

WELCOME TO OUR TOWN 56345

Our Town 56345 has been an important opportunity for an extensive community listening process, to explore what's important for our town's shared future. It is based on the belief that when residents are informed, connected to their community, & feel represented in city deliberations they are empowered to influence decisions that impact their lives. "Of, for and by the people," is a phrase that describes this initiative, seeking themes and priorities around which there is broadly held common ground for mutuality.



Since August of 2019, the Little Falls area has been engaged in this unique and important process as a local region to learn what our community thinks about itself, and for residents to consider creative approaches to becoming the place they envision for their own future, as well as the place they hope their children will also consider calling home. The process has been one of deep, inclusive listening and engagement with residents of all ages and profiles to explore the region's hopes, dreams, visions and priorities for building a healthy and sustainable future. This process has been a carefully constructed to ensure it has identified what is important broadly to most residents. It has also been a process that has built on past community planning initiatives and identifying synergy with actions already taken and goals already achieved.

The community was very clear in its hopes and dreams for the future, as outlined in the Strategic Framework. This is not intended to be a workplan, but rather as a roadmap – an outline that provides structure and focus for the community as specific public, private or nonprofit entities are considering future projects. It gives strategic direction that honors key priorities broadly held by the community. This is intended as offering a path with guideposts along which the future might unfold.

So much has changed for us as a community this year, since our visioning process. A viral pandemic as well as the many expressions of the need for social justice are paramount on our minds. As you read this document, please consider the many ways in which community thinking already has been holding up issues that will service us well as we address these urgent concerns. The timing and foresight of this plan underscores its value to the community.

WHY IS THIS IMPORTANT?

Why do people love where they live, and why does it matter?

What drives passion and loyalty in a community?

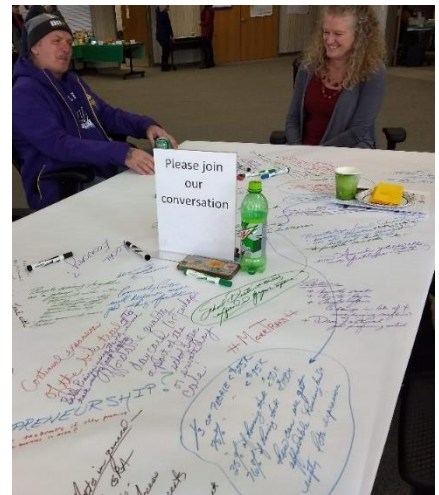
What draws people to a place and keeps them there?

Studies repeatedly document that a significant connection exists between residents' levels of emotional attachment to their community and its economic growth. The Knight Foundation, has done extensive analysis on what is important in rural (and urban) communities. They report two key findings:

- There is empirical evidence that the drivers that create emotional bonds between people and their community are consistent in virtually every city. Interestingly, the usual suspects — jobs, the economy, and safety — are not among the top drivers.

People consistently give higher ratings for elements that relate directly to their daily quality of life: an area's physical beauty, opportunities for socializing, and a community's openness to all people.

- Remarkably, the study also showed that the communities with the highest levels of attachment had the highest rates of gross domestic product growth. Discoveries like these open numerous possibilities for leaders from all sectors to inform their decisions and policies with concrete data about what generates community and economic benefits.



COMMUNITY LISTENING PROCESS

OUR HERITAGE: VALUING OUR HISTORY WHILE LOOKING TO THE FUTURE

History confirms that the land and water that attract and hold us to this place, now called Little Falls, Morrison County, Minnesota, is not ours alone. We are borrowing it from our Native and immigrant ancestors and descendants. Our children and grandchildren will in turn borrow it from us and their descendants. All of us together have a hand in shaping this community.

Native tribes, including Mound Builders, Dacotah, and Ojibwe, were drawn to the natural waterfall on the Mississippi River at the current site of Little Falls. The fertile land in Central Minnesota was carved and watered by receding glaciers and became a place where the prairies and forests met. Through hard work that varied with the seasons, Native people created a nourishing home, with the lakes, rivers, and land supplying wild rice, maple syrup, fish, wild game, birch bark and a wide variety of useful trees and plants.

As French-Canadian and English fur traders, explorers, and European-American immigrants moved into the area, displacing, often with force, Native tribes, they, too, were drawn to the waterfall and other natural resources. It was the waterfall that led to the development and naming of Little Falls.

Along with the French-Canadian/Ojibwe families who settled in Morrison County following their work in the fur trade, immigrants came from Germany, Poland, Norway, Sweden, Denmark, Russia, Ireland, England, Czechoslovakia, and other European countries, or traveled from the eastern United States to make a home here. A huge selling point in encouraging immigration was the land with its fertile soil and the Mississippi River.

While the largest wave of immigrants came between the late 1880s and 1920, immigration to the area has been continual. Smaller cultural communities that didn't fit the majority demographic from this time period have moved to the area, either from other countries or from elsewhere in the United States. These communities have included Jewish people, Hispanics (during the early construction of Highway 10 and more recently), African Americans, Asians, Brothertown Indians, Hmong and Vietnamese immigrants following the Vietnam War, Somalis, and others.

Those who have made this place their home needed to make a living. Although some very large businesses offering employment were drawn here by the river and/or hydroelectric power, including Pine Tree Lumber Company, Hennepin Paper, and Larson Boats, a large portion of the economic activity in the area has been driven by small-scale entrepreneurs. Farmers are entrepreneurs who sell the fruits (vegetables, milk, butter, eggs, meat, and grain) of their labor. Whether running a mom & pop grocery store or farm of the past or selling handmade items online and turning the family farm into a wedding venue today, the entrepreneurial spirit of the community remains.

We close with the reminder that the land and water that nurture us at the 'little falls' is the legacy of our Native and immigrant ancestors and descendants and our gift to our children and grandchildren. Together, we create this community.

--Mary Warner, Executive Director, Morrison County Historical Society

How did we gather public opinion?

- There was an initial process to develop a representative Steering Committee, carefully chosen to represent a wide variety of interests throughout the community;
- The steering committee set the stage for public listening process;
- Initial interviews, focus groups and narrative response surveys were completed in October-November, 2019;
- From this 1st round of surveying, a broad range of emerging themes were identified and built into an online, multiple choice survey tool. The 2nd round survey was designed to further refine and narrow trends and a range of perspectives;
- Participation was invited through the *Morrison County Record*, the *Brainerd Dispatch*, and Falls Radio, as well as the City of Little Falls website, an OurTown56345 Facebook page, and flyer distribution through a myriad of community businesses and affiliates of steering committee members;
- There were continued focus groups and individual interviews from November through early February;

- Community design meetings were hosted in open house format in 3 locations, 3 hour blocks of time, February 10-12;
- The Listening Process was closed on February 24, 2020, as advertised.

What questions did we probe?

1. What characteristics do you believe make our community special? What do you love about this place? What gives you a sense of pride about living here?
2. What characteristics or elements do you believe are working well in our community? What assets do we have as a community that are important for us to build on as we think about our future?
3. What do you believe are the key challenges that we need to overcome as we think about building a strong and sustainable future for our community?
4. What are the top underlying values or principles you hope will guide decision-making for our community into the future?
5. What statements describe for you elements of your vision or aspiration for our community? How do you hope that it will be different, successful, ten years from now?

COMMUNITY LISTENING PROCESS OUTCOMES

There was a significant commitment to a thorough process. An invitation for “All voices, including the underserved, to be heard,” a process of, for and by the community.

- The Steering Committee worked hard to identify the many groups and voices that make up the community, to ensure that all perspectives were heard. An Executive Team routinely reviewed which groups had participated; which still needed further invitation to participate.
- Several individuals committed to facilitator training to ensure that meetings were conducted in a transparent, open manner, inviting all differences of opinion to be heard.
- Steering Committee members and other community volunteers conducted individual interviews and focus groups.
- There were 2 rounds of survey process.
 - Narrative surveys were completed in the first round and submitted for tabulation. Themes were distilled and a second, online, survey was broadly distributed.
 - The second, online SurveyMonkey questionnaire, probed the same questions as the narrative survey, but allowed for multiple choice options based on the most commonly received responses from the narrative survey.

There was an exceptionally high response rate, one that far exceeded expected numbers from a rural community of this size.

- Nearly 100 narrative surveys were completed
- 112 individual interviews were completed
- 19 focus groups were completed
- 3 City-wide open house meetings were held, engaging approximately 100 individuals
- 408 online surveys were completed
- Community leadership dedicated over 1,200 hours of volunteer time to this effort

There was an exceptionally high level of common ground reported across the survey responses.

As survey results came in between early January and the advertised survey closure date of February 24, 2020, the alignment of ideas became increasingly clear; there was clear similarity in thoughts and dreams among various segments of the community.

What emerged was a remarkable level of common ground; whether teen to age 40, 41-65, or over 65, all respondents to the online survey were in close agreement on their top 5-6 preferences in response to each question. This was similarly true whether one had lived in Little Falls all one’s life, for 10+ years, or less than 10 years. In addition, when the age distribution of respondents was compared with the census data for the zip code, the survey was again validated including responses that approached the age distribution of the region. These all point to a very statistically high confidence level in the findings reported here.

WHAT DID WE LEARN?

What follows is a compilation of the responses following the closure of the survey processes on February 24, 2020. They are reported in relationship to the 5 questions asked. As noted above, there was an exceptionally high level of common ground across various demographic profiles within the community. Residents had consistent passions for a vision, values and direction for the Little Falls of the future. Throughout the process there were some important through lines identified, which are woven into the Strategic Framework that follows on pages 8-10.

- **Connection.** The community is hungry for paths to strengthening bonds and build bridges to overcome the barriers and silos that divide. Paths that encourage pride of place and encourage engagement in a wide variety of ways in the community.
- **Creativity.** There was significant conversation about the many ways that creativity, cultural expression, and arts should be employed as positive and nonthreatening vehicles through which the community can be drawn together, celebrate common ground, optimism and excitement for a shared future.
- **Community Health and Wellness.** The community seeks to be further strengthened as a healthy community, through rural community wellness and vitality initiatives for residents of all ages and demographic profiles.

What are our aspirations for the future?

The Community's hopes and aspirations, it's vision for its future were clear and compelling. "We hope that the community will be different and successful ten years from now because it



WHAT SHOULD GUIDE OUR DECISION MAKING AS A COMMUNITY?

Every community has underlying guiding principles that either implicitly or explicitly shape decision making. Guiding principles should, when endorsed, set boundaries and enable a community to continue to focus on the strategic direction it has set. These guiding principles become an important lens through which discussions can be filtered, a “compass north” if you will, to keep the community focused on its vision and common goals. In this extensive community listening process, there was strong agreement, that continued to come through among residents of all ages and demographic profiles, naming the following guiding principles.

Top six guiding principles the community named:

1. **We value our children**, being a community that is a good place to raise a family.
2. **We value and respect our environment**, maintaining our natural resources.
3. **We value economic opportunities**, creating paths to foster economic growth.
4. **We value being a welcoming, hospitable community**, where everyone has a sense of belonging.
5. **We value our creative assets—creativity, culture and the arts**—as important and vital to establishing a commitment to place.
6. **We value health and wellness**, further strengthening Little Falls as a health community through rural community wellness and vitality initiatives.

We value our children

We value our natural resources

We value economic opportunity

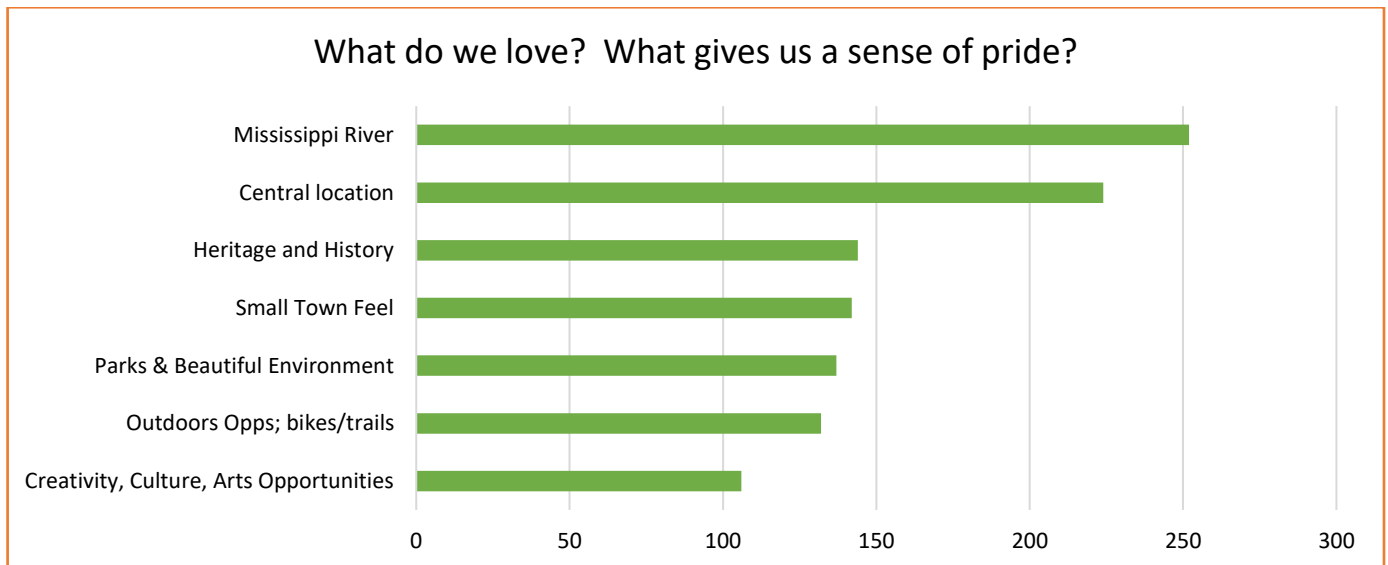
We value welcoming hospitality

We value our creative assets

We value health and wellness

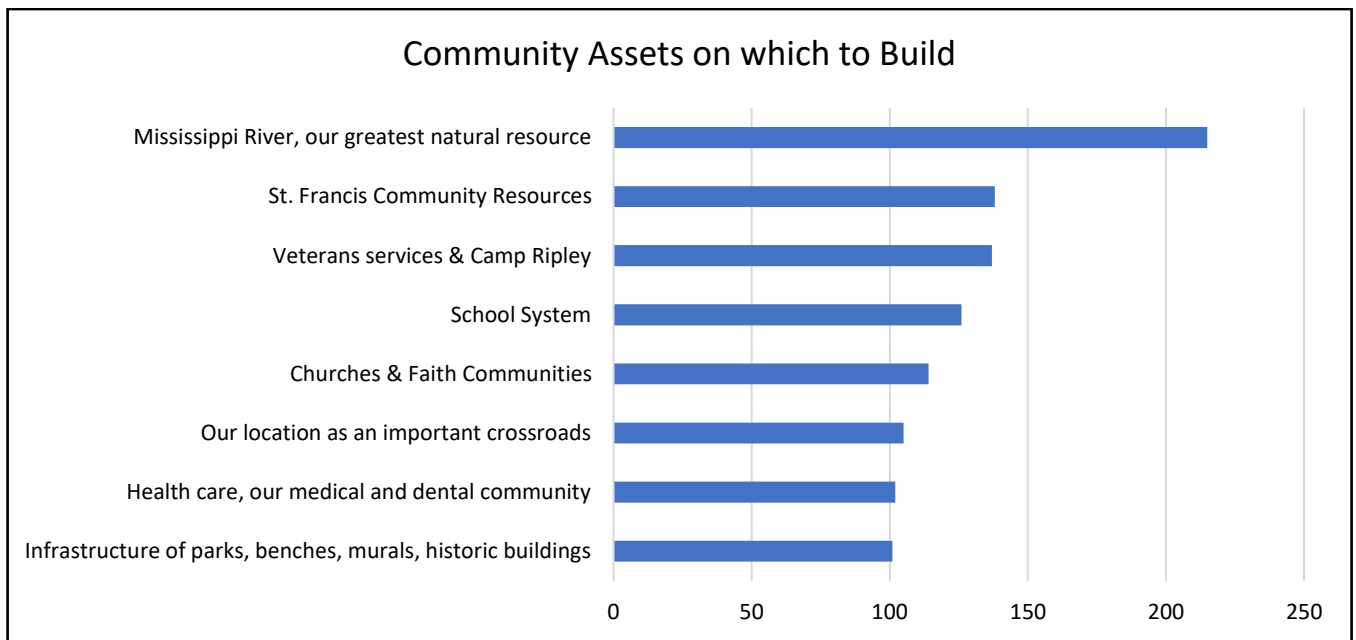
PRIDE OF PLACE

Residents were asked to identify characteristics of 56345 that they believe make the community special. The question was posed “What do you love about this place? What gives you a sense of pride about living here?”



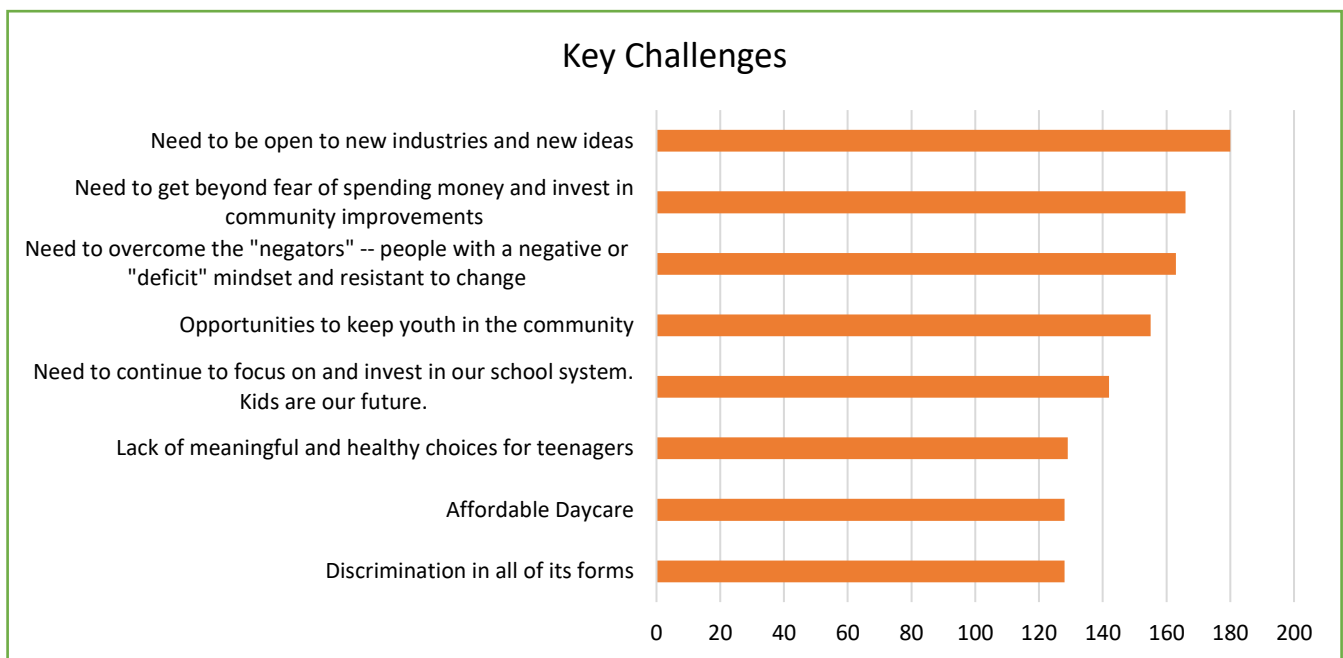
ASSETS

Residents were asked to identify the top characteristics or elements that they believe are working well in the community. What assets does the community have that are important for us to build on as we think about our future? As with all questions, there was a significant level of commonality in the answers across demographic segments of the community.



Challenges

Residents were asked to identify the key challenges that we need to overcome as we think about building a strong and sustainable future for the community. Again, there was a great deal of consistency across demographics in naming the following as the key challenges faced by Little Falls and its surrounding area as it shapes its future.



THE STRATEGIC FRAMEWORK

STRATEGIC PRIORITIES AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The community was very clear in its hopes and dreams for the future, seeking a community, as outlined in the vision, that will guide future development. There were scores of ideas advanced by community members throughout this process. These clustered around essential themes that are offered here as a structure guiding the development of future projects. It gives strategic direction that honors key priorities broadly held by the community. This is intended as offering a path or course as well as guideposts along which the future might unfold.

These essential themes are offered as a framework for articulating the community's hopes and dreams. This is not intended to be a workplan, but rather as a framework – an outline that provides structure and focus for the community as specific public, private or nonprofit entities are considering future projects. It gives strategic direction that honors key priorities broadly held by the community. This is intended as offering a path or course as well as guideposts along which the future might unfold.

The intent is that this framework be adopted by the City, as a key tool for use when economic development, community development, and public/private initiatives are advanced. Not as an endpoint, but as a tool guiding deliberation, knowing that these priorities can be looked to with confidence that there is a broad “swath” of the community that passionately shares these priorities.



SUPPORT THE NEXT GENERATION.

Be intentional as a community in developing projects and programs that support our “Next Generation”: initiatives that nurture our children and youth. The community emphasized the importance of

- Strong schools;
- More community facilities and other amenities that provide healthy choices for youth, especially teens;
- Supports key to families with young children;
- Promotion of health and wellness assets.



PROTECT OUR NATURAL RESOURCES. Strive to preserve and protect our natural resources, especially our most important resource, the Mississippi River.

- Become known as a River City with a waterfront destination;
- Work with County, DNR, and Camp Ripley in advancing plans to protect all regional natural resources;
- Support bikes and trails, and the region as a crossroads in the growing Minnesota trails network.



REINFORCE THE LOCAL ECONOMY. Develop a more vibrant downtown and greater support to locally owned businesses. Foster more economic opportunities. This recommendation included focus on

- Strengthening support to entrepreneurs and small businesses, as the lifeblood of rural communities;
- Development of downtown as a riverfront gateway for bikes and trails tourism as well as “crossroads” tourism;
- Development of light manufacturing, trucking, and other trades that offer a livable wage to local residents.



PRACTICE HOSPITALITY and WELCOME. Work assertively to overcome divisions in the community, becoming known as a welcoming, hospitable, inclusive community where everyone has a sense of belonging. Practice hospitality and welcome.

- Develop paths to strengthen a sense of connection;
- Work with a wide variety of community groups to cultivate a spirit of hospitality and welcome;
- Develop projects that build bridges of understand; projects that encourage pride of place and engagement in a wide variety of ways in the community.



BUILD ON OUR CREATIVE ASSETS. Use creativity, culture and the arts as important assets vital in the appeal for establishing a commitment to place. Creativity, cultural expression, and arts were emphasized as important positive and nonthreatening vehicles through which the community can find and celebrate common ground, optimism and excitement for a shared future.

- Cultivate celebration, public art, performance and visual arts to create community pride;
- Honor arts and creativity as essential as intrinsic human expressions;
- Creativity, cultural expression, and arts should be employed as positive and nonthreatening vehicles through which the community can find and celebrate common ground, optimism and excitement for a shared future.



BOLSTER HEALTH AND WELLNESS. Further strengthen Little Falls as a healthy community, through rural community wellness and vitality initiatives.

- Further support to development of local foods, local agriculture, and the farmers’ market;
- Value placed on the medical care system and services available locally;
- The importance of bikes and trails, and healthy outdoor as well as winter recreational amenities.

PROCESS PRIORITY RECOMMENDATIONS

The community expressed a great deal of hope that through this kind of a community process, very transparent and open, that Little Falls would be on a path toward approaches to decision making that invites greater citizen voice and participation in all civic processes, whether governmental, business, or across community groups. The diagram offered below suggests an overall framework for building a new “habit” of participation.

What follows are recommendations from the Executive Team, offering paths to overcome the significant divides that were voiced as a major community challenge throughout the community listening process. A guide for discussions and decision-making matrix have been developed to assist in these efforts, and is available through this initiative.

1. **BE PARTICIPATORY.** Ensure that in every community decision making process there is a plan to invite ideas across the community. Develop plans and processes for keeping the community well-informed, making public processes transparent, and to insure appropriate and timely public input.
2. **ADVANCE BROADLY HELD GOALS.** Use this document as a guide. The process it reflects was deep, inclusive, and very clear in outlining pathways into the future. The vision, guiding principles, assets and challenges addressed are important statements of broadly held beliefs and goals. This document is an important framework for development.
 - Ensure that the community becomes known for the guiding principles, vision and priorities named by the community in this process.
 - Develop a community public image and identity campaign to shape a refreshed community pride and new habits that do not allow past practice to limit the consideration of new ideas.
 - Develop a community-wide, multi-year training initiative to build habits of civic discourse and participatory, transparent community engagement.
3. **LEADERSHIP DEVELOPMENT.** Grow the Next Generation: Ensure that there is a strong pipeline for the development of new civic leadership. Develop plans and processes for nurturing the development of new leaders.



ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Thank you to the residents of 56345

The response rate and thoughtful, passionate desire to be a part of making a difference in your community has been overwhelming.

Thank you to those organizations in our community that hosted our meetings – The Purple Carrot Market, Little Falls Community Schools and the Initiative Foundation.

Thank you to the Our Town 56345 Steering Committee

A Steering Committee, comprised of 26 leaders carefully chosen to be broadly representative of all sectors of the community was charged with advising and shaping the process. This dedicated team has met in 3 retreats, considering all aspects of this process, and as well have been instrumental in the community interview and focus group process gathering the many diverse perspectives of the community and ensuring that the product reflects the overall voice of the community.

Mike Becker, Soil & Water Conservation Dist.
Kate Bjorge, Initiative Foundation
Deb Boelz, Chamber of Commerce
Sr Julien Dirkes, Sisters of St Francis
Kyle Hoggarth, Edward Jones
Heidi Jeub, Artist, Entrepreneur
Steve Jones, Supt. Little Falls Schools
Ashley Kaisershot, Planner for Sourcewell
Michelle Kiley, Great River Arts
Raquel Lundberg, City Council; Waller House
Molly Nelson, KW Realty, Little Falls Business Assn.

Sarah Okroi, IWCO
Tony Romaine, Pastor, First United Church
Fallon Ryan, Sprout
Steve Smith, CEO, St. Gabriel's Hospital
Vicki Spofford, Child Advocate/teacher
James Storlie, City Council
Adam Surma, Knife River
Rose Surma, OASIS Central MN
Kris Vonberge, Conv. & Visitors' Bureau
Greg Zylka, Mayor

Executive Team

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Vicki Chepulis - Five Wings Arts Council

Cathy Hartle - Local OurTown 56345 Facilitator
Arlene Jones - Sprout MN
Sharon Rodning Bash, Project Facilitator

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