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MINNESOTA CITIES

A PUBLICATION OF THE LEAGUE of MINNESOTA CITIES

Legislative Priorities

The League Board has identified 14 key issues to prioritize during the 2025 legislative session.

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Leadership Insights

Experienced public officials share lessons from their years in local government. PAGE 15

MINNESOTA'S NEXT BONDING BILL

**Addressing Cities'
Critical Infrastructure
and Housing Needs**

PAGE 8



A photograph of two construction workers on an orange aerial lift platform. They are wearing hard hats and safety vests. The lift is positioned next to a large, vertical concrete structure, possibly a bridge pier or wall. Two yellow pulleys and black cables are visible on the right side of the frame, attached to the concrete structure. The background is a clear sky.

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LEAGUE OF MINNESOTA CITIES

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LMC's Grant Navigator is now offering even **more** opportunities for Minnesota cities to secure funding for critical projects.

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In addition to the original program, which provides up to \$5,000 per city for grant research and writing expenses, there is now **additional funding for environmental and climate change projects**. Cities with projects focused on these areas can now receive up to \$10,000 per city to cover grant writing expenses, pre-engineering work, or other consultant fees.

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A Call for Local Leadership To Inspire Bipartisan Action at the Legislature

BY LUKE FISCHER

Since the November election, nearly every conversation I have with our members includes some discussion about what might happen this state legislative session. The curiosity and speculation are more specific and intense than in previous election cycles. And I totally understand why.

As of early January, the Legislature's makeup is uncertain, with two special elections scheduled later in the month for seats in the House and Senate.

When the dust settled after the November election, we thought that for the first time since 1979 (or since the "nineteen-hundreds," as the kids say), the Minnesota House of Representatives would be evenly split 67-67 between Republicans and Democrats (DFL). But with a seat recently vacated, Republicans will hold an ultra-slim, one-seat, 67-66 majority as the session begins, until we have the results of the Jan. 28 special election for House District 40B.

Regardless of the special election outcome, any legislation that has a chance of passing the House this session will need to garner bipartisan support. This means that both parties are going to have to work together differently than they have in recent memory to get the 68 votes necessary to pass legislation. Many are concerned that our politics today don't lend themselves well to the give and take necessary to get anything done.

A special election will be held for the Senate District 60 seat, also on Jan. 28, to determine the Senate's composition after former Senate DFL Majority Leader Kari Dziedzic tragically lost her battle with cancer in December. This race will be closely watched as the DFL currently holds a slim one-seat majority. This close margin means that the majority party needs to have every member present and voting to move bills forward — lest they're able to garner

support from the other side of the aisle. Just like in the House, this means that legislators are going to have to compromise if there is any hope of progress on a myriad of important issues affecting us all.

And the questions facing the Legislature this session are significant.

We're in the first year of the biennium. Now is the time state lawmakers take up the two-year budget. Absent an adopted budget by June 30, the state faces a government shutdown — which hasn't happened since 2011. This has the potential to impact aid payments to cities, Minnesota Department of Transportation projects, public safety, and a number of other important services cities (and the public) have come to rely on.

In addition to the required task of passing a budget this session, inaction on a bonding bill last session has many of our members hoping lawmakers can come together to support legislation that funds needed local initiatives and deposits its money into accounts that support things like water and sewer projects. The prospect of a bonding bill is in question, considering that it requires a super-majority of lawmakers to move these needed investments forward.

The state's fiscal picture looks considerably different with recent budget forecasts predicting a structural imbalance (or deficit) on the horizon. Lawmakers are going to be asked to do more with much less than the previous session — again with a political landscape that is daunting.

It's no surprise that many pundits, observers, and even some lawmakers are already speculating about a dreaded special session.


Bleak as it may be at the state level, I find hope that our government can and should be able to get through challenges like this when I see the work that happens at the local level in your city halls.



In December, each and every city council in Minnesota passed a budget to ensure the local streets are plowed, public safety is funded, and our drinking water is clean. You did that by taking time to listen to the public, through compromise, and with a sense of duty — after all, you were elected to make your city better.

It's important that you bring that same spirit of progress to every conversation you have with your state representatives and senators this session. Now is the time to call them to action to get their work done. As local leaders, you know just how important it is that our partners at the state level do their work.

As you talk with folks at the Capitol, call on them to set partisan differences aside, find areas of agreement and compromise, and encourage them to put their districts first. You can do this best by engaging with legislators, sharing your stories, and letting them know how important the city-state partnership is to the people we all serve.

And don't let anyone blame the "other side." Cities are the sterling example that compromise and progress are possible — despite differences of opinions. 



Luke Fischer is executive director of the League of Minnesota Cities. Contact: lfischer@lmc.org or (651) 281-1279.



Expanded Grant Navigator Program Offers More Funding for Climate Projects

The League of Minnesota Cities' Grant Navigator is now offering even more opportunities for Minnesota cities to secure funding for critical projects. In addition to the original program, which provides up to \$5,000 per city for grant research and writing expenses, there is now additional funding from Minnesota foundations specifically for environmental and climate change projects.

Cities with projects focused on these areas can now receive up to \$10,000 per city to cover grant writing expenses, pre-engineering work, or other consultant fees. This increased funding demonstrates a commitment to supporting cities in addressing critical environmental challenges and implementing sustainable solutions. For the application and more information, visit lmc.org/grant-navigator.



Bloomington Enlists Therapists To Support Residents Following Certain 911 Calls

Bloomington recently launched a pilot program hiring therapists to assist residents experiencing mental health crises after certain 911 calls, as reported by the *Minnesota Star Tribune*. Initiated by the Bloomington Police Department in partnership with Bloomington Public Health, this program aims to connect individuals to a therapist within one to two days, targeting those facing issues such as overdoses, anxiety, depression, or school attendance challenges. Two licensed therapists, along with two interns from St. Mary's University, provide short-term support either in person or via telehealth to stabilize individuals until they can access long-term care.

The program addresses a crucial gap as many residents face significant wait times for therapy, with some experiencing delays of up to 10 weeks. In the program's



initial seven months, therapists handled 44 cases, and over half of these individuals successfully transitioned into long-term treatment. Funded initially by opioid settlement and state funds, officials are currently exploring sustained funding options.

NLC's Congressional City Conference

The National League of Cities Congressional City Conference is set for March 10-12 in Washington, D.C. City officials who attend this annual event can connect with the Minnesota congressional delegation, learn about new federal programs, meet other city officials from across the country, and polish their advocacy skills. Learn more at ccc.nlc.org.





New Raymond Area Museum Shares City's Rich History

The Raymond Area Museum recently opened, celebrating the city's 135-year history, featuring artifacts, photos, and documents from the community's past.

Local volunteers established the museum in a section of the former MACCRAY East Elementary School, saved from demolition by the Raymond City Council, according to the *West Central Tribune*. The museum's grand opening took place during the Raymond Harvest Festival, drawing over 300 visitors.

Museum board member Randy Haats, volunteer Diane Macht, and others transformed the classrooms into displays highlighting the city's rich history. Volunteers carefully cataloged donations to accurately document the stories behind each item, from past milestones to recent events. The museum continues to welcome donations, encouraging residents to contribute items along with their personal stories.

Open on a limited schedule and during key community events, the museum serves as an educational resource, especially for younger residents, to connect with the city's heritage. The museum board hopes to keep Raymond's history alive, inviting future generations to play a role in preserving and celebrating the community's legacy.



All-America City Award

The National Civic League will once again recognize 10 communities with the All-America City Award, and the time is now for your community to apply for this national recognition. This year's awards will highlight the pivotal role that community engagement plays in advancing environmental sustainability.

To apply, you'll need to describe the strength of your city's civic capital — the formal and informal relationships and networks used to make decisions and solve problems — and to provide examples of community-driven projects that demonstrate a commitment to conservation and mitigating the impacts of climate change.

More than 500 communities have been named an All-America City since the program began in 1949, including 20 from Minnesota.

The deadline to apply is Feb. 27. Learn more at nationalcivicleague.org/america-city-award.

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Elected Leaders Institute – Foundational

Feb. 7-8 — Mankato

Feb. 21-22 — Plymouth

Feb. 28-March 1 — Alexandria

Elected Leaders Institute – Advanced

Feb. 21-22 — Plymouth

Feb. 28-March 1 — Alexandria

City Day on the Hill

March 6 — St. Paul

Safety and Loss Control Workshops

March & April – Various locations

Annual Conference

June 25-27 — Duluth

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Learn more about these and other events at lmc.org/events.

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How Does Your City Use Drones To Support Its Operations?



HUNTER PANNING

POLICE OFFICER

CHASKA (POPULATION 29,034)

The Chaska Police Department implemented a drone program in April 2024 to assist with our law enforcement activities. To date, the program has proved to be extremely successful, and I've had the privilege of seeing firsthand how it's reshaped the way we serve and protect. Our communities

rely on real-time information and swift action, and drones have helped us deliver on those expectations.

The department has four drones that are piloted by five officers. They are used to locate missing persons, provide aerial surveillance during emergencies, and provide perspectives that we can't get from the ground. In addition to the 50-plus drone deployments we've had related to law enforcement and public safety needs since our implementation, in early summer 2024 we captured footage of the record-setting Minnesota River flooding, helping us monitor its peak and provide our residents with aerial awareness. The drones have become our eyes in the sky, offering a new value on service and safety.

Drones have significantly enhanced our officers' safety by reducing the need for dangerous interventions with armed people by providing us time and distance to more effectively mitigate those risky encounters. They also save us resources while still providing top-tier service to our community. Technology, when used with purpose and integrity, can make a lasting impact in the lives of the people we're sworn to protect.

Like any new tool, there are challenges. Privacy concerns from residents are completely understandable, and from day one, we've made transparency and responsible usage a priority with clearly articulated policies and procedures. Operating drones lawfully under Minnesota law and Federal Aviation Administration regulations requires rigorous preparation, and our priority will always be remaining responsible users of airspace.

I've also been inspired by the overwhelmingly positive feedback we've received from the community. People see the benefits in the form of faster resource deployment or increased safety, and they appreciate the steps we've taken to improve our delivery of critical public safety services.

For city leaders thinking about implementing drone technology, it's critical to start with a clear vision. Make transparency with your community a priority, and ensure your team is well trained and ready to operate responsibly while adhering to all regulations. Drones are the future of public safety, and being part of that future is something we should all embrace.

SAM TEMPLE

NORTHFIELD PUBLIC BROADCASTING (NPB)

STATION MANAGER

NORTHFIELD (POPULATION 21,020)

The City of Northfield first used drones for aerial footage in 2022. We have since utilized aerial footage for videos inviting businesses to Northfield, public service announcements communicating infrastructure updates, and in the annual State of the City address.

It's one thing to communicate information, but showing familiar places from an unexpected angle prompts people to consider their community from a fresh perspective. In government communications, that's no small thing; it can create a sense of belonging and shared purpose.

I was 14 when I worked on my first local PEG (public, education, government) television station production, a documentary about my hometown's founder. What we discovered then, and what I continue to apply in my work today as a public access station manager for the City of Northfield, is that aerial videography and thoughtful editing can impact viewers in a uniquely profound way.

At the municipal level, one of our key challenges is helping residents remember that they're part of a broader community. Government communicators often aim to reinforce that we're connected — that no one exists in isolation. Aerial footage of a city, where viewers can spot landmarks or even their own homes, serves as a powerful reminder of those connections. It's a visual tool that can inspire pride, curiosity, and a sense of shared responsibility.


For government communicators, aerial perspectives are more than just flashy visuals; they're a storytelling device that connects people to place and to one another. The work that I started when I was 14 is what I continue to do today — telling community stories for local public television. Aerial footage alone doesn't make a message effective or a video professional. Like anything, it is a tool. With the right team and the right message, this tool can help foster a community-wide understanding that we're all part of something larger — an idea that resonates long after the video ends. 





PHOTO BY ERIC HAUGEN

MINNESOTA'S NEXT BONDING BILL

Addressing Cities' Critical Infrastructure and Housing Needs

BY SUZY FRISCH

St. Michael — like many cities across Minnesota — is in a bind. It's facing new state clean water regulations to upgrade and expand its aging wastewater treatment plant. To complete the project's required \$20 million in improvements, the city is seeking \$7 million in funding assistance through the state capital investment bonding bill.

But the Legislature failed to pass the bill in May 2024, following its trend during three of the four most recent legislative sessions. Last session, bonding proposals didn't even make it to either chambers' floor. The House approved a \$70 million cash investment bill minutes before the session ended, but the Senate did not vote on it. The Legislature's inaction has left cities across the state in limbo as their infrastructure needs stack up and costs climb.

Lengthy to-do list

From fixing deteriorating roads and bridges to rehabilitating public housing, there is vast demand to improve and maintain Minnesota's infrastructure. Even though the Legislature passed a significant bill in 2023 — including \$2.6 billion in bonding and cash investments — the state still has \$5 billion in pending requests for additional capital investment needs, said former state Rep. Dean Urdahl (R-Grove City). A perennial leader during 20 years of bonding bill deliberations, Urdahl notes that the backlog is sky-high because the Legislature didn't enact a bonding bill in 2021 or 2022.

Minnesota's overall demands for infrastructure spending are extensive in communities big and small, whether for new projects or preservation of existing facilities. Hundreds of wastewater plant improvements alone will clock in at \$12 billion during the next 20 years, though the state doesn't foot the entire bill, said Craig Johnson, senior intergovernmental relations representative for the League of Minnesota Cities.

The American Council of Engineering Companies issues an annual report card of each state's infrastructure. Its most recent report for 2022 gave Minnesota's drinking water infrastructure a C- while roads earned a D+ and bridges got a C. The state's bridges will require \$8.2 billion in rehabilitation and repairs during the next 20 years, while Minnesota's

roads will need \$17.7 billion in upkeep — or \$885 million annually.

“If you don’t do bonding, you have unmet needs that continue to grow, and the prices go up. It just makes it more expensive to do the things we should have done in the first place,” Urdahl said. “It’s wrong to play political games with the health and safety of the people of Minnesota. We are elected and sent to St. Paul to serve the interests of our district and the people of the state. If you have infrastructure problems, you should deal with them.”

How politics impact bonding

The requests for capital investment funding are piling up because Minnesota has fallen off its traditional bonding cadence. For 50 years, the Legislature shaped each two-year term, or biennium, to function either as a budget year or a bonding year. Odd years usually are when lawmakers set the state’s budget for the next two years. Then in even years, they typically approve the issuance of long-term bonds to pay for a wide array of public works projects.

A bonding bill’s reach spreads across Minnesota, contributing funds to diverse needs like building maintenance at state colleges and universities, cities’ police and fire stations, and investments in natural resources. However, getting the bill passed can be a heavy lift that often becomes politicized because a supermajority of both chambers must authorize the spending, Johnson said. In recent years, either each party controlled one chamber, or one party controlled the House and Senate but with slim margins, making it challenging to secure enough votes.

Urdahl has retired, leaving with the perspective that the bonding bill now must overcome another roadblock. It has been turned into a bargaining chip lately, he said. The parties used to negotiate for various spending priorities within the bill. Since 2019, when Republicans became the minority party, it’s become more common to hold up the bonding bill entirely to achieve other legislative goals.

Unfortunately, cities like St. Michael get caught in the middle. Infrastructure needs like repairing roads and bridges and upgrading wastewater treatment plants to meet new state and federal regulations wait on the backburner. Minnesota’s main funding source for wastewater projects, the Point Source Implementation Grant

(continued on page 10)

PHOTO BY MATT WALES



GETTING IN ON BONDING

It’s no easy feat to clinch funds through Minnesota’s bonding process. But with some investments of time and money, cities can obtain resources to help them meet their infrastructure, transportation, and economic development needs. Here are some tips from the Minnesota Management and Budget (MMB) office, which leads the process for the state.

1) Set your expectations for a lengthy process

The Legislature typically takes up bonding bills every other year — and there have been longer gaps without lawmakers approving such a measure.

2) Choose your projects wisely

To be eligible for bonding or cash investments, initiatives must be for a public purpose, publicly owned, and include a clearly stated purpose for the funds.

3) Seek funding

Cities must have skin in the game to obtain bonding money. The Legislature often requires that recipients provide nonmatching funds to receive an appropriation. Other times, recipients must secure matching dollars from sources like the federal government or private organizations.

4) Collect all the details

To be considered for inclusion in the bonding bill, submit capital budget documents to MMB. Required details include a summary of the project or projects, in priority order; detailed project descriptions; rationale for its need; the amount requested, per project; a proposed timeline; and resolution of support from the governing body.

5) Turn in your homework

When following a traditional timetable of even-year bonding, local governments must submit their requests in mid-June of odd-numbered years. Projects are analyzed, prioritized, and recommended by the governor, then submitted to the Legislature for consideration.

6) Prepare to make your case

Legislators work collaboratively on bonding bills, often meeting with applicants to hear their requests. That might involve advocating at the chambers’ capital investment committees or hosting lawmakers during a “bonding tour,” when they visit locations to assess opportunities for funding. It’s all part of the state’s due diligence to support the most needed projects, with a mix of urban and rural investments.

SOURCE: Minnesota Management and Budget
mn.gov/mmb/budget/capital-budget/faq.jsp

program, had a \$101 million pot that was drained by projects receiving funding in 2023. The program requires new state bonding dollars to direct money to municipal projects like St. Michael's, enabling the city to provide residents with basic services, said Steve Bot, city administrator and public works director for St. Michael.

"The bonding bill has been a great opportunity to meet infrastructure needs that the community otherwise might not be able to afford without state help," Bot said. "Roads, bridges, sewers, and wastewater projects aren't flashy, but they are essential, and they cost a lot of money. There's an expectation by the public that we make those things happen."

Sometimes, cities find that they can't wait any longer to fix a crumbling road or improve the performance of a water treatment facility. "But then it's all on the city taxpayers' dime, and those are tough decisions to make," Bot adds. "Sometimes you have to wait and keep patching things together with the hope that the funds will eventually come, and sometimes you have to make a decision to move ahead without the funds."

In addition, cities risk missing out on federal matching grants for water and sewer projects when the state doesn't contribute its share of funding. It becomes a lost opportunity to move projects forward, Johnson said.

There are other challenges when lawmakers don't approve bonding. Applicants' proposals have a shelf life. If a request for bonding money stays unfunded for too long, cities must renegotiate and rebid contracts with vendors. Then the

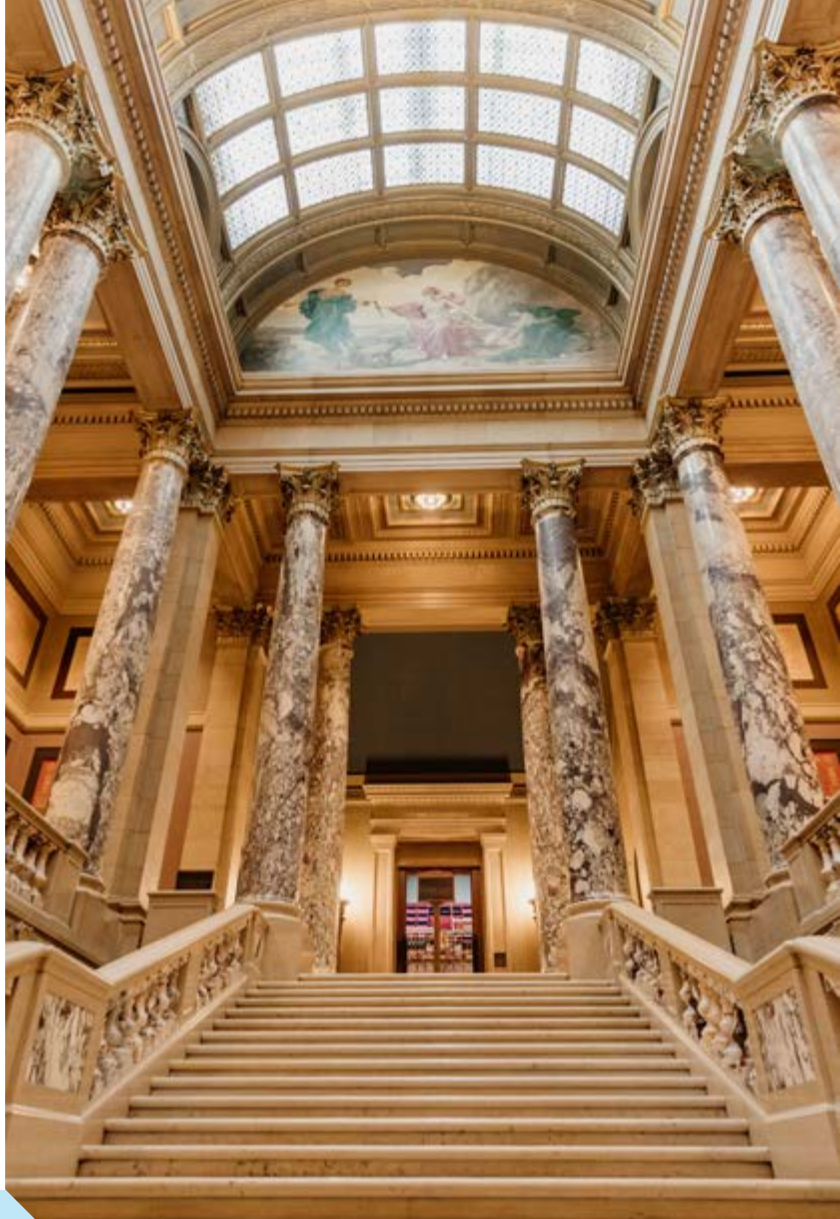


PHOTO BY ERIC HAUGEN

WHERE DID THE 2023 BONDING FUNDS GO?

In 2023, the Minnesota Legislature broke records with its capital improvement bill. Minnesota authorized \$1.3 billion in general obligation bonds and \$1.1 billion in cash investments, making up for lost time when it didn't pass a bonding bill in 2021 or 2022. How is the money being spent?

Some highlights from the bonding bill include:

- ▶ \$381.1 million for the Public Facilities Authority to fund 47 water and wastewater projects.
- ▶ \$326.3 million for the Department of Transportation, including \$146 million for local roads and bridges.
- ▶ \$233.1 million to the Department of Natural Resources, including \$49.7 million for flood hazard mitigation.
- ▶ \$136 million for University of Minnesota, including \$43.4 million for asset preservation; Minnesota State Colleges and Universities received \$134.7 million, including \$90 million for renovations and upgrades.

Cash bill highlights include:

- ▶ \$48.6 million for the Department of Public Safety, which mostly funded local fire or public safety centers, including a \$10 million regional training center in Hibbing.
- ▶ \$21.6 million to renovate facilities at the St. Peter Regional Treatment Center.
- ▶ \$14.5 million for a wastewater treatment plant in Austin.
- ▶ \$12.8 million to the Pope-Douglas Solid Waste Management board to switch to single-source recycling.

SOURCE: Minnesota House of Representatives
house.mn.gov/sessiondaily/Story/18028

work usually becomes more expensive because of rising costs for materials and labor, Johnson said.

“There is a ton of infrastructure that was planned that is not being built,” he adds. “We have this desperate backlog of projects that can’t start, even though they are all planned and ready to go.”

Help for housing

Housing is another vital area supported by bonding bills — and the need for funding is constant. The federal Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) built thousands of housing units in Minnesota that are operated by communities’ public housing authorities. Spread across the state in cities of all sizes, many units were built in the 1950s and 60s and require substantial repairs. Though HUD provides some funding, it’s not enough to cover the properties’ extensive needs, said Jennifer Leimaile Ho, commissioner of Minnesota Housing.

“This is where some of our aging Minnesotans and people with disabilities are living, and they are on fixed incomes. There’s often no other place in the community where they can afford to live. These buildings have deteriorating HVAC systems and broken elevators and literally windows falling off the sides of buildings,” Ho said. “The level of repair we see in this program is really intense. So public housing preservation is a really high priority for us, and if you’re a city it’s an important community asset.”

In 2023, the Legislature approved a record \$1.3 billion for housing, including \$82 million in cash and general obligation bonds for public housing rehabilitation. Yet there is still a lengthy list of housing stock waiting for repairs, Ho said. Another channel for preserving affordable housing comes from Minnesota’s housing infrastructure bonds. Usually privately owned, this housing stock is HUD-subsidized to keep rent affordable. Such units also require a significant investment in upkeep to ensure that they remain safe and high-quality places for Minnesotans to live, Ho said.

Gov. Tim Walz’s 2024 bonding proposal designated \$57.5 million for housing. It recommended \$50 million for housing infrastructure bonds to develop additional multifamily developments for people who are homeless, seniors, and families, plus single-family development and manufactured home community infrastructure. The proposal directed another \$7.5 million to public housing rehabilitation. Without these dollars, vital new housing doesn’t get built, significant repairs go uncompleted, and the list of needs grows unabated, Ho said.

“When we fund less, we build less. The housing market in America is largely a private market endeavor, and what we do with precious government resources is focus on affordability for people who can’t play in the private market,” Ho said. “In Minnesota, we are at least 50,000 units short of what we need, and the gap is greatest for people who are low income. That’s where the government subsidy to build or create affordability is really critical.”

What’s next?

The question on many city leaders’ minds is whether the Legislature will take up bonding as part of its regular business in 2025. Traditionally, a bonding bill wouldn’t be considered until 2026. The jury is out.

“I wish I could say I’m an optimist, but I’ve gone through too many of these circumstances over the years to take anything for granted,” Urdahl said. “I would say I’m hopeful that they

“The bonding bill has been a great opportunity to meet infrastructure needs that the community otherwise might not be able to afford without state help. Roads, bridges, sewers, and wastewater projects aren’t flashy, but they are essential, and they cost a lot of money. There’s an expectation by the public that we make those things happen.”

– STEVE BOT, CITY ADMINISTRATOR AND PUBLIC WORKS DIRECTOR, ST. MICHAEL

can get it done. I really wish they could just realize that my gosh, the people of Minnesota depend on us to do it.”

During the 2024 session, Minnesota Management and Budget gave the state a \$930 million bonding target. One proposed bill included \$600 million for state projects and more than \$330 million to be split among Democrats and Republicans in both chambers, who would determine how to disburse the funds locally. The state will know more after the next economic forecast is released in February, giving Walz and lawmakers a sense of Minnesota’s bonding capacity in 2025.


City leaders can help inspire the Legislature to act, making the case that they need support to keep their infrastructure in good working order and meet federal mandates. Treating water and wastewater have many new regulations, including updated clean water standards and the required removal of chemicals like per- and polyfluoroalkyl substances (PFAS).

“We have a strong case that we cannot afford any more delays, and local infrastructure needs are at an urgent level,” Johnson said. “We have to get the money because there will be significant impacts.”

One of those impacts includes stifling growth. Communities are having trouble expanding to accommodate new businesses and housing developments. Many can’t afford to build the necessary roads and expand their infrastructure capacities for water and sewer to meet newcomers’ needs, Johnson said.

The League also will be fighting recent efforts to require local governments to show that they have money set aside to pay for expansion, rehabilitation, and eventual replacement of their requested projects. Otherwise, the state would not send bonding dollars their way.

“It’s like saying you can’t get a loan for your car until you show you have money in the bank to pay for it,” Johnson said. “That would make the state no longer a viable source for funding for anything.”

Lobbying has been fierce to block such measures, with arguments that cities don’t request funds from the Legislature without a plan, up-front investments of time, effort, and funds, and money set-aside for future maintenance and improvements. Johnson argues that while cities should be planful and prepared before they request state funds, Minnesota’s own capital improvement planning and vetting process already should provide sufficient guardrails. 

Suzy Frisch is a freelance writer.

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LMC's 2025 Legislative Priorities

In preparation for the upcoming legislative session, the League of Minnesota Cities Board of Directors formally approved the 2025 *City Policies*, a publication developed with input from member city officials who participated in the League's four legislative policy committees in 2024. The *City Policies* document is the only comprehensive statewide legislative advocacy agenda for all Minnesota cities — access it at lmc.org/policies.

From those city legislative policies, the League Board adopted a broad set of legislative priorities. The priorities were determined through discussions that occurred during the policy committee process and through other member interactions and communications over the past several months. While the issues addressed in the priorities list do not reflect the entire scope of the League's anticipated activities at the Legislature during the 2025 legislative session, they do provide a starting point for important issues to watch as the session gets underway.

The 14 LMC legislative priorities for 2025 (listed alphabetically):

- ▶ Adult-use cannabis
- ▶ Bonding
- ▶ Elections
- ▶ Emerald ash borer (EAB)
- ▶ Emergency Medical Services (EMS)
- ▶ Employment issues
- ▶ Housing
- ▶ Local decision-making
- ▶ Local government aid (LGA)
- ▶ Local sales taxes
- ▶ Public safety duty disability
- ▶ Sales tax exemption on construction materials
- ▶ Transportation funding
- ▶ Water infrastructure and policies

Have questions?

If you have questions about the legislative session or the League's legislative priorities, contact a member of the LMC Intergovernmental Relations (IGR) team. Find staff contact information at lmc.org/igr-staff.



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Jorge Prince
Mayor
Bemidji



Lisa Dircks
Council Member
Spring Lake Park

Experienced Elected Leaders Share Insights From Their Years in Local Government

As this year's incoming newly elected officials assume their roles, Jorge Prince and Lisa Dircks share wisdom from their combined nearly 16 years of government service.

BY DEBORAH LYNN BLUMBERG

PHOTO BY MATT WALES



JORGE PRINCE

The driving force behind Jorge Prince's campaign for mayor of Bemidji was a desire to restore industry to the city he grew up in. Prince, a first-generation Mexican immigrant, finance professional, and small business owner, has been mayor since 2020. He's focused on rebuilding relationships with tribal neighbors, building up business, and leading major infrastructure projects.

QUESTION: *What inspired you to run for mayor?*

Jorge Prince: I moved to Bemidji in 1976, and growing up realized the city was having structural problems. Our county is one of the poorest in the state. Lumber mills closed, the first batch in the '80s, more in the '90s, and that impacted us pretty negatively. It was our industrial base; we never really replaced it. As a student at Bemidji State, then as a young professional, I kept hoping somebody would take these challenges head on. Finally, in 2014, I thought, maybe that person is me, so I ran for mayor. I lost that campaign by a couple hundred votes and wasn't so sure I'd ever run again. Then in 2020, a seat became open and people asked, 'Are you going to run?' My kids were grown, so I thought, let's try. Now, I'm also a business partner

in seven companies, and proud to be part of efforts to bring industry back to Bemidji.

Q: *What's been the biggest challenge you've encountered while in office?*

JP: Navigating complex issues in a polarized world. The majority of city issues are not political, from streets to water to policing. But because we live in a polarized world, people look at things through lenses. It's surprising how that percolates into local affairs. I try to approach things through a lens of, just because we're on the opposite side of something today doesn't mean we have to be on the opposite side of everything forever.

Q: *What do you wish you had known going in that you know now?*

JP: I always knew government moves slowly, but it moves even slower than I thought. People automatically think that's a bad thing. But when you're talking about bringing change, you have an obligation to help steward your entire community through change, and people generally don't want to see it happen fast. So, just know that, if you want to bring change, it's going to take you even longer than you would have thought.

Q: *How can incoming elected officials prepare for their new role?*

JP: This role is all about relationships — that's key to being a successful local leader. The more you can develop relation-

(continued on page 16)

ships before you take office, and once in office, the better it's going to be. Get out of your comfort zone and meet people you otherwise wouldn't, and don't go in with an agenda. Be there, participate, build a relationship. The more you build in a variety of spaces in your community, the easier it is down the road when difficult decisions need to be made. I don't typically go to symphony events, but I get invited, go, and learn from those people. It's the same with the racetrack. I've been in so many neat spaces in our community I didn't even know existed.

This role is all about relationships — that's key to being a successful local leader. The more you can develop relationships before you take office, and once in office, the better it's going to be. Get out of your comfort zone and meet people you otherwise wouldn't, and don't go in with an agenda.

—JORGE PRINCE

Q: What are some resources you've relied on?

JP: The League of Minnesota Cities has tremendous resources. I immersed myself in the League's new elected official training, the Elected Leaders Institute (ELI) Foundational Program, and I also went to the ELI Advanced Program. Through those I was able to build relationships with council members in other places, as well. I found that community of fellow elected officials to be invaluable.

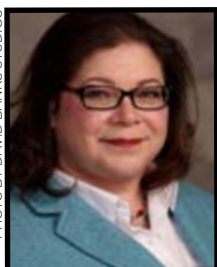
Q: What's been a bright spot or highlight so far in your time as mayor?

JP: To rebuild relationships with our tribal neighbors, we had council-to-council meetings with all three nations. It was the first time that had been done in our city's 125 years. We've also worked on big infrastructure projects that we secured millions for, including building new facilities that filter per- and polyfluoroalkyl substances (PFAS) out of our wells.

Q: Any parting words of advice for incoming officials?

JP: Be consistent. When people say things that aren't truthful, remain professional, stay on point about what you did. It's what your citizens need from you. Also, remember you're responsible for representing everybody, then give yourself a little grace as a newly elected official. You're not always going to get it right; you may be wrong and make a decision you'll regret. The goal is to learn and do the best you can.

PHOTO BY DAVID BANKS STUDIOS



LISA DIRCKS

In the City of Spring Lake Park, Lisa Dircks worked in civil engineering designing roadways before joining her city's planning board commission, a role she held for five years, one as chair. Running for City Council felt

like a natural progression. Dircks was appointed in 2019 and reelected in 2020. She's been instrumental in updating city codes and navigating a changing demographic of aging residents, coupled with a change in the city's economic demographic and a younger, more diverse population.

QUESTION: What inspired you to run for council originally?

Lisa Dircks: I was a 10-year plus volunteer with the nonprofit Fare for All, which provides lower-cost fresh food for people across Minnesota and Wisconsin. As a single mom, I benefited from the program. When the site I was working on moved elsewhere, I saw a volunteer opening on the Spring Lake Park Planning Commission and applied. I'd worked in civil engineering and surveying technology, so this complemented my career. Being on the commission gave me insight into how government functions — the biggest project I worked on was rewriting our zoning code. Several years later there was a Council opening; it felt like a natural progression. I wasn't sure I wanted to be on the City Council, but the appointment gave me an opportunity to try the position out. I grew up very poor, and there's a feeling that comes with that background that you don't belong in posi-

tions of influence and your voice might go unheard. I figured if I did win, but it wasn't the right fit, I didn't have to run again. When I ran for election a year later, I did it to make an impact for people who don't believe they have a voice.

Q: What do you wish you had known going in that you know now?

LD: I wish I'd known more about how government accounting works. I spent a while reading the entire city budget. That was the hard part for me, the financial bit. On the human side, it's getting used to the fact that often by the time residents call you they already have a problem and they're very upset. I can still remember the few first nasty emails I got. You have to be able to get that person to the point that they can be calm so you can actually help them with their issue.

Q: What are some important skills elected officials should possess in order to be successful?

LD: Being a council member is really all about relationships, networking, and listening. Brush up on your listening skills, have that natural curiosity, network with other elected officials, and ask questions, particularly of your staff. Building relationships with my city administration was very helpful. Your staff are your allies, they do the job every day and know how it works. To help with relationship-building, I volunteer at city events. It allows me to meet people I wouldn't necessarily meet, and for them to meet me. It's important because many people don't know who their mayor or City Council members are, and it's easier to reach out to people you know. This helps foster engagement and makes government accessible to our residents. We recently

Resources for new council members

The League offers a variety of resources for elected city leaders. View a list of information and guidance at lmc.org/citycouncil, as well as online courses for elected leaders through MemberLearn at lmc.org/councilcourses.

tried something new, a Pokémon Go Community Day event — a city police officer and I play Pokémon — and we got 60 people to attend, which was huge. It showed us that when you want to engage people, you've got to figure out what their passion is, go where they are, or give them a reason to come to you. You have to get creative in how you engage.

Q: What are some resources you recommend to hone those skills?

LD: For my day job, I work for the Minnesota Department of Transportation, and if they're offering any kind of communications class I sign up. I also listen to audiobooks while commuting, books on how to communicate, how to listen, and how the history of politics has made government inaccessible and difficult to engage with. Learn as much as you can as often as you can because nobody knows this job 100%. You just have to keep learning and adjusting.

Q: What inspired you to seek reelection?

LD: I considered not running again because of family health issues, because it's a big commitment, and I didn't want to run if I couldn't do my best. In the end, I realized that I really

like doing this work, and I'm excited about guiding my city into the future.

Q: Any parting words of advice for incoming officials?

LD: Read your city code. It took me three months on the bus, reading it on a tablet, but now I have a good idea of how things are set up and how they work. Also, treat city staff with respect. They do the day-to-day work of running the city, and they deserve to be treated like the professionals that they are. A little bit of respect and support goes a long way with your staff, other elected officials, and the community you represent. ☑☑

Deborah Lynn Blumberg is a freelance writer.

Brush up on your listening skills, have that natural curiosity, network with other elected officials, and ask questions, particularly of your staff. Building relationships with my city administration was very helpful. Your staff are your allies, they do the job every day and know how it works.

-LISA DIRCKS



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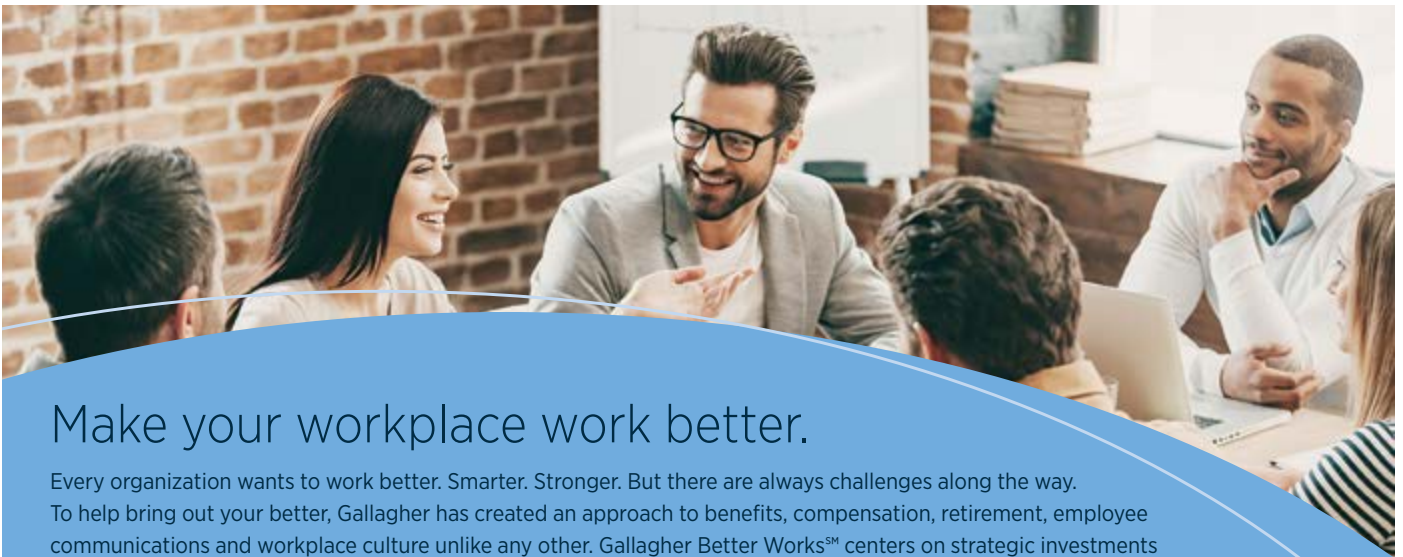
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The Essential Role of Onboarding City Staff

BY AARON MENZA



In today's competitive job market, local governments face specific challenges in hiring and keeping talented employees. One example is the City of Rosemount, which is growing fast and experiencing high turnover due to retirements, making an effective onboarding program essential.

Onboarding helps new employees get comfortable in their roles, builds engagement, and improves long-term retention. For local governments, having a well-prepared team is critical because disengaged or underprepared staff can directly impact public services. Without a structured onboarding process, cities like Rosemount risk inefficiencies and low engagement, which can reduce the quality of services provided to residents.

Why onboarding matters in local government

Onboarding is more than just an HR task; it shapes how new hires view their role and influences their long-term career path.

Studies show that effective onboarding improves job satisfaction, performance, and retention. A strong onboarding program boosts employee engagement, enhances job performance, and encourages commitment to the organization — all crucial for reducing turnover.

In government roles, onboarding creates a structured path that helps employees feel welcomed, informed, and aligned with the organization's goals. This is especially important in public service, where understanding the broader mission is essential for success.

Key elements of a successful onboarding program

A well-designed onboarding program should be thorough and tailored to

the unique needs of local government employees. Here are some key components to include:

- ▶ **Pre-onboarding preparation:** Onboarding starts before the first day. Administrative tasks, like paperwork and IT setup, should be completed in advance. Early communication between the new hire and their supervisor can help ease any anxieties and clarify expectations.
- ▶ **Structured orientation and training:** A clear orientation plan should introduce employees to the organization's mission, goals, and their role's contribution. According to Gallup, employees with a better onboarding experience are 2.6 times more likely to feel satisfied at work. A structured approach ensures that new hires are not only well-informed, but also feel connected to the city's objectives from their very first day.
- ▶ **Onboarding handbook:** A well-organized employee handbook is a valuable reference for policies, culture, and job expectations. It helps new hires settle in by providing clear answers to common questions, reducing stress and confusion.
- ▶ **Peer mentorship and team integration:** Pairing new hires with a peer mentor helps them learn informally and build strong connections to the organization. Approximately 56% of new hires said an onboarding buddy or mentor helps tremendously, according to BambooHR. These mentors can help clear up doubts or questions, share details of the workplace culture, and encourage participation in team activities, making the onboarding experience more welcoming.
- ▶ **Leadership interaction and department tours:** Casual 'lunch with leader-


ship' sessions and departmental tours allow new hires to meet key figures and other teams, giving them a fuller picture of the organization and how their role fits into the city's mission.

- ▶ **Ongoing support, training, and feedback:** Onboarding should continue beyond the first few weeks. Regular check-ins, feedback meetings, and trainings help employees overcome challenges and fully settle into their roles. For example, the City of Burnsville implemented a development program, known as Burnsville University, that offers employees training to build skills, support workplace culture, and promote learning, belonging, and employee well-being. This extended approach supports new employees' transition while gathering valuable input to enhance existing employee development over time.

Program evaluation and continuous improvement

An onboarding program should include ongoing evaluation. Collecting feedback from new employees through surveys or discussions reveals what's working and what needs improvement. Metrics like retention rates and job satisfaction also help assess the program's success.

A consistent feedback process, like a survey sent after six months, can show how well new employees are adjusting. Continuous assessment allows the organization to adapt the onboarding program to meet evolving needs.

For local governments, a strong onboarding program is essential. As retirements and turnover continue to affect the workforce, a structured onboarding process helps create an engaged and high-performing team that serves the community effectively. 

Aaron Menza is a geographic information systems (GIS) supervisor with the City of Rosemount.

The League of Minnesota Cities has resources to help you develop and implement a successful onboarding program in your city. See LMCs' *HR Reference Manual*, Chapter 2: Hiring, at lmc.org/hiring.

Battle Lake Hatchery Row: Before and After

BY HEATHER RULE

Val Martin lived in a neighboring community and was familiar with Battle Lake when she started working for the city in 2015. The public works director gave her a tour of Battle Lake, and Martin asked about West Henning Street, just off Lake Avenue, the main drag in town.

The area she was asking about is known as Hatchery Row. “It looked pretty tough. In my mind I’m thinking, ‘well, we’re going to have to do something about that,’” Martin said.

Nearly a decade later, and the unsightly Hatchery Row with its dilapidated and unused properties — which hadn’t been fully functional in decades — has turned into a flourishing new property known as the redevelopment of Hatchery Row. The three-story, multiuse building includes commercial space, high-end apartments, and underground parking. The approximately \$8 million redevelopment is one of the biggest projects Battle Lake has ever seen, Martin said.

Hatchery Row history

Hatchery Row was a group of agricultural and industrial buildings on the north side of Henning Street in Battle Lake, just west of the downtown business area. The unused buildings became unsightly within the thriving community. Hatchery Row offered the perfect location for redevelopment and expansion within the city.

The project became a priority for Battle Lake starting in 2016.

PHOTO BY VAL MARTIN



After years of disrepair, Hatchery Row was transformed into a new three-story property with commercial space, high-end apartments, and underground parking.

It started with reforming the city’s economic development authority (EDA), of which Martin is now the director, along with her duties as city clerk/treasurer. One of the first tasks was meeting with the property owners and convincing them to sell.

The EDA also had meetings in 2017 with community members, and a visioning study helped put together ideas for property redevelopment. This visioning study was a “huge help in recruiting a developer,” Martin said.

After a groundbreaking in August 2022, construction and concrete work started in November 2022 and continued through 2024.

Redevelopment takes shape

The multiuse building is home to commercial space and 15 high-end apartments. Most of these apartments were spoken for as of October 2024. Deemed “high-end,” the units are a little more expensive and were built with better quality woodwork and countertops, for example, according to Martin. These apartments are just the latest housing options added to Battle Lake in recent years.

About 100 people attended a ribbon cutting event for the project in July 2024 and by fall 2024 construction of the building was nearly complete, with just a few finishing touches remaining, such as landscaping. The businesses in the retail space are all open and include a nonprofit organization, fitness center, financial advisory services, beauty salon, and doughnut shop.



Hatchery Row, once neglected industrial and agricultural buildings in Battle Lake, became an ideal site for redevelopment and community expansion near downtown.

The city was more involved up front with purchasing the property and cleaning it up so the developer could build on the land. The developer funded the project through investors and borrowed money from the local bank. Plus, the city used tax increment financing and various grants, including grant funding to help pay for the sidewalks, water, sewer, and natural gas hook-ups.

Part of the broader community

The redevelopment in the heart of Battle Lake is part of “an explosion of business” that includes about a dozen restaurants in the city that has a population of 857. The area is extremely busy, especially in summertime.

“We’ve become the foodie destination of the area,” Martin said. “We’ve become that area where people say, ‘hey, let’s go to Battle Lake.’”

Many people who’ve visited the community have been in awe of this new multiuse building in place of what was there before, according to Martin, saying things like “It fits right in. They did a good job with the design.”

Though the feedback is “not 100% positive” regarding the redevelopment project, for the most part the city has received positive communications, according to Martin. She’s conducted many presentations and press interviews about the project, too, along with the progression of changes they’ve made in Battle Lake. As others have asked ‘How did you get that done?’ Martin said it’s been fun to share their story.



In July 2024, a ribbon-cutting event celebrated the nearly complete Hatchery Row redevelopment project.

Part of the answer to that “how?” question, Martin said, is knowing who to talk to and asking questions. Battle Lake received money and help from Otter Tail County, the Minnesota Department of Employment and Economic Development, and USDA Rural Development.

“Then when you’re doing a project, ask people, find out who to talk to,” Martin said. “If there’s somebody at the county that does economic development, talk to them. Ask them if they have ideas.” **MG**

Heather Rule is a freelance writer.



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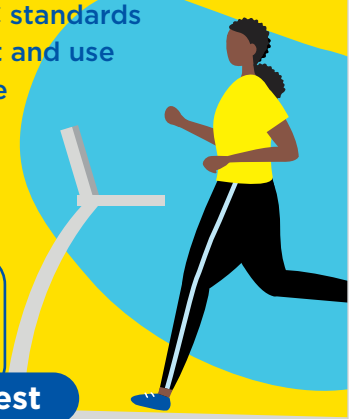
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Constitutional Considerations When Regulating Peddlers, Solicitors

BY JOSIE ROSENE

It is common to see people knocking on doors to sell goods or services, or to express religious or political beliefs. These people are known as peddlers, solicitors, transient merchants, and canvassers and the specific activities in which they engage determine a city's ability to regulate them.

The commerce clause

The fundamental differences among these activities are determined by the commerce clause. The commerce clause is a part of the United States Constitution that gives Congress the power to regulate commerce — buying and selling on a national scale — between states. Of importance to cities, the commerce clause prevents states from interfering with interstate commerce — the movement of goods, services, or money across state borders.

Peddlers, solicitors, canvassers, and transient merchants

Peddlers carry their products and deliver at the time of sale. Cities can license or register peddlers without fear of violating the commerce clause because goods are not shipped from out of state to be delivered later.

Solicitors take orders for goods or services that will be delivered or performed at a later date. The commerce clause restricts a city's ability to license solicitors; some solicitors who take orders in one state may have the goods delivered in the future from another state. However, cities can require solicitors to register before soliciting as a way to track and monitor door-to-door sales activity, ensure that only legitimate businesses operate within the city, and protect residents from potential scams.

Canvassers promote and ask for support for religious and ideological purposes, which is protected First Amendment speech. If canvassing only involves advocacy, cities cannot impose a prior restraint — a regulation that prevents speech or expression before it occurs — like a license or registration.

Transient merchants are similar to peddlers and permanent businesses; they sell goods or services temporarily in a non-permanent location. Cities can adopt ordinances to regulate and license transient merchants and provide criminal penalties for violating city regulations.

Soliciting donations

You might also see people soliciting donations like food or money on the street. This type of solicitation is a form of speech, and city regulation of speech raises First Amendment concerns.

Cities across the country have enacted ordinances restricting and even criminalizing this activity. Although the U.S. Supreme Court has not addressed this specific issue, it has addressed regulations on direct solicitation by charities by holding that “solicitation of money is closely intertwined with speech,” and that “solicitation to pay or contribute money is protected under the First Amendment.” However, some ordinances that prohibit soliciting donations have been upheld where cities have found the activity adverse to the purpose of the public space.

Generally, public property that is neither a traditional nor designated public forum can still serve as a forum for free speech if it is appropriate for the property. Ordinances prohibiting solicitation in the city's subway system, at state fairgrounds, on sidewalks outside of a post office, and within an airport terminal, however, have been upheld because cities found the solicitation inappropriate for the public property where it took place.

Constitutional issues — the First Amendment


When the constitutionality of a city ordinance is challenged, courts apply one of three levels of judicial scrutiny. Judicial scrutiny is a process courts use to review laws to determine if they are constitutional. The level of judicial scrutiny applied depends on the nature of the law being challenged:

- ▶ **Strict scrutiny.** The highest standard of review. The challenged law must be narrowly tailored to achieve a compelling government interest.
- ▶ **Intermediate scrutiny.** The challenged law must further an important government interest and be substantially related to that interest.
- ▶ **Rational basis review.** The lowest standard of review. The challenged law must be rationally related to a legitimate government interest.

Generally, city regulations must be content-neutral, meaning that they apply to all speech regardless of its message. Content-neutral laws regulate only the time, place, and manner of speech (when, where, or how people can express themselves publicly), as opposed to content-based laws. This is an important distinction because courts review content-based laws with strict scrutiny and content-neutral laws with intermediate scrutiny.

Generally, cities can adopt content-neutral time, place, and manner restrictions related to speech. The same goes for peddlers, solicitors, and transient merchants, although courts have not addressed soliciting donations specifically. These ordinances must also pass intermediate scrutiny, meaning that they must further an important government interest and be substantially related to that interest. They must also allow other ways to communicate, like leaving donation request forms, restaurant menus, or other order forms.

Overall, regulation of peddlers, solicitors, and transient merchants is an unsettled area of law subject to evolving legal interpretations. Because of the constitutional protections at play, cities should work with their city attorney when adopting or amending any regulation that affects peddlers, solicitors, transient merchants, and canvassers.

Learn more in the LMC information memo, *Regulating Peddlers, Solicitors, and Transient Merchants* at lmc.org/transient-merchants. 

Josie Rosene is a staff attorney at the League of Minnesota Cities. Contact: jrosene@lmc.org or (651) 281-1205.

‘Dear Colleague’ Letter Provides Federal Guidance on Crime-Free Ordinances

CIVIL RIGHTS

Fair housing

U.S. Department of Justice Dear Colleague Letter, Aug. 15, 2024

The facts: In August 2024, the Department of Justice (DOJ) issued a Dear Colleague Letter addressing crime-free rental

ordinances. Dear Colleague Letters provide guidance from the federal government, but are not regulations or laws. The DOJ’s primary concern was about crime-free ordinances that may allow landlords to evict tenants based on criminal activity or excessive calls

to law enforcement. However, these ordinances often include proactive measures, like requiring landlords to attend trainings and develop processes to improve communication between law enforcement, landlords, and tenants. Crime-free ordinances are common across the country, including in Minnesota. The Minnesota Crime Prevention Association states that over 120 law enforcement agencies currently participate in some sort of crime-free housing program.

The issues: According to the DOJ, crime-free ordinances can violate the following civil rights laws:

- ▶ The Fair Housing Act (FHA) bans discrimination based on race, national origin, disability, and sex and applies to both public and private housing. Programs may violate the FHA if they have restrictions based on criminal histories, arrest records, or calls for emergency assistance.
- ▶ Title VI of the 1964 Civil Rights Act, which applies only to entities receiving federal financial assistance, may be violated when programs are implemented selectively, such as only being enacted in a predominantly Black community.
- ▶ The Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) bans discrimination against people with disabilities. Programs that impose penalties for disability-related calls or share private information with landlords may violate the ADA.
- ▶ The Violence Against Women Act protects the right to report a crime or emergencies from one’s home without being penalized for requesting assistance.

What this means for cities: Crime-free ordinances are not banned, and the Dear Colleague Letter is intended only to serve as guidance. However, the DOJ has made clear it will bring lawsuits when it believes a civil rights law is being violated. Lawsuits have also been brought by private individuals and advocacy groups. However, there is no standard crime-free

ordinance, so cities may have provisions that implicate civil rights laws. Cities should consider examining, with the assistance of the city attorney, whether they have a crime-free ordinance and how it has been implemented. For reference, view the City of Faribault’s ordinance, rental license applications, and a crime-free housing lease addendum, which have been reviewed by the DOJ, at bit.ly/rental-licensing-ordinance.

NUISANCE LAW

Interpretation of nuisance-accumulation ordinance

City of St. Cloud v. Schaefer, No. A23-1880 (Minn. Ct. App. Oct. 28, 2024) (nonprecedential opinion)

The facts: In May 2023, a compliance specialist from the City of St. Cloud’s Health and Inspections Department went to Matthew Schaefer’s residential property after receiving a complaint. The specialist observed “nuisance accumulation” outside of Schaefer’s garage, including rusting metal file cabinets, wooden cabinets, pallets, boxes, lumber, and carpet. The city, pursuant to its ordinance, gave Schaefer 10 days to address the violations or to be subject to a fine of up to \$750. When the compliance inspector returned to Schaefer’s property in June, they found most items had been addressed, except for the metal filing cabinets and wooden cabinets. When the city mailed Schaefer a second notice of violation, he appealed to the city. The city upheld the notice and told Schaefer to remove all items or show they were intended for outdoor use. A reinspection in July 2023 showed the cabinets remained, so the city mailed Schaefer an administrative citation, fining him \$300. Schaefer requested a hearing with the city’s health and inspections department. After an administrative hearing where the hearing officer heard testimony and reviewed exhibits, the officer ordered Schaefer to pay the \$300 fine.

The type of case: The hearing officer’s determination that Schaefer violated the nuisance-accumulation statute is a quasi-judicial determination. Quasi-judicial determinations are like court proceedings but are conducted by administrative agencies or officers. Such decisions can be reviewed by petitioning the Minnesota Court of Appeals.

Cities should ensure that any nuisance ordinance **provides thorough definitions of anything prohibited under the ordinance.**

The issues: Schaefer argued the nuisance-accumulation ordinance was unclear, and the hearing officer incorrectly interpreted the term “rubbish” found in the ordinance. Next, he stated the decision was arbitrary and that the perception of waste is a matter of personal opinion. Finally, he argued that the city’s enforcement of the nuisance-accumulation statute was not a reasonable exercise of police powers.

The court’s ruling: The court ruled against Schaefer on all three issues. It found the city’s nuisance-accumulation ordinance defined “rubbish” to include furniture, trash, material no longer of value for its original purpose, and construction materials not being currently used, and that the hearing officer interpreted the term correctly. The appellate court also rejected Schaefer’s argument that the decision was arbitrary, saying the record reviewed by the hearing officer included testimony and exhibits showing the cabinets stacked outside Schaefer’s garage. Finally, the court ruled that cities have wide discretion in using police power to abate public nuisances and that St. Cloud’s ordinance provided authority to issue an administrative citation.

What this means for cities: Cities should ensure that any nuisance ordinance provides thorough definitions of anything prohibited under the ordinance. Additionally, any nuisance ordinance should also specify what actions the city may take, such as citations and fines. Finally, if cities conduct their own administrative hearings when a resident challenges a fine or other action, those hearings should include testimony from city inspectors and other relevant personnel and should

include a review of exhibits, such as photographs of the nuisance conditions.

COMPETITIVE BIDDING LAWS

Responsible bidders

Nordic Underwater Servs., Inc. v. City of Proctor, No. A24-0199 (Minn. Ct. App. Sept. 23, 2024) (nonprecedential opinion)

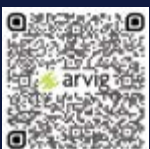
The facts: In March 2023, the City of Proctor put out a call for construction bids for a new public works garage. The estimated cost exceeded \$175,000 and was therefore subject to Minnesota’s competitive bidding laws, which require that the lowest “responsible bidder” be awarded the contract. Nordic Underwater Services (Nordic) was the lowest bidder. However, Proctor determined that Nordic was not a responsible bidder and awarded the contract to the next-lowest bidder, Ray Riihiluoma, Inc. (RRI). RRI began work on the project, but Nordic filed a lawsuit asking the court to declare that awarding the contract to RRI was unlawful and asking the court to prohibit the award, execution, and performance of the contract. The district court

(continued on page 26)



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found that Nordic was the lowest responsible bidder and granted Nordic's request for a permanent injunction, requiring the city to stop all work and payments for the public works garage project.

The city appealed.


The type of case:

A request for an injunction asks the court to prevent a city from taking certain actions, either temporarily or permanently. Nordic's request was granted only after the court determined it was indeed a responsible bidder, which relates to factors like a bidder's financial responsibility, integrity, skill, and likelihood of providing satisfactory performance.

The issues: Both parties agreed that

ble bidder and therefore the city violated competitive bidding laws, the contract with RRI was void. However, the city argued that the permanent injunction issued by the district court was too broad, because it prohibited all work and payment on the public works garage project, which blocked the city from protecting the work already completed by RRI and using already-purchased materials that would otherwise go to waste.

The court's ruling: The Minnesota Court of Appeals found that the lower court did not err by granting the permanent injunction because the injunction was necessary to prevent irreparable injury to Nordic. The permanent injunction did not stop the city from rebidding the project, which was required once the contract with RRI was void. The appellate court did agree to remand the case back to the lower court for clarification on the scope of the permanent injunction, but ruled that the city could not perform under its contract with RRI.

What this means for cities: For contracts subject to competitive bidding requirements, cities should make sure that bid specifications are clear regarding evaluation criteria for responsible bidders. If a city chooses to reject the lowest responsible bidder, it will likely need to be prepared to address the issue in court and will need to provide information on how the decision was made. Cities should also be aware that contracts that violate statutorily required bidding procedures are void and work cannot be conducted under such a contract. 

Written by Lisa Needham, research attorney with the League of Minnesota Cities.
Contact: lneedham@lmc.org or (651) 281-1271.

For contracts subject to competitive bidding requirements, cities should make sure that bid specifications are clear regarding evaluation criteria for responsible bidders. **If a city chooses to reject the lowest responsible bidder, it will likely need to be prepared to address the issue in court and will need to provide information on how the decision was made.**

since the lower court found Nordic was the lowest responsi-

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Can City Employees Accept Prizes When at Work-Related Events?

Gifts



Can city employees accept prizes when at work-related events?

LMC

It's unlikely. Elected and appointed "local officials" generally may not receive a gift from any "interested persons." An interested person likely includes anyone who

may provide goods or services to a city, such as engineers, attorneys, financial advisers, contractors, and salespersons. The state law definition of "gift" includes money, property (real or personal), or a service, given and received without the giver receiving something of equal or greater value in return. There are

some exceptions, such as trinkets or mementos costing \$5 or less. Cities can have more stringent gift policies than state law. All cities may accept gifts or donations that serve a public purpose with council approval.

Answered by Research Manager Amber Eisenschenk: aeisenschenk@lmc.org.

Leave benefits



What should cities look for as they update their leave policies to reflect the 2024 legislative changes to the earned sick and safe time law?

LMC

The earned sick and safe time (ESST) law received several updates during the 2024 legislative session. Starting Jan. 1, 2025, the ESST requirements (except for the requirements outlined in Minnesota Statutes, section 181.9446) have been expanded to other city-paid leave available to employees for personal illness or injury that exceeds the minimum ESST requirement amount.

A few factors to consider when reviewing city leave policies include, but are not limited to:

- ▶ **Eligible uses.** Be sure that leave subject to ESST requirements is allowed for all ESST eligible uses outlined in Minnesota Statutes, section 181.9447.
- ▶ **Notice and documentation.** For paid leave accrued before Jan. 1, 2024, employers have the option to apply their written notice and documentation requirements that were in place as of Dec. 31, 2023. Cities must ensure their benefits tracking systems are capable of isolating the leave accrued before this date and cannot require employees to use leave accrued after Jan. 1, 2024.
- ▶ **Sick leave.** If your city has both a sick leave policy and ESST policy, beginning Jan. 1, 2025, the sick leave policy will need to meet or exceed the minimum ESST requirements, except for the accrual and carryover limits.

For more information, see LMC's *HR Reference Manual*, Chapter 7 and the recently updated model personnel policy template at lmc.org/HR-Ch7-personnel.

Answered by HR Member Consultant Elise Heifort: eheifort@lmc.org.

Cybersecurity




What are the different cybersecurity assessment options available for cities, and how can each option be used effectively?

LMC

Understanding cybersecurity preparedness and measurement options can be confusing, especially with varied vendor terminology. Here's a quick guide to choosing the right method for your city, in order from least to most costly.

- ▶ **Vulnerability scans (\$)** — Computer controlled scans identify known vulnerabilities on network systems at a specific point in time. These one-time scans can quickly become out-of-date, so instead install a vulnerability scanning software or service that can perform automated scans on a routine basis. These are best used by IT staff on a weekly basis to prioritize updates and respond to critical risks.
- ▶ **Security maturity assessment (\$\$)** — Similar to a financial audit, this assessment evaluates both technical controls and administrative policies on paper. Controls are benchmarked against industry best practices using frameworks like National Institute of Standards and Technology Cybersecurity Framework (NIST CSF). The resulting analysis provides overall and category scores, which help leaders track improvement year-over-year and to prioritize cybersecurity investments. Consider performing self-assessments internally and hiring outside assessors to validate (or reset scores) every third year.
- ▶ **Network penetration test (\$\$\$)** — Penetration tests (pentests) simulate real-world attacks using human experts to target specific goals, such as accessing sensitive data or gaining administrator access. Types of pentests include white-box, gray-box, and black-box, each offering different levels of initial information to testers. Optional components can test physical security or employee susceptibility to social engineering. Pentests are most effective for prepared organizations with foundational security measures in place.

LMCIT offers expert consultant assistance in evaluating which cybersecurity services are best for your city. For support, contact Christian Torkelson at ctorkelson@lmc.org or (651) 281-1296. 

Answered by Cybersecurity Loss Control Consultant Christian Torkelson: ctorkelson@lmc.org.

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Lighten Up: Using Humor To Communicate Your Message

BY JANINE HILL AND ASHLEY KLEMER

A little humor goes a long way in connecting with residents, making messages memorable, building trust, and transforming content into something people want to engage with. Fun, attention-grabbing posts can help you achieve your communications goals and raise the profile of your social media presence.

Be an influencer

Building credibility with your audiences on social media is important. So is growing your number of followers and engagements (likes, loves, shares, etc.). The City of Richfield recently held a focus group with youth who reported that they first look to see how many followers someone has before scrolling through their social media feed or engaging with their posts. And while the City of Bloomington's followers count may not put us on influencer level status, the point is well taken.

A great way to gain new followers and get more eyes on your city's content is by trying something new. Once people are following you, mix in funny posts with educational and informational ones. You don't need to incorporate humor or trends in every post, but those are great ways to keep your followers engaged and connect with expanded audiences. Be real and don't overthink it.

On trend

It's also important to know the latest social media trends, and what memes and audio might work for your message and use them to your advantage. We showcased our firefighters' dancing skills and the equipment they wear with the 'Paging Dr. Beat' trend that people on TikTok were using to highlight outfits. It's amazing what a 14-second phone video can achieve. Within a few weeks, the Instagram Reel was viewed more than 162,000 times and received 4,650 likes. During that time, we gained more than 600 followers — 96% of the viewers were not yet following the City of Bloomington's Instagram account.

Got employees? You've got talent

We all consume social media, whether it's a video or post that we like and share with friends, family, or coworkers. You don't have to look too far for your talent for Instagram Reels. Find coworkers who are willing to have a little fun. Mix in a simple message, some trending audio, and you'll have the perfect recipe for an effective post.

Be very mindful, very demure

Humor doesn't work all the time. Use humor when it fits and be mindful of when topics call for seriousness. It's OK to test the waters and see what works. Know your audience and your platform, as well as how people are interacting on it.



Follow your friends

There are a lot of places to look for inspiration. Many of our local government peers know how to effectively use humor and get results. We've been inspired by posts from the cities of St. Louis Park, Richfield, and Savage to name a few. The City of Denver and national government agencies, including the National Park Service, U.S. Consumer Product Safety Commission, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service,

and the Transportation Security Administration (TSA), also engage with some really fun, creative content.

Post with purpose

Consider drafting purpose statements for your accounts that define your goals and actions for that platform. By aligning Bloomington's content with our organizational purpose, we've seen a positive response from the community, with growing engagement and impressions.

Make a plan

Generate ideas with your team. We keep a list of trends we want to try that we can refer to as different topics for social media come up.

Signing off

Adding a little fun to your social media presence could pay big dividends. We've seen these types of posts that resonate with our audiences clearly outperform our usual posts.

Focus on posts that remind people of what they love about your city. A City of Minneapolis TikTok video with rewritten lyrics to Billy Joel's "We Didn't Start the Fire" creatively informed residents about organics recycling containers and it generated these comments:

"I might move to Minneapolis solely because you made this." "And suddenly I wish I lived in Minneapolis," and "Is it possible to fall in love with a city's municipal government? Yes."

So, take some risks, try to use more humor, and follow social media trends. You'll end up with stronger connections to your community and a more informed and engaged public. 📱

Janine Hill is communications administrator and Ashley Klemer is strategic communications coordinator with the City of Bloomington.

Woodbury Water Program Promotes Conservation for Future Residents

BY ANDREW TELLJOHN

Woodbury's population has grown over the last quarter century from about 20,000 in 1990 to 80,000 now, and the eastern suburb along Interstate 94 is tracking to eventually hit 100,000.

That fast-growing population and current challenges with the city's wells tasked Woodbury's leadership with making sure its water is clean and available to existing and new residents as that expansion continues. The water efficiency efforts, city officials say, enable the city to meet that growing demand for water while a permanent water treatment plant is under construction.

Currently, nine of the city's 20 wells are being treated for per- and polyfluoroalkyl substances (PFAS) removal at a temporary water treatment plant and additional treatment facilities at three other well sites.

These water efficiency efforts help ensure the availability of clean water as the longer-term solution takes shape.

As part of the effort, the city's public works, environmental, engineering, and planning divisions teamed up to research water-related best practices in cities around the country and how they could be applied in Woodbury.

"Being careful and concerned about our water and our environment and the sustainability of our natural resources is really vital to our community," said Woodbury Mayor Anne Burt. "Water especially, as we continue to grow, add more housing, add more businesses, we need to make sure we're going to have water for our current generation and for generations to come."

The result of that collaborative effort is the Woodbury Water Wise Implementation Plan, which took city research and community suggestions into account in recommending eight different programs



either underway or in planning aimed at water preservation.

Heidi Quinn, environmental resources techni-

cian at the city, said the work started before she arrived three years ago, but she's proud to be a part of the effort.

"A coalition of city leaders in the east metro area recognized this was going to be a challenge moving forward," she said. "As a growing community we needed to be efficient with our water resource, and so the initial initiative came from the leadership level."

Woodbury's water conservation efforts earned it the 2024 League of Minnesota Cities Sustainable City Award.

Program details

The Water Wise Implementation Plan includes eight key programs aimed at promoting water efficiency across residential, commercial, and community landscapes. These programs are designed to adapt as demand and resources allow. Current and future initiatives include:

- ▶ Continuation of the Residential Smart Irrigation Controller Program, which provides a low-cost opportunity for residents to upgrade their systems with smart technology.
- ▶ Continuation of the Commercial and HOA Cost Share Program, which provides subsidies for irrigation efficiency upgrades.
- ▶ Creation of a Pressure Regulated Sprinkler Head Program to encourage upgrades to water-saving components.
- ▶ Creation of a Low Water Use Landscaping Program to support low-maintenance, water-efficient landscapes.
- ▶ Creation of a Lawn Dormancy Education Program to inform residents about letting lawns go dormant in the summer to save water.
- ▶ Continuation of the High Efficiency Toilet Rebate Program, which incen-

tivizes replacing older toilets with water-efficient models.

- ▶ Creation of a Water Softener Optimization Program that will offer rebates to encourage the upgrade or optimization of water softeners.
- ▶ Continuation of the use of stormwater ponds for irrigation when feasible as part of new development projects.

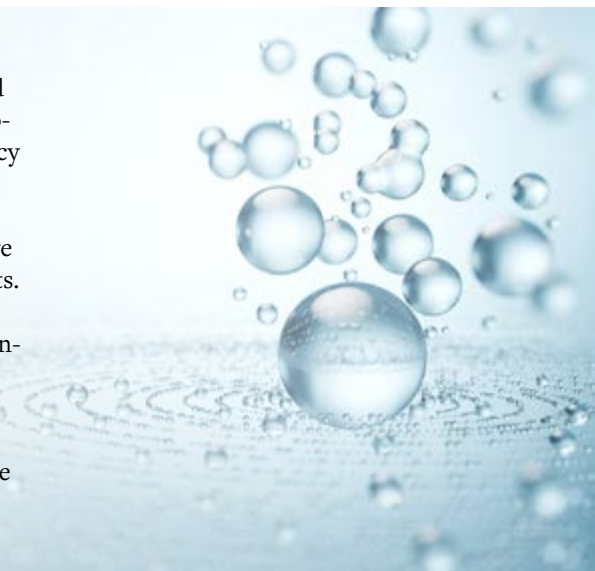
Together, these initiatives aim to reduce water consumption and promote sustainable water management practices.

City leadership, community feedback

The components of the program actually started coming together nearly eight years ago, with a focus on water efficiency ideas going back even a decade earlier. The Smart Residential Irrigation Controller Program first piloted in 2016.

"They were really looking at irrigation policies, education, looking at our rate analysis," Quinn said. "It started there, and with that we focused on how we can do more with what we have while still meeting the needs of the community."

Now, as part of this program, several of the eight initiatives are underway.



The city has helped distribute more than 4,000 of the smart irrigation controllers, which are estimated to save 30,000 gallons of water per user annually, for a total savings to the city of approximately 123 million gallons a year, she said. Toilet replacements, she adds, save an estimated 13,000 gallons annually per toilet.

The toilet replacement program was funded through a grant from the Metropolitan Council. Those funds helped support the replacement of just under 700 residential toilets, saving an estimated 9 million gallons of water annually. The program reopened in September 2024.

“When we created this, it was a 10-year plan,” Quinn said. “We plan to stagger implementation to account for time and resources.”

Communicating the need

There are several entities involved, both city-wide and beyond. The programs are paid for out of the public works department’s budgets, but implementation often requires supplemental funding from outside partners, such as the Metropolitan Council, local watershed districts and, more recently, the state’s Environment and Natural Resources Trust Fund.

As with any ask of the community, not everyone jumped on board right away, said Burt. For example, the city, at the behest of the Minnesota Department of Natural Resources, imposed limited water allowances during the drought a couple summers ago.

The city quickly created a communication plan to get the word out about two-day-a-week watering that included a lot of data, and the public works team created a plan that divided the city into four quadrants for scheduled watering days. Everybody got a weekday and a weekend day to water their lawns and then commercial properties and homeowners’ associations were each given single days when they could water.

“We have a community that is concerned about the environment; environmental stewardship is important,” Burt said. “So, many were willing to go along with it. Nobody likes change, but we gave it time and, really, in the end, it was embraced by most people.”

Efforts go beyond water

Woodbury, Burt reiterated, has a history of strong community support for its decades-long focus on sustainability. The water initiatives are big, but they are just one of the most recent areas where the city had focused its conservation efforts. It’s completed several projects as part of the GreenStep Cities program and has been a leader in piloting new ideas.

But many of these non-water-related pilot programs have not been strategically planned. Over the past couple years, the city has worked on implementing a more focused effort to maximize the impact, said Michelle Okada, parks and recreation director.

One way they do that is through Woodbury’s Environmental Stewardship Plan. It was born out of a regular City Council retreat, during which members looked at community surveys and considered feedback from different community groups to create a cohesive plan for the future.

Environmental stewardship has been identified as one of the city’s seven critical success factors and, “To preserve our environment for future generations, the city will foster environmental stewardship through focused conservation, social responsibility, and best management practices,” according to a draft of the plan. “As our local environment faces new challenges, we will make appropriate investments in preservation, adaption, mitigation, and maintenance.”

The group used community surveys, citizen involvement — including groups from churches, students at local schools, and environmental clubs — and other data to put together the priorities. Okada also credited Environmental Division Manager Jennifer McLoughlin for overseeing the efforts.

The document covers areas such as transportation, land use, buildings and energy, waste management, water, food and agriculture, and greenspace. The idea, Okada said, was to give more structure to the efforts that have been in play for a long time.

“I think our staff has done an excellent job of either piloting programs or positioning themselves well to get some of those environmental initiatives paid for through grant funding or cooperative

“Being careful and concerned about our water and our environment and the sustainability of our natural resources is really vital to our community.

Water especially, as we continue to grow, add more housing, add more businesses, we need to make sure we’re going to have water for our current generation and for generations to come.”


Anne Burt, mayor, Woodbury

partnerships,” she said. “But we’ve not been really focused. I think, for us, this plan is what is going to help us focus.”

The community surveys and a group of citizens and the Parks and Natural Resources Commission identified several areas of focus and several goals for each focus area for the next 10 years.

“Within each focus area, there were goals and objectives outlined and prioritized by the different entities,” Okada said.

It’s the latest step for a city that has shown a lot of initiative in the past when it comes to preserving its resources for future generations.

“Environmental stewardship has been a foundation and a focus of the City Council for many decades,” said Burt. “We are so proud and thankful for the staff that we have who embrace these programs and help to implement them, and more than anything, for the residents of our community who have said, ‘Yes, we are on board. We are going to do all we can to help.’” 

Andrew Tellijohn is a freelance writer.

ON THE WEB

Access a video of this Woodbury initiative at lmc.org/Woodbury.

2025

SAFETY AND LOSS CONTROL WORKSHOPS



FIND OUT MORE: [LMC.ORG/LCW2025](https://lmc.org/lcw2025)



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MARCH 26
ALEXANDRIA

APRIL 2
SPRINGFIELD

APRIL 3
ST. CLOUD

APRIL 15
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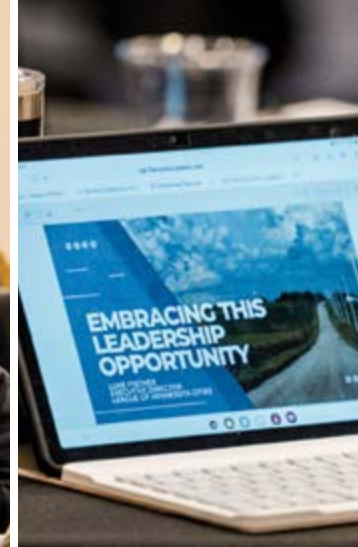
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Plymouth

Feb. 28-March 1, 2025
Alexandria

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DATES & LOCATIONS:

Feb. 21-22, 2025
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