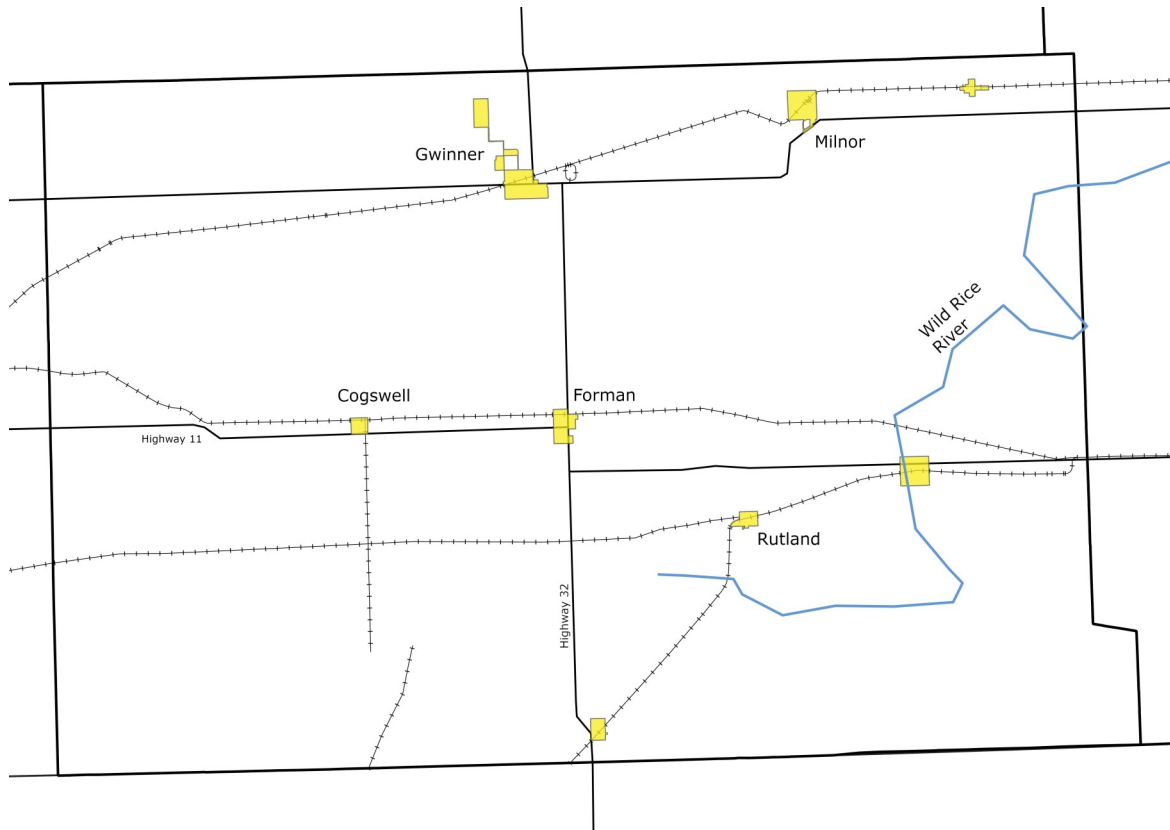


Population	16,546
Population Change since 1990	- 1,602
Population Projection to 2050	14,772
Median Household Income	\$62,481
Unemployment Rate	1.9%
Poverty rate	10.7%
Post-Secondary Degree Attainment	42.4%

Gross Domestic Product	\$7.16 billion
GDP Change since 2001	24.2%
Labor Force Participation	85.4%
Number of Housing Units Built (2008-2022)	481
Owner Occupied Housing	71%
Employers with less than 10 employees (including owners)	76.8%

Industries with High Employment LQ by NAICS	713 Amusement, Gambling, and Recreation 111 Crop Production 321 Wood Product Manufacturing
Industries with High Annual Wage LQ by NAICS	311 Food Processing 713 Amusement, Gambling, and Recreation 111 Crop Production
Largest Private Employers by Number of Employees	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Minn-Dak Farmers Cooperative (food manufacturing)</li> <li>2. Dakota Magic Casino (amusement, gambling, and recreation)</li> <li>3. CDI Services Inc (plastics and rubber products manufacturing)</li> <li>4. Continental (plastics and rubber products manufacturing)</li> <li>5. Doosan Bobcat (machinery manufacturing)</li> </ol>

# Sargent

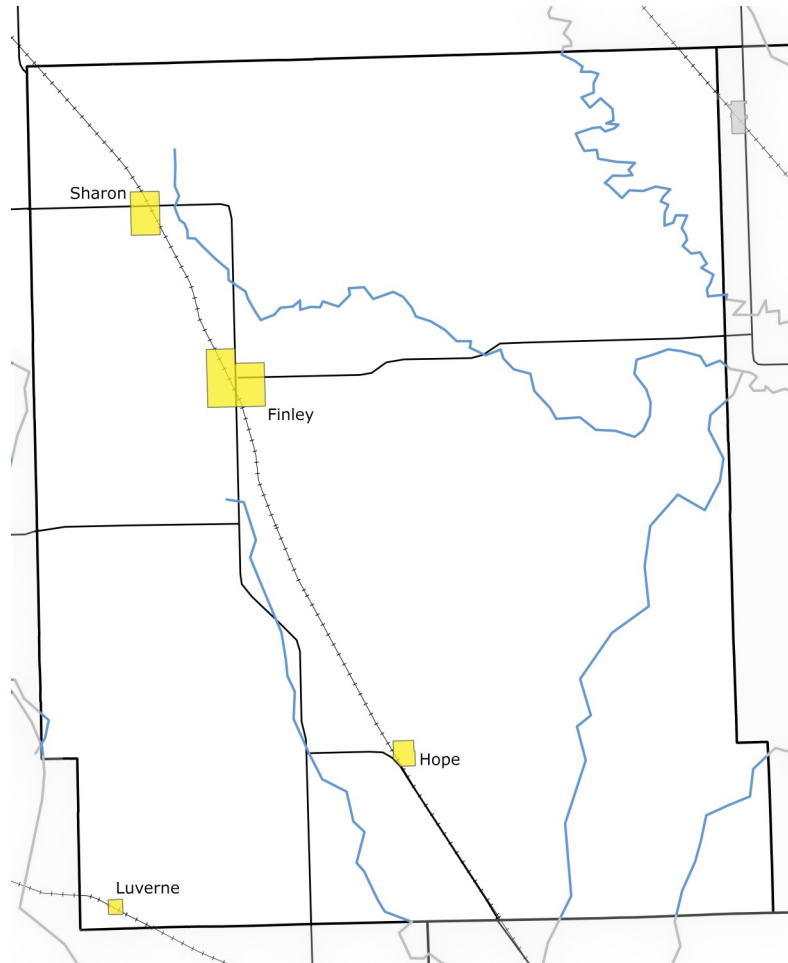


Population	3,839
Population Change since 1990	- 710
Population Projection to 2050	3,406
Median Household Income	\$67,467
Unemployment Rate	1.7%
Poverty rate	5.7%
Post-Secondary Degree Attainment	36.4%

Gross Domestic Product	\$7.18 billion
GDP Change since 2001	145.8%
Labor Force Participation	86.5%
Number of Housing Units Built (2008-2022)	197
Owner Occupied Housing	73%
Employers with less than 10 employees (including owners)	75.6%

Industries with High Employment LQ by NAICS	621 Ambulatory Health Care Services 111 Crop Production 713 Amusement, Gambling, and Recreation
Industries with High Annual Wage LQ by NAICS	457 Fuel Dealers 924 Administration of Environmental Quality Programs 111 Crop Production
Largest Private Employers by Number of Employees	1. Doosan Bobcat (machinery manufacturing) 2. Ray-Mac (fabricated metal product manufacturing) 3. Four Seasons Health Care Center (nursing and residential care facilities) 4. J & M Printing (printing and related support services)

# Steele

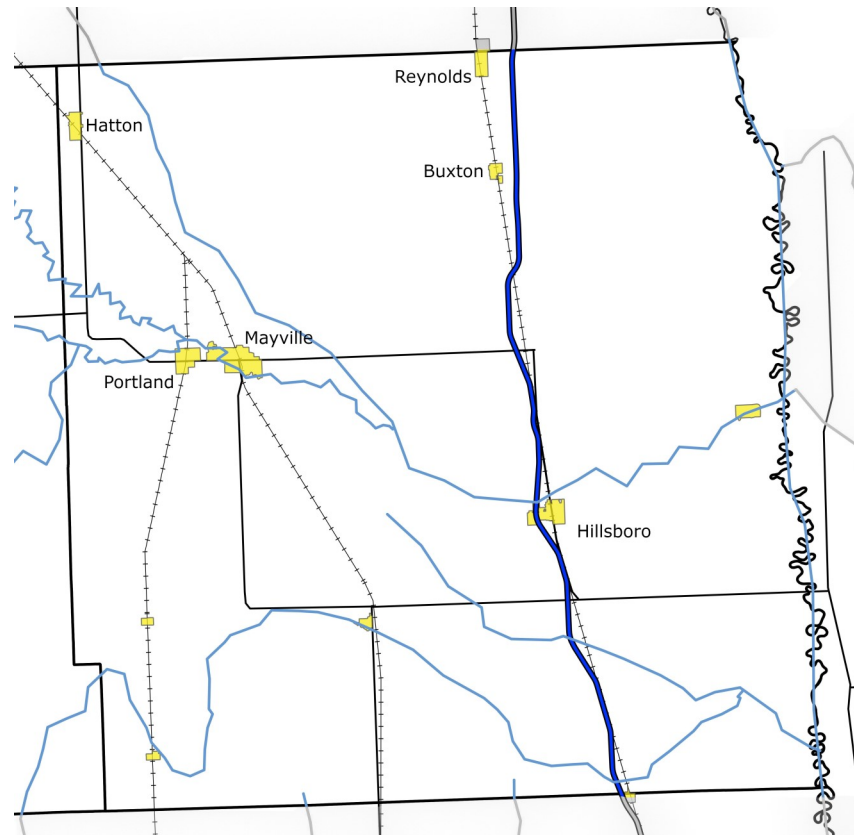


Population	1,870
Population Change since 1990	72
Population Projection to 2050	1,437
Median Household Income	\$81,354
Unemployment Rate	2.0%
Poverty rate	12.1%
Post-Secondary Degree Attainment	41.9%

Gross Domestic Product	\$1.6 billion
GDP Change since 2001	127.9%
Labor Force Participation	86.5%
Number of Housing Units Built (2008-2022)	42
Owner Occupied Housing	78%
Employers with less than 10 employees (including owners)	78.3%

Industries with High Employment LQ by NAICS	713 Amusement, Gambling, and Recreation 311 Food Processing 924 Administration of Environmental Quality Programs
Industries with High Annual Wage LQ by NAICS	624 Social Assistance 924 Administration of Environmental Quality Programs 102 Service Providing
Largest Private Employers by Number of Employees	1. Hope Electric (specialty trade contractors) 2. Finley Farmers Grain and Elevator (merchant wholesalers of nondurable goods) 3. Trinidad Benham Corporation (support activities for agriculture and forestry)

# Trail



Population	8,008
Population Change since 1990	- 744
Population Projection to 2050	6,864
Median Household Income	\$73,113
Unemployment Rate	2.0%
Poverty rate	6.0%
Post-Secondary Degree Attainment	45.6%

Gross Domestic Product	\$4.4 billion
GDP Change since 2001	69.3%
Labor Force Participation	85.3%
Number of Housing Units Built (2008-2022)	157
Owner Occupied Housing	75%
Employers with less than 10 employees (including owners)	80.8%

Industries with High Employment LQ by NAICS	111 Crop Production 115 Support Activities for Agriculture and Forestry 611 Educational Services
Industries with High Annual Wage LQ by NAICS	115 Support Activities for Agriculture and Forestry 459 Sporting Goods, Hobby, Musical Instrument, Book, and Miscellaneous Retailers 111 Crop Production
Largest Private Employers by Number of Employees	1. American Crystal Sugar (food manufacturing) 2. Sanford Health (health care) 3. Luther Memorial Home (nursing and residential care facility) 4. Transsystems LLC (truck transportation) 5. Hatton Prairie Village (nursing and residential care facility) 6. Degelman Industries USA (machinery manufacturing)

## Appendix A - Advisory Committee Membership

<i><b>Name</b></i>	<i><b>Organization</b></i>	<i><b>Position</b></i>
Paul Smith	Small Business Development Center	Regional Director
Chris DeVries	City of Wahpeton	Economic Development Director
Jan Sobolik	NDSU Research and Tech Park	Associate Director
Carey Fry	ND Job Service	Customer Service Manager (Fargo Office)
Laurie Tuite	Steele County Jobs Development Authority	Director
Lyndsay Ulrickson	Bush Foundation	Grantmaking Officer (ND)
Greg Kempel	MinnDak Market	Owner
Justin Neppel	Southern Valley Economic Development Authority	Executive Director
Kim Konikow	ND Council on the Arts	Executive Director
Nancy Johnson	Soybean Council	Executive Director
Bob Wurl	Lincoln State Bank	President & CEO



## Appendix B - Distressed Communities Index Map

The Economic Innovation Group is a public policy organization dedicated to the cultivation of a more dynamic and inclusive national economy. They attempt to find solutions for creating new jobs, investment, and dynamism in American communities through original research and analyses. One tool which they have created is the Distressed Community Index. It measures the comparative economic well-being of communities and the disparities between them. Data for educational attainment, housing, employment rates, poverty, income, and business establishments are used to create scores falling into five tiers: prosperous, comfortable, mid-tier, at risk, and distressed.

In general, one finds across the country diverging economic trends between well-off areas and those which are relatively disadvantaged. Knowing where communities fall along the spectrum aids in identifying communities where resources should be directed, as well as informs the planning and implementation of place-based strategies.

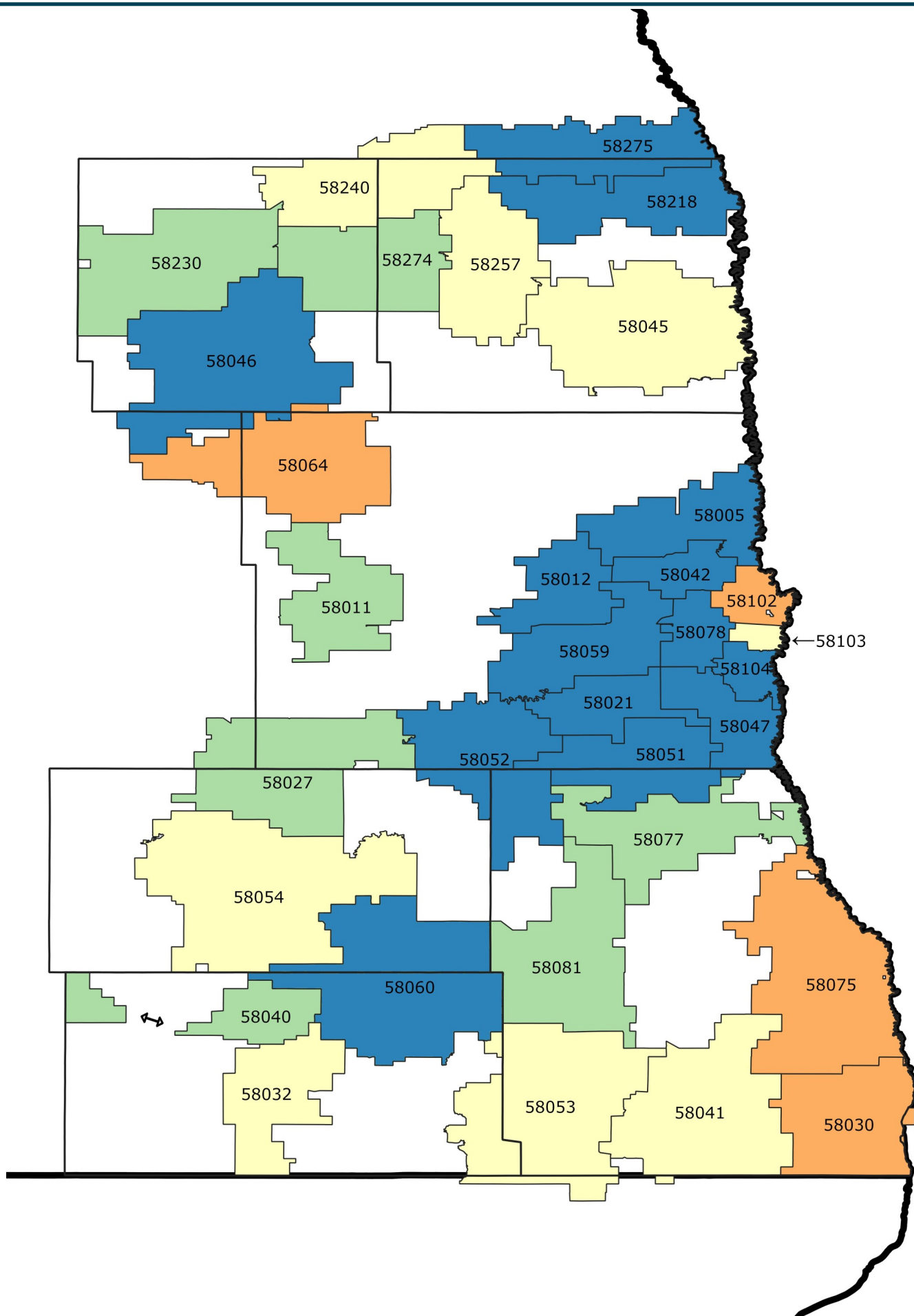
The following tables present the scores and designation for each zip code - organized in numerical order - where data was available. The next page has a map of said communities.

Zip	Town	Score	Designation
58005	Argusville	6.7	Prosperous
58011	Buffalo	25.8	Comfortable
58012	Cassellton	7.6	Prosperous
58021	Davenport	2	Prosperous
58027	Enderlin	35.4	Comfortable
58030	Fairmount	61.8	At-Risk
58032	Forman	55	Mid-tier
58040	Gwinner	21	Comfortable
58041	Hankinson	45.4	Mid-tier
58042	Harwood	8.4	Prosperous
58045	Hillsboro	53.5	Mid-tier
58046	Hope	19.5	Prosperous
58047	Horace	0.7	Prosperous
58051	Kindred	1.5	Prosperous
58052	Leonard	11.5	Prosperous
58053	Lidgerwood	52.8	Mid-tier
58054	Lisbon	58.4	Mid-tier

Zip	Town	Score	Designation
58059	Mapleton	0.8	Prosperous
58060	Milnor	14.6	Comfortable
58064	Page	63.3	At-Risk
58075	Wahpeton	63.7	At-Risk
58077	Walcott	23.4	Comfortable
58078	West Fargo	1.5	Prosperous
58081	Wyndmere	32.3	Comfortable
58102	Fargo	65.8	At-Risk
58103	Fargo	57.1	Mid-tier
58104	Fargo	1.8	Prosperous
58218	Buxton	11.8	Prosperous
58230	Finley	37.3	Comfortable
58240	Hatton	52	Mid-tier
58257	Mayville	49	Mid-tier
58274	Portland	31.7	Comfortable
58275	Reynolds	4.7	Prosperous

Fortunately, there are no communities in the region which are considered "distressed". Such areas are extremely difficult to turn around their economic fortunes. "At-risk" and "mid-tier" communities are easier to create economic opportunity in because they have more assets and resources that can be leveraged.

Those communities are found in the southern valley, in downtown and north sections of Fargo, and in Traill County. It is heartening to see the ring around Fargo's core scores very well.



## Appendix C — Economic Development Capacity Index

EDA and Argonne National Laboratory have partnered to create the Economic Development Capacity Index for the purpose of measuring the elements which contribute to each counties' ability to engage in successful economic development. Capacity, in this case, is comprised of the knowledge, skills, assets, and resources that can be brought to bear in fostering prosperity, innovation, entrepreneurship, and a high quality of life. Using publicly available data, EDA and Argonne have created this tool to gauge a county's strengths and weaknesses across five areas: financial, human capital, industry composition, infrastructure, and institutions and partnerships. A detailed explanation of the methodology, including the individual measurements constituting each score, are found on the Argonne National Laboratory website. These numeric scores are presented as national percentiles to aid in comparing to other counties.

	Human Capital	Financial	Industry	Infrastructure	Institutions and Partnerships
Cass	92	92	91	98	38
Ransom	80	73	25	78	37
Richland	61	98	35	61	22
Sargent	95	77	35	54	78
Steele	97	91	6	70	93
Traill	90	88	28	73	2

All counties scored well or excellent in the *Human Capital* category due mostly to the larger-than-normal share of the population who have graduated high school and college. Robust household incomes and assets, as well as low levels of inequality, are also notable contributors.

The scores for *Financial* are buttressed by the number and health of independent banks found in our area of the country. Those looking to borrow have a greater variety of options from which to choose.

*Industry* is the low spot for our rural counties due mostly to the lack of industry sector diversity. Being concentration in either agriculture or manufacturing sectors can be an asset in some regards (e.g., value-added processing is a fruitful economic development strategy). However, it does present risks as downturns in those sectors will be felt especially hard. Diversification is a priority if we are to reduce those risks.

The *Infrastructure* scores are helped by the region's great broadband service; conditions for roads and bridges are the weak point in that category. The relative affordability of electricity is also a strong suit (and one that is of particular interest to manufacturers).

The scores for *Institutions and Partnerships* should be viewed less reliably as the other categories given the data not fully capturing the more informal networks of cooperation found in our region. Nonetheless, the amount of grant funds can definitely be improved.

## Appendix D — Innovation Index

EDA and Indiana University created the Innovation Intelligence Index to measure counties' capacity for innovation and regional competitiveness based on inputs and outputs. The index is a hierarchy, built up pyramid-like from a large foundation of data that is transformed into metrics that are key to each category. Results are presented in the county's ranking out of 3,110 counties - therefore the lower the number the better - and the its percentile in italics.

	Human Capital & Knowledge Creation	Business Dynamics	Business Profile	Employment & Productivity	Economic Well-Being
Cass	196 (94th)	1,335 (57th)	320 (90th)	647 (79th)	124 (96th)
Ransom	1,626 (48th)	2,386 (23rd)	1,796 (42nd)	1,959 (37th)	144 (95th)
Richland	563 (82nd)	1,651 (47th)	1,914 (38th)	2,560 (18th)	29 (99th)
Sargent	931 (70th)	3,002 (3rd)	3,079 (1st)	2,273 (26th)	174 (94th)
Steele	1,107 (64th)	2,087 (33rd)	2,613 (16th)	2,369 (24th)	13 (99th)
Traill	991 (68th)	779 (75th)	1,986 (36th)	2,657 (15th)	36 (99th)

According to these metrics, the regional economy is strong and healthy (notwithstanding a few mediocre to poor scores). Across all six counties, we find the human capital piece to be a strong suit given the relatively high degree attainment rate. While the share of the population with graduate degrees is about in line with or slightly below the national average, the number of people with an associates degree is higher than normal.

Under *Business Dynamics*, the rural counties did well in the number of small establishments per capita. Relatedly, the share of household income being proprietor based—i.e., those who earn income through their own business—is high. A weakness is found in the anemic formation rate of businesses in traded sectors. In Cass County, there are more businesses that are targets of venture capital deals and foreign direct investment. However, the number of deals falls short of the national average adjusted for the number of businesses within the county.

On the innovation side, the number and diversity of patents earned falls short of the region's potential. Finding ways to help inventors take their ideas from conceptual stage to a marketable produce is a kind of technical assistance which should be scaled up.

All of the counties score highly in the job growth to population growth ratios, however it is more applicable to Cass County where the population has actually been appreciably increasing. The region's widespread broadband coverage also is an asset that contributes to the *Economic Well-Being* category.