

MAY/JUN 2025

MINNESOTA CITIES

A PUBLICATION OF THE **LEAGUE** of MINNESOTA CITIES

BUILDING
STRONGER
COMMUNITIES

How Rural Areas Can Cultivate Local Leaders

Community Engagement

Using humor and connection to bridge divides. PAGE 14

Workplace Safety

Learn options for testing employees for drug and alcohol use under federal and Minnesota law. PAGE 23



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Volume 110, Issue 3



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ON THE WEB

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Celebrate, Connect, and Recharge at City Fest 2025

BY LUKE FISCHER

Growing up in Delano, home to Minnesota's oldest and largest Fourth of July parade and celebration, it's hard not to get just a little excited about the summer festival season. From a young age, I remember my dad coordinating with friends that lived along the parade route to secure a place to watch the action and collect all the candy. If you had friends (or friends of friends) that lived on Elm Street, you really had some social capital!

As the years wore on and the lure of candy lost its luster, the parade and fairgrounds remained a summer tradition. Whether it was carnival wristband night, grabbing cheese curds, or catching up with friends at the street dance, these moments became part of my community story. Now, as a parent, I get to relive that excitement through my own kids as they eagerly wait for the fire trucks in the parade and collect candy on the same Elm Street curb where I once sat.

Even if you haven't experienced Delano's Fourth of July events, chances are good you can relate to the nostalgia I feel about this community celebration — because you have your own version in the special places you call home.

The power of community festivals

Community festivals are more than just fun — they're an important part of civic life, creating shared experiences that make our cities unique. These gatherings give us the chance to celebrate what we love, spend time with people we care about, build new connections, and maybe even take a breath and recharge.

As we enter summer festival season, all of us at the League are excited about the state's oldest, largest gathering of city officials — the League of Minnesota Cities Annual Conference. We're meeting June 25-27 in Duluth for City Fest 2025, and we want you to know that you are invited, and you belong!



Just like the city festivals that make your community unique, City Fest 2025 is the perfect opportunity to gather with city officials from across our state to connect, learn, and grow together.

Why you should join us at City Fest 2025

Celebrating something you love

Think back to when you first ran for office or applied to work for the city. What excited you most about public service? City Fest is a chance to reflect on that passion and an opportunity to reinvigorate yourself for all the work ahead.

Spend time with people you care about (and who care about you)

One of the best parts of the conference is the chance we have as League staff to connect with you, our city officials. We love hearing your stories and learning how we can better support you in your service. Your team here in St. Paul is looking forward to spending time with you.


Build meaningful connections

One highlight of the annual conference is the chance to connect with your peers from across Minnesota. For new officials or first-time conference attendees, it's an opportunity to develop a network of

colleagues who share your challenges and goals — camaraderie makes public service more meaningful. For returning attendees, including several who are seasoned veterans of the conference, it's a chance to reconnect with old friends year after year to catch up, share progress, and learn from one another.

Recharge and get inspired

We've lined up exceptional speakers and focused content to help you hone skills and stay motivated in your city service. From inspirational keynote speakers to technical sessions, every part of the conference is designed to prepare you for the year ahead.

We hope you're thinking about the LMC Annual Conference the same way you think about the community celebration that makes your city special. While we may not have a parade or fireworks, the energy and excitement will be just as high. Join us in Duluth — we can't wait to see you! 



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

St. Peter's Squirrel Problem Solved With Underground Electrical System

In recent years, St. Peter has faced an unexpected culprit behind most of its power outages: squirrels. These animals caused 82% of the city's outages over the past three years by chewing through electrical wiring, according to the *St. Peter Herald*.

To tackle this issue, the city recently completed a \$1.6 million project to move its electrical system fully underground. The effort culminated with the replacement of the aging Front Street substation, the final piece of St. Peter's old overhead infrastructure. This milestone makes St. Peter one of the few Minnesota cities with a completely underground system, which is much less susceptible to outages than above ground systems. Aside from being safe from squirrels, it's protected from storms, falling trees, and similar emergency situations.

In February, city officials celebrated the accomplishment with a light-hearted ribbon-cutting ceremony featuring cardboard squirrel cutouts.

The underground transformation, initiated after a devastating tornado in 1998, was largely funded through utility user fees and completed under budget. With a more resilient system in place, St. Peter residents and businesses experience some of the fewest power outages and fastest restoration times in the nation, according to City Administrator Todd Prafke.



Bayport Fire Department To Go Solar

The Bayport Fire Department is set to harness clean energy with the installation of a 36-kW solar array panel, according to the *Stillwater Gazette*.

The project will be fully funded by a state grant from the Minnesota Department of Commerce's Division of Energy Resources, and through federal tax credits, including the Made in the USA Tax Credit, so there will be no cost to the city or taxpayers.

The solar array panel will generate enough energy to power approximately five and a half homes each year, significantly reducing the fire station's energy expenses. Over time, the city could save hundreds of thousands of dollars.

The Bayport City Council recently approved the final contract, marking the last step before implementation. Wolf River Electric will manage the installation and ongoing maintenance. Xcel Energy has also confirmed no infrastructure issues. The city is now one step closer to a more sustainable future.

LMCIT's Dan Greensweig Honored With International AGRiP Leadership Award

On March 18, League of Minnesota Cities Insurance Trust (LMCIT) Administrator Dan Greensweig received the prestigious Award for

Excellence in Leadership from the Association of Governmental Risk Pools (AGRiP). This international honor recognizes his transformational leadership, particularly in addressing post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) among first responders.

Since 2017, Greensweig has led LMCIT, a self-insurance trust managing \$150 million in annual premiums for over 1,200 Minnesota cities and local government entities. LMCIT initiatives led by Greensweig include the PTSD and Mental Health Toolkit, the "Accept, Prevent, Treat" campaign, and the Peer Support Advisory Board, have reshaped

mental health support for first responders.

Greensweig's leadership extends to cutting-edge research — such as collaborations with Benchmark Analytics — that aims to improve policing practices through data-driven insights. He also fosters professional development through university teaching, internships, and industry mentorship programs.

Greensweig's award highlights his commitment to public safety, innovation, and mentorship, making a lasting impact on Minnesota communities and beyond. Congratulations, Dan!



PHOTO BY MATT WAILES



Apprenticeship Programs Strengthen Water Workforce

The cities of Chaska and Plymouth are leading efforts to address workforce shortages in the water sector through innovative apprenticeship programs. These programs aim to create accessible, well-paying career opportunities in water management, from wastewater treatment to natural resource management.

With about one-third of the water workforce nearing retirement in the next decade, according to the Environmental Protection Agency, initiatives like these are crucial. Through partnerships with the American Water Works Association and Freshwater's Water Workforce Pathways program, municipalities are tackling labor shortages by offering hands-on training and reducing entry barriers.

Chaska's program, launched in 2022, has already seen success, with its first apprentice transitioning to full-time employment. Plymouth

introduced a tri-division maintenance apprenticeship in 2024, providing experience across streets, utilities, and parks departments. Both cities prioritize on-the-job training over formal qualifications, requiring only a high school diploma and a valid driver's license.

These efforts highlight how local governments can collaboratively build a water workforce and support clean water access for the future.



LMC 2025 Annual Conference Mobile Tours

LMC's Annual Conference, taking place June 25-27, features three mobile tours, offering attendees the chance to explore innovative community projects, housing developments, and climate resilience initiatives in the Duluth area.

On June 25, from 10 a.m. to 12 p.m., the Hermantown Essentia Wellness Center tour will showcase the multipurpose facility that combines child care, health care, fitness, and community spaces. Learn about the city's successful partnerships and funding strategies. Cost: \$65 (includes lunch).

Also on June 25, from 10 a.m. to 12 p.m., the Duluth Residential Development Showcase tour will explore two major housing projects — Incline Village and Riverwest. Hear how the city has approached the projects from a needs assessment as well as community and design perspectives. Cost: \$65 (includes lunch).

On June 26, from 2:30 p.m. to 4:30 p.m., the Climate Resilience along Lake Superior tour will take you through Canal Park, the Lakewalk, and Brighton Beach to see how Duluth is rebuilding its shoreline to withstand future storms and adapt to climate challenges. Cost: \$45.

Pre-registration for all mobile tours is required. Add a tour when registering for the LMC Annual Conference or contact registration@lmc.org if already registered. For more conference details, visit lmc.org/ac25.

LMC LEARNING & EVENTS

LMC Annual Conference

June 25-27 — Duluth

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ON THE WEB

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A photograph of two men in orange safety vests and hard hats looking at a set of blueprints on a construction site. The man in the foreground is holding the blueprints. In the background, there is a building under construction and a Bobcat excavator.

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How Does Your City Use the LMC Salary & Benefits Survey?



SHEILA STAGE

HUMAN RESOURCES COORDINATOR
REDWOOD FALLS
(POPULATION 5,059)

The City of Redwood Falls uses the LMC Local Government Salary & Benefits Survey to compare our compensation structure and benefits with similar sized cities and counties. This helps us make informed decisions about salaries to ensure our pay is competitive and attracts top talent. The survey also provides insights into where our current benefits stand in the market, helping us stay competitive in those areas.

To access the survey data, the city or county must participate by submitting salary and benefits information. In Redwood Falls, as human resources coordinator, I am responsible for entering the data. I also use the survey the most and run reports for anyone who requests them. However, the survey is very user-friendly, and anyone with access can easily generate the reports they need.

I find the salary information and the benefits section to be the most valuable, but the specialty compensation and job description sections are also extremely helpful. The survey makes it easy to organize data into an Excel spreadsheet, and reports can be sorted by organization, job type, or department with just a click of a button. Exporting the data is also simple, making it easy to analyze and compare information.

Since the benefits section was added, the city has used it extensively. In 2023, I discovered that Redwood Falls was one of only a few cities offering only one health insurance option. That information prompted us to form an insurance committee in 2024 to explore additional choices. Based on input from the committee, our insurance broker, and the data from the survey, we will be offering two health insurance plan options to employees in 2025.

When the LMC survey was temporarily unavailable, I had to email or call other cities and counties individually to gather salary and benefits data. This process was inefficient and time-consuming, reinforcing just how valuable it is to have a centralized, accessible salary and benefits survey. Having this tool available saves me time and ensures we have the best possible data for making important compensation and benefits decisions.

The League's Local Government Salary & Benefits Survey is free for members — learn more at lmc.org/salarysurvey.

JESSE SWENSON

HUMAN RESOURCES DIRECTOR
EAGAN
(POPULATION 67,396)

The City of Eagan's Human Resources Department utilizes the League's salary survey data to guide compensation and benefits strategies. With over 100 different job titles in the organization, the data compiled in a one-stop shop has been a long-standing useful tool for our organization.


We use survey data primarily to benchmark our compensation structures against industry standards and to ensure we are offering competitive salaries. By comparing the data to similar-sized cities, we are able to identify any gaps in our offerings and adjust as necessary to attract and retain top talent. Additionally, this data is helpful in planning budget adjustments, reviewing pay equity, and ensuring compliance with both state and federal regulations.

In terms of accessing and entering the survey data, our process involves multiple roles. Typically, the person responsible for entering salary and benefits information is our administrative assistant; however, I review the data once it's entered. Maintaining that structure reinforces accuracy and consistency.

The most valuable aspect of the survey is its ability to provide objective, real-world data that allows us to make decisions grounded in external benchmarks. Having access to comparative data allows us to validate our internal pay structures, ensuring they are competitive and equitable. This data also plays a key role in developing our salary structures and adjusting them in response to economic shifts or changes in the job market.

When it comes to organizing the survey data, I find it relatively straightforward to convert the information into an Excel spreadsheet for further analysis. The ability to manipulate and filter the data in Excel makes it easy to cross-reference different factors, such as job title, location, and industry, helping to make more targeted and precise decisions.

With the inclusion of the benefits section in the survey, we now utilize this information to assess our benefits offerings, ensuring we are in line with trends in the public sector. Our city primarily uses city data because our needs are more aligned with municipalities of similar size and structure.

Lastly, when the survey was unavailable due to provider changes, we turned to peer networking to gather the necessary information. 



BUILDING
STRONGER
COMMUNITIES

How Rural Areas Can Cultivate Local Leaders

BY DEBORAH LYNN BLUMBERG



From bringing new businesses to town to improving traffic flow, decisions made by local government leaders like mayors, city councilors, county commission members, and zoning and planning board officials can impact whether a community grows and thrives or stalls and stagnates.

To ensure communities thrive, cities need passionate, capable leaders, said Ben Schierer, former Fergus Falls mayor and director of civic partnerships for the West Central Initiative, a Fergus Falls-based community foundation and regional development organization focused on economic and community development and promoting civic participation in west central Minnesota.

“When it comes to a well-run, well-functioning democracy, good people are needed for good government,” Schierer said. Currently across Minnesota, “there are a lot of roles that need to be filled, and you really need people to step up and serve,” he added.

In Minnesota, in order to fill all current leadership roles in local government, one in 21 people would need to serve as an elected official in their lifetime, according to the West Central Initiative. In some rural areas, the need is even greater — one in seven must step up to leadership roles in Grant County, for example. But in recent years, fewer people have heeded the call to run for office, especially in rural communities where populations are smaller and spread across larger geographic areas. Many Minnesota cities struggle to recruit residents for school boards, township boards, and zoning boards. In the last election, when no one ran for mayor in the City of Millerville in Douglas County, the City Council had to appoint a leader.

“We’ve heard you’ve got to strong arm someone into taking your spot if you’re ready to go,” said Celeste Koppe, West Central Initiative’s rural initiatives strategist. “And we see a lot of seats unopposed.” Ballotpedia found that across the U.S. in 2024, 70% of the nearly 77,000 elections it covered went uncontested.

Part of the problem is people are wary of opening themselves up to public scrutiny in a charged political climate. Another major barrier is that people don’t know how to run for office or prepare for their role once elected. That’s where the West Central Initiative comes

in. Since 2023, the organization’s Rural Democracy Program has trained dozens of people interested in running for local office in rural areas, while engaging historically excluded groups in civic processes and supporting local leaders.

Koppe and Schierer will present at the League of Minnesota Cities’ upcoming annual conference in June. Local government leaders can support initiatives like the Rural Democracy Program by creating opportunities and encouraging residents to serve on boards, commissions, and councils, they say.

**Clearly advertise meetings and make them easy to access**

A first step in recruiting more residents to run for office is to get them fully invested in their city by becoming more informed. An obvious way is through city meetings, but leaders must find ways to get residents in the door and keep them interested, Koppe and Schierer said.

“The way we communicate to the public is often more cumbersome than it needs to be,” Schierer said. Local leaders should clearly advertise meetings with easy-to-understand invitations. Put up posters at the local library and use technology to spread the word by posting on social media. Always record meetings and put them online, Koppe added — on YouTube, for example — so residents who aren’t able to attend can still stay informed.

**Create welcoming spaces where diverse voices can be heard**

In 2023, 68% of elected officials in west central Minnesota identified as male, which does not reflect the populations they serve, Schierer said. “Our communities work better when voices are representative of all of the people in the community,” he said.

To encourage more women, people from marginalized backgrounds, and individuals across socioeconomic classes and professions to run for office and join boards, local leaders need to be intentional about inviting everyone to share concerns, opinions, and ideas, Schierer said. Leaders can do this by organizing open forums, town halls, or listening ses-



When Schierer served as mayor of Fergus Falls, officials asked high school students to participate on city committees for the first time. Their participation and enthusiasm for local government inspired others in the community to take an interest as well.

“It’s about thinking outside the box about how you recruit people.”

—Ben Schierer, former Fergus Falls mayor and director of civic partnerships for the West Central Initiative

sions. Then, be open to listening without becoming defensive.

Being heard can encourage residents to turn concerns into meaningful action, like running for office or serving on a board. During his eight years as mayor of Fergus Falls, Schierer always ensured that all residents who took the time to attend a public meeting had the opportunity to speak.

Koppe added “Also put some joy in it. Make meetings accessible, make people comfortable, and make things fun and relatable.”



Facilitate more resident connections to build and nurture community

Forging connections among residents of all backgrounds will help people feel more connected and invested in their community, Koppe said.

West Central Initiative fosters these connections through its free Going Local rural democracy workshops where groups of community members come together to share food and stories. Workshops begin with a communal meal before participants learn about unique challenges rural communities face and brainstorm what they can do together to strengthen their community.

“The meal is the grounding, the coming together,” Schierer said.

Past events have happened in partnership with local League of Women Voters groups and churches. In Hoffman, a young family, residents who had moved from Brazil, business owners, a county commissioner, a city clerk, and more attended an event.

“We watched as they discussed community problems and solved some in real time,” Koppe said, “like making city council members’ contact information more accessible or identifying grant opportunities for some of their ideas and challenges.”

The first Community Conversation series, held in the City of Morris in 2024, was titled “Toward a Positive Rural Future.” The series’ three events focused on democracy, elections and civic engagement, the need for leadership in rural communities, and opportunities for clean energy investments in rural communities. Speakers included Minnesota Secretary of State Steve Simon, rural sociologist Ben Winchester, and Peter Wykoff, deputy commissioner

in the Energy Division at the Minnesota Department of Commerce, as well as local elected officials.

The group’s current Community Conversation series tackles civic literacy and the importance of local journalism.

“These types of community gatherings and conversations are the foundation of good government, and I don’t think they happen enough in 2025,” Schierer said.



Reevaluate committees, and find and fuel community champions

Schierer encourages cities to

take a close look at their long-standing committees and assess whether they are still addressing current community needs. If not, “you have to look at new and interesting ways to get people involved,” he said.

When Schierer served as mayor of Fergus Falls, officials asked high school students to participate on city committees for the first time. Their participation and enthusiasm for local government inspired others in the community to take an interest as well, he said.

“It’s about thinking outside the box about how you recruit people,” Schierer said. Another helpful strategy is to welcome residents onto committees who may initially seem adversarial. They can become powerful allies for positive change.

During Schierer’s tenure, he helped form a new committee, the Natural Resource Advisory Committee. Residents passionate about the environment who had never participated in city government joined.

“And as a result of that committee, we became the first Prairie City USA,” he said. “We identified 100 acres of parkland with Kentucky bluegrass to convert into native plantings that are

(continued on page 10)

LEARN MORE

Ben Schierer and Celeste Koppe will present a session on “Civic Engagement for Stronger Cities: Tools and Strategies from West Central Initiative’s Rural Democracy Program” at the LMC 2025 Annual Conference, June 25-27 in Duluth.

In this session, Ben and Celeste aim to empower rural communities across Minnesota to build stronger, more connected local leadership. This session will provide city officials and staff with practical tools to create welcoming spaces for civic engagement.

Learn more and register for the annual conference at lmc.org/AC25.



“We can’t have healthy, sustainable communities unless we have healthy sustainable local government. We have all of these diverse perspectives that we’re just starting to tap in to. We’re taking small steps forward in reframing local politics, and it’s just the beginning.”

—Celeste Koppe, West Central Initiative’s rural initiatives strategist

good for the environment. The project is also saving taxpayers money since less mowing is required.”

For community members interested in running for office, the initiative’s Run4Rural program provides support. The nonpartisan one-and-a-half-day public leadership training program teaches participants how to run a successful campaign. Anecdotally, those who receive comprehensive training on running for office are more likely to follow through, Schierer said. And ultimately, they are more successful.

In addition to Run4Rural, mayors in west central Minnesota can join West Central Initiative’s Lead Local Mayors Network, where they share ideas and encourage constituents to engage in

public service. The group meets quarterly. The Rural Advocacy and Public Leadership Program is a six-month leadership and advocacy initiative for residents interested in strengthening democracy in their rural community. It culminates in a hands-on project that addresses a local issue.

In a recent success story, Schierer met a Fergus Falls Township resident after speaking at a community hospital about Run4Rural. The resident felt her voice was not being heard at the township level.

She told Schierer, “Maybe I could run for office.”

“Of course you can run,” he replied, “and we have this training program just for you.”

She signed up for Run4Rural, ran for election, and became the first woman ever to serve on the township board. “She brought a perspective that had never been on that board before,” Schierer said. “It’s the best example of what our founders envisioned for democracy,” he adds. “It includes everyone, and it works only when everyone is invited into the process, and they participate.”

Adds Koppe, “We can’t have healthy, sustainable communities unless we have healthy sustainable local government. We have all of these diverse perspectives that we’re just starting to tap in to. We’re taking small steps forward in reframing local politics, and it’s just the beginning.” 

Deborah Lynn Blumberg is a freelance writer.

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PHOTO COURTESY CITY OF BALDWIN

Baldwin residents attended a public comment session during the incorporation hearing.

Baldwin Takes Control of Its Future Through Incorporation

BY ANDREW TELLIOHNN

Newly married and looking for an affordable place to start a family, Scott Case spent much of 2000 scouring the metro area near his job as a firefighter in St. Paul for his first house.

High costs and the appeal of a quieter lifestyle led the Case family more than an hour north to Baldwin, then a 35-square-mile rural township in central Minnesota, surrounded by Princeton, Zimmerman, and several other townships.

They moved into a house on 5 acres in 2000. A few years later, they bought 6 acres nearby, where they built the home that they live in today.

"I was willing to drive to work at the time," said Case, who has retired from the St. Paul Fire Department and is now fire chief and a City Council member in Baldwin. "The people are great. We can see the stars and we've got wildlife. Our place has 6 acres and a nice view of the pond, woods, and we don't see neighbors in the back."

Like many Baldwin residents, Case grew fond of the township's quiet lifestyle. So, when it appeared that the City of Princeton, to the north, might pursue an attempt at annexation, Baldwin Township officials filed for incorporation in 2024.

The application for incorporation was approved in July 2024, and once Bald-

win's new City Council was elected and took office in late November, the transition was complete.

"We just wanted to keep things pretty much the same," he said. "That seems to be what has happened so far."

A long time coming

While the city of 7,200 didn't file for incorporation until 2024, the issue has been on the radar for at least 20 years.

City Council Member Jeff Holm has been involved in much of the planning from the start. Holm grew up in Baldwin Township, where his parents had a farm on 240 acres and his great uncle owned another 80 acres down the road, now a township park.

"I was born in 1980 and grew up knowing all the neighbors, knowing every car that drives by," he said. "My piece of the county road was gravel."

He watched the township grow and develop and watched land prices rise from the mid-1990s through the mid-2000s, up until the economic crash.

In 2005, he began attending St. Cloud State University. He was a pre-business marketing major, but he quickly developed an interest in community development after meeting Kent Robertson, a renowned expert in redevelopment. Shortly after, Holm was elected to

the township board, where he quickly formed a new committee to study incorporation and annexation.

"We were just covering all the bases," he said, "giving due diligence to all the possibilities."

At the time, the committee determined that Baldwin could hold off on incorporation for at least a decade.

"Township is a cheap form of government," Holm said. "It's efficient. It works. At the time we didn't hear good things about cities or townships attempting to incorporate."

Still, steps were being taken to prepare, said Joan Heinen, city clerk and treasurer. The city established its own planning commission, handled its own permitting, and had its own fire department.

"A lot of steps had to be taken throughout the years for us to get to this point," she said.

Limits of township governance

While Baldwin thrived and grew for many years as a township, the lack of control sometimes created challenges. One of the biggest arose when a mobile home park in Baldwin Township wanted to expand. Baldwin residents and township board officials supported the plan, but planning decisions were controlled

by Sherburne County, which refused to grant the variance necessary to allow the expansion.

Baldwin's northern neighbor, Princeton, was growing and it saw the opportunity, annexing the 97-unit property in 2021.

"Poof, we watched 97 families evaporate from Baldwin Township," said Mayor Jay Swanson. "That was a very sad day. The town board agreed with the owner that expanding was a great idea. Sherburne County, however, would not allow expansion through its existing ordinances. The mobile home park could exist, but it could not expand."

That wasn't the only time the township and county clashed over development, but it was the turning point. Township leaders dusted off the incorporation plans and moved to close Baldwin's borders from further annexation.

"Every time we asked for something special, they'd say, 'We have to do it for everyone.' That just doesn't fit," Holm said. "We just decided to really have control of where we are going, we need to take over planning and zoning."

With Princeton looking to expand and Baldwin leaders wanting to protect their ability to shape the area's future, the township filed for incorporation in 2024.

The path to incorporation

Baldwin Township notified neighboring cities and townships in late 2023 and passed a resolution seeking incorporation. The official filing came in January 2024.

State law requires townships to prove they are urban or suburban in nature, have the resources necessary to operate efficiently as a municipality, or that township governance is not in residents' best interests.

In March, Administrative Law Judge Jessica A. Palmer-Denig held a public hearing — "the largest public hearing I have ever seen," she told attendees, according to the *Princeton Union-Times*. In July, Palmer-Denig ruled that Baldwin met the criteria for incorporation.

What's next?

For all the effort that went into converting from township to city, Baldwin officials say the goal was to keep things much the same.



The full Baldwin City Council. From left to right, Scott Case, Tom Rush, Mayor Jay Swanson, Alan Walker, and Jeff Holm.

"It's a very nice area, a great place to work," said Heinen.

Many aspects of the job remain unchanged, she said. The city is formalizing policies, has created an unpaid volunteer coordinator position, and will likely add a chamber of commerce to represent the local business community.

But with incorporation completed, Baldwin is now planning for the future. In April, the city had its first special election to let residents decide whether they want to allow Sunday liquor sales.

While there's not much appetite for major changes or spending increases — officials plan to maintain the 2.5-acre minimum lot size for residential development, for example — council members know infrastructure improvements are needed. Baldwin has nearly 80 miles of roads to maintain and is considering expanding or relocating City Hall as the current facility becomes outdated.

These decisions will come with access to new local funding sources, such as local government aid from the state and the Municipal State Aid Street program, which provides funding through the Minnesota Department of Transportation.

"We have new sources of funding that we never had available to us as a township," Swanson said. "That's exciting, trying to figure out how to utilize that to its best potential and not have to raise the levy on taxpayers."

Beyond immediate needs, Case and others say it's important for Baldwin to look ahead.


"What do we want the city to look like in 20 years?" Case said.

"We have new sources of funding that we never had available to us as a township. That's exciting, trying to figure out how to utilize that to its best potential and not have to raise the levy on taxpayers."

JAY SWANSON
MAYOR
CITY OF BALDWIN

That includes studying the best uses for land at the intersections of Highway 169 and County Road 9, where three corners are undeveloped, Holm said.

The key, city leaders say, is maintaining control over planning and zoning decisions. And for the time being, that means proving to residents that leaders meant it when they pledged to keep taxes low and change slow and minimal.

"The biggest opposition is that people were afraid we'd turn into a city, you know, like the big metro cities," Case said. "That was not our intention, and I think residents are seeing the way we're trying to make the transition smooth." 

Andrew Tellijohn is a freelance writer.



Using Humor and Connection To Bridge Divides

BY SUZY FRISCH

Karith Foster knows what it's like to face a tough crowd made up of people completely different from her, whether in viewpoint or background. It's something she has done regularly throughout her career as a comedian, radio and television show co-host, and public speaker. Instead of highlighting these differences, she weaves together humor, empathy, and the perspective that people are more alike than dissimilar to break down barriers and open the door for dialogue.

The keynote speaker at the League of Minnesota Cities 2025 Annual Conference in June, Foster will present “A Celebration of Strength in Community, Connection, and (Yes) Chaos” with her signature mix of humor and expertise in the human condition. Foster is the founder of Inversity™ Solutions, a consulting and training firm that works with corporations, organizations, and academic institutions to improve communication and connection.

Foster coined the term Inversity to move away from traditional diversity theories and workshops, calling them contrary to their objectives. A self-professed lover of words and etymology, Foster breaks down the word diversity this way: “The first three letters of diversity are the same as divide, division, divorce — and then we're shocked that diversity isn't bringing everyone together,” she

said. “Inversity is shifting from what is separating and dividing us to look at what we actually have in common, which is more than we don't.”

As an alternative, Foster's Inversity framework covers a wide range of “in” themes, including inviting, inclusive, in common, and innovative. She aims to focus on the notion of being introspective at the annual conference, particularly recognizing and celebrating individuality and people's intrinsic value. That might encompass honoring the background, heritage, and identity of individuals without overemphasizing any one aspect.

“With introspection, when you look inside yourself and really see yourself and understand your own value and worth, that's when you can see it in someone else,” Foster said. “Instead of focusing on what divides us, we need to focus on what we have in common and be truly inclusive with one another.”

Opening doors for dialogue

In a time of divisiveness and constant, rapid change, Foster focuses on opportunities for local leaders to extend that introspective vantage point into their communities and discover ways to use their assets to strengthen relationships and bonds.

The hallmark of Foster's work is humor. A professional stand-up comedian for more than 25 years, Foster knows how to get people laughing. Even though laughter is said to be strong medicine, there's science and a purpose behind the joy. Research shows that humor positively affects learning, retention, and motivation.

“When we can laugh at something, especially ourselves, we can be in a more neutral space for awareness, for healing,



LEARN MORE

Karith Foster presented at the LMC's Elected Leaders Institute in 2024 and will present the keynote session titled “A Celebration of Strength in Community, Connection, and (Yes) Chaos” during the LMC 2025 Annual Conference, happening June 25-27 in Duluth.

In this keynote session, Karith will provide stories and inspiration for how we can celebrate our communities, lead boldly, and forge connections with one another.

Learn more and register for the conference at lmc.org/AC25.

and for catharsis,” she said. When people feel stressed, it activates the amygdala, the part of the brain that triggers the fight, flight, freeze, or fawn response. Messages and emotions get filtered through the context of being attacked, putting people on the defensive. “If you’re laughing or relaxed, that’s when epiphanies happen. Humor is an incredible tool to get people relaxed enough to be able to have an uncomfortable conversation.”

Foster developed her perspective on traditional diversity methodology and honed her skills at navigating uncomfortable situations with humor in varied situations. A key experience was being hired as co-host for the “Imus in the Morning Show” after shock jock Don Imus was vilified for making racist remarks about the Rutgers women’s basketball team. Foster thought she was being hired to engage in a dialogue about race and racism in America, but instead found that her desire to have meaningful and thoughtful conversations wasn’t appreciated. Here, diversity was being deployed for the wrong reasons, and she was there to check a box.

When she left the show, Foster sought to find a way to actually have the conversations she craved and believed were necessary. She created “Stereotyped 101,” presenting the program for college students across the country. Foster brought humor, personal stories, and a way to build connections so that people didn’t feel so alone.

Over time, her themes evolved as she wove in other experiences, such as working on the ABC news show “The View,” in human resources at a Fortune 100 company, and writing the book, “You Can Be Perfect or You Can Be Happy.” Inversity was born from her engagement with new audiences including companies big and small, federal agencies like the FBI, universities, and organizations from the Ms. Foundation for Women to Young Americans for Liberty.

Foster wants Inversity to help people handle uncomfortable situations or conversations. One way she approaches this work is through the lens of CARE — conscious empathy, active listening, responsible reactions, and environmental awareness.

“It’s a muscle that you have to exercise,” she said. “If we can invoke CARE when we have an interaction or a conversation, it leads to more caring and communication and respect. There needs

to be room for people to be human and make mistakes and then have forgiveness and grace because we’re all doing the best we can.”

Being able to build connection and community is ever more important, Foster notes, in light of the U.S. surgeon general’s 2023 report, “Our Epidemic of Isolation and Loneliness.” As Vivek Murthy, MD, wrote, loneliness is a mental and physical condition that affects people of all ages and socioeconomic backgrounds, harming individuals and societal health.

To combat loneliness, it’s vital that individuals, workplaces, schools, communities, and local governments work to strengthen connections and relationships. Improving communication skills, meeting people where they are, and not being afraid to ask for support are all ways to do that.

“It’s a huge problem that not many people are talking about. We weren’t brought onto this planet to be siphoned off into categories,” Foster said. “We can instead focus on community and celebrating community. We’re all living together, and that means we have shared experiences, and we can utilize our communities to rely on one another, to support one another. Community is a strength that allows us to serve one another and work with one another.”

Small, doable steps

Working in public service, it can be difficult when leaders constantly hear disparate viewpoints. The overall temperature is high, and conversations often get heated. Still, there can be opportunities. Leaders can refocus and recenter their goals, putting some of these CARE and Inversity concepts into action, Foster said. Remember that small steps can make an enormous difference, and that soft skills like listening, embracing change, compassion, and connection can be their superpowers.

“If they can be courageous enough to have these conversations that might be challenging at times, to truly listen and not just hear, then they can take action,” Foster said. “They are letting people see that they have been heard. And when people feel heard, they feel loved and they feel valued. And when they feel valued, they add value. It’s exponential and has a domino effect.”

“When we can laugh at something, especially ourselves, **we can be in a more neutral space for awareness, for healing, and for catharsis.**”

Karith Foster, comedian, founder of Inversity™ Solutions, and keynote speaker at LMC’s 2025 Annual Conference

After connecting with community members and having a range of conversations, it can feel overwhelming to know where to start. Foster recommends considering doables instead of trying to accomplish everything at once. It’s not a to-do list, which can be intimidating, but the steps that show community members they are serious, they are listening, and they are bringing people along to help support the change.

It’s also important to remember that community building isn’t a one-and-done exercise. Foster likens it to the Japanese practice of kaizen, a continuous improvement process often used in business settings. She keeps kaizen in mind regarding her own work with Inversity.

“It’s incremental Inversity. I can’t think that one keynote is going to change the world. It has to be a practice. In kaizen, you practice the 1% where every day you do something in the name of improvement,” she said. “In the name of building community, that 1% will add up over time.”

In our society of instant gratification, people want to see progress yesterday, but Foster recommends being realistic and patient. “We have to recognize that it might not happen overnight. But one day we might wake up and see this amazing community where people came on board with us,” she said.

“They see that our heart is in the right place and our minds are clear and we have the best intentions. Will we make mistakes along the way? Heck yeah. But we’re human and hopefully we have the insight to make a course correction. The biggest thing that holds people back is fear. Be fearless and powerful in your own way so that you can contribute.” 📧

Suzu Frisch is a freelance writer.



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When disaster strikes, attention focuses on the imminent threat, making it difficult to anticipate long-term risks.

Learn how planning, practicing, and refining response strategies can lead to better disaster outcomes in [this issue](#) of Minnesota Cities Magazine!



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RAPID RESPONSE TO NATURAL DISASTERS: Ensuring Public Safety and Infrastructure Recovery

BY JOSH POPE

Athletes don't show up to a championship match without practicing, actors don't take the Broadway stage without having rehearsals, and diplomats don't enter a negotiation with the intent to "wing it." No matter the industry, high-performing professionals spend time planning, practicing, and refining their approach. They assess what works — and what doesn't — and adjust their strategy and repeat the process until they are fully prepared to succeed and shine when it matters the most.

When it comes to natural disasters, we can never predict when they will occur or how severe they will be. However, we know it's only a matter of time before one occurs. As city leaders, we can't simply stand by and hope for the best or rely on another entity to handle disaster response for us. Like athletes, actors, and diplomats, we must prepare.

The critical role of local response

We have all likely witnessed — and some of us have experienced — the disruption caused by natural disasters. The initial local response is crucial in shaping the outcome of these events. When disaster strikes, attention focuses on the imminent threat, making it difficult to anticipate long-term risks in the moment. However, failing to make rational and informed decisions can impact our interconnected infrastructure systems during the disaster and throughout the recovery process. That's why city teams must prepare in advance, ensuring they can respond deliberately, effectively, and quickly under stressful conditions.

Leveraging institutional knowledge

City teams understand the intricacies of their infrastructure systems better than anyone else. They know which streets will flood first, when lift stations become overwhelmed, and which properties are at risk from sewer backups or water supply disruptions. This institutional

knowledge is critical for effective disaster response and recovery. However, if it is siloed within individual departments, the city may miss opportunities for a more comprehensive and coordinated response.

To maximize a successful response, a city should build upon this institutional knowledge and continually identify potential failure scenarios. By running through hypothetical disaster situations, the city and consultant teams can:

- ▶ Determine at-risk infrastructure components.
- ▶ Identify necessary materials and equipment for a response.
- ▶ Establish key contacts from other city departments and external agencies.
- ▶ Decide when to escalate issues and who to call.
- ▶ Plan the sequence of response operations to maximize effectiveness.

Adjusting disaster response plans

Establishing a sequence of response actions positions a city to react effectively when unexpected challenges arise. For example, a sewer collection department recently responded to backup threats to homes caused by rising floodwaters entering the sewer collection system. Based on decades of operational experience, the department enacted their relief plan at a designated manhole. However, despite their efforts, they struggled to safeguard homes — even after surface flooding receded.

The team asked themselves, "How can we do this better? Our team has been rotating between this and other threatened areas for days and we need a more effective approach."

Upon evaluation, they discovered that while the relief manhole had been effective when the system was smaller, it had become less effective due to decades of system growth and reconfiguration. After this realization, the department shifted to a more optimal relief location, which significantly reduced their operational

PHOTOS COURTESY OF BOLTON & MENK



Loss of electricity to lift station infrastructure within a neighborhood due to rising floodwaters.




City crew relieving the sanitary sewer collection system from floodwaters to protect a notable lift station (in the background).

efforts while better protecting the overall system. This adjustment also helped reopen local roads and reduced the need for dedicated monitoring of critical water supply facilities.

By asking a simple question, the department is now better positioned to safeguard more properties with less effort the next time a flood occurs in this area. But they aren't stopping there — after seeing the benefits of this adjustment, they are working with consultants to evaluate the entire response plan for broader improvements across the sewer utility and other infrastructure systems.

Preparedness leads to success

This is just one scenario of how planning, practicing, and refining response strategies can lead to better disaster outcomes. Across cities, countless other examples show that well-prepared teams respond more effectively when disaster strikes.

Just as athletes, actors, and diplomats are honored for their performances, city teams that prepare for disaster response will be recognized as champions of infrastructure systems — shining when their communities need them the most. 

Josh Pope is a principal engineer at Bolton & Menk (bolton-menk.com). Bolton & Menk is a member of the League's Business Leadership Council (lmc.org/sponsors).



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The Who, What, Why, and When of Federal COBRA and Minnesota State Continuation

BY MARLO PETERSON

Administering Minnesota state continuation laws and federal COBRA are likely not an employer's favorite task. Some outsource it, some manage it in-house, and others hope no former employees elect coverage. But both programs — Minnesota state continuation (a state-mandated plan) and COBRA (a federal program) — offer employees, including certain police officers and firefighters, continued health insurance after leaving your organization or experiencing a qualifying event.

While federal and state options have similarities, they also differ in key ways. Employers are responsible for ensuring that eligible employees are offered either the state or federal plan that provides them with the most generous coverage. Failing to provide proper notices and guidance can lead to penalties.

If this seems complicated, the following breakdown clarifies key points.

COBRA versus Minnesota state continuation

Both federal COBRA and Minnesota continuation allow individuals (qualified beneficiaries) to continue benefits after a qualifying event, including:

- ▶ Termination of employment (voluntary or involuntary).
- ▶ Divorce/separation.
- ▶ Death of an employee.
- ▶ Dependent losing eligibility.
- ▶ A covered employee becoming covered under Medicare.
- ▶ A secondary event, such as a disability determination.

While the qualifying events are the same, health coverage differs:

- ▶ **Termination of employment:** Under federal COBRA, each qualified beneficiary, such as a dependent child under a family plan, can individually elect coverage. In contrast, Minnesota state continuation does not offer independent elections and requires that the former employee elect coverage for all dependents.
- ▶ **Divorce:** COBRA offers 36 months of coverage, whereas Minnesota contin-

uation allows coverage until another plan is obtained.

- ▶ **Death of an employee:** COBRA allows 36 months of coverage with a 30-day grace period for payment. Minnesota state continuation offers beneficiaries 90 days for payment and indefinite coverage until new insurance is secured.
- ▶ **Disability:** COBRA allows for up to 29 months of coverage, with the last 11 months costing 150% of the premium. It also requires a Social Security Administration (SSA) determination within 60 days of the qualifying event. Minnesota continuation allows for coverage indefinitely at 100% of the premium and does not require an SSA determination, but the beneficiary must be determined to be totally disabled while employed.
- ▶ **Life insurance:** COBRA does not offer life insurance continuation, but Minnesota state continuation does.
- ▶ **Field specific:** Unique requirements apply to police officers and firefighters.

Compliance and penalties

To ensure that your plan complies with federal COBRA, employers must meet the following Technical and Miscellaneous Revenue Act of 1988 (TAMRA) requirements:

- ▶ **Training:** Proof that COBRA administrators have received proper training.
- ▶ **Documentation:** Written instructions for COBRA administration.
- ▶ **Professional guidance:** The plan is updated and designed based on professional advice.
- ▶ **Independent oversight:** The plan is monitored by an independent auditor. Adhering to these criteria is essential to demonstrate compliance during an audit. Federal COBRA and Minnesota state continuation laws differ yet run concurrently. This creates administrative challenges. While municipalities are not subject to Employee Retirement Income Security Act of 1974 (ERISA) penalties, qualified beneficiaries can bring a lawsuit to recover COBRA coverage under provisions of the Public Health Service Act

(PHSA). For reference, courts have based rulings on penalties for private-sector employers, which can be \$100 per day per beneficiary (\$200 per family).


Additional requirements for municipalities

Minnesota state law mandates that municipalities and governmental entities offer continuation of health coverage to eligible former employees, under Minnesota Statutes, section 471.61, subdivision 2. Key provisions include:

- ▶ **Eligibility:** Applies to former employees (excluding volunteer firefighters) who either receive or qualify for public pension through the Minnesota Public Employees Retirement Association.
- ▶ **Prior notification:** Employers must inform retirees of coverage options and deadlines before termination.
- ▶ **Indefinite coverage:** Retirees and dependents must be allowed to continue group coverage indefinitely, but cannot drop individual coverage while keeping dependent coverage.
- ▶ **Premiums:** Under COBRA, employers can charge up to 102% of the cost of coverage, including a 2% administrative fee, but are not required to charge the full 2%. Under Minnesota continuation employers may only charge 100% of the cost of coverage.

It is important to remember that this benefit is not COBRA, though COBRA notice requirements must still be followed. Although it is generally advantageous for former employees to receive benefits under this statute, COBRA requirements must still be satisfied. Both a COBRA notice and a notification under this statute must be provided to the departing employee or beneficiary.

Navigating complexities

The interplay between federal COBRA, Minnesota continuation, and municipal requirements create a complex regulatory landscape. Employers must compare the options and offer the most beneficial coverage. If meeting TAMRA criteria seems challenging, consider updating internal practices or outsourcing administration to a trusted third-party administrator. 

Marlo Peterson is a consumer directed benefits consultant for the Minnesota Healthcare Consortium (mnhc.gov). The Minnesota Healthcare Consortium is a member of the League's Business Leadership Council (img.org/sponsors).



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Food Pantry in Bricelyn Fills Need With City's Help

BY HEATHER RULE

Before launching the Bricelyn Food Pantry, organizers spoke with people in the community about their past experiences at food shelves. Many recalled feeling shame, judgment, and an overall lack of compassion.

Bricelyn's pantry was determined to take a different approach.

"First of all, we're trying to eliminate stigmas when it comes to food insecurity," said Tiffany Isaac-Ruiz, chair and executive director of the Bricelyn Food Pantry. "They're happy to tell us what they like compared to their past experiences at other places."

So far, so good for the Bricelyn Food Pantry, which has received positive feedback since opening in June 2024.

A convenient, welcoming space

Barbara Carlson is vice chair and co-founder of the pantry. She's also heard pantry clients comment about the friendly and welcoming nature of the volunteers, along with the accessible location right in the city.

"Several of them have expressed it's handy to get to," Carlson said. "It's pretty much accessible to everybody."

"They've really been appreciative of the choices that they have," she added.

Located at 311 N. Main St. in Bricelyn, the pantry is open Thursdays from 5:30 p.m. to 7 p.m., allowing clients to shop for needed items twice a month. It partners with Channel One Regional Food Bank in Rochester to supply food, and eligibility is determined through the Emergency Food Assistance Program (TEFAP) annual form. However, no one is turned away.

It's a way to help friends and neighbors, Carlson said.

"A lot of people don't go out with the maximums," she added. "They just take what they need and know they'll use until the next time."

How the pantry got started

Isaac-Ruiz noticed the need for a food pantry in Bricelyn (population 340) when she moved to the area in fall 2023. She first spoke with a local pastor about creating a blessing box, like a little free library but for food, and presented the idea to the Bricelyn City Council in early 2024.

However, an outdoor food shelf wasn't practical. Instead, a city employee suggested using some vacant office space in a city-owned building. The City Council was on board and the pantry took shape.

"They recognized there was a need," Isaac-Ruiz said. "They said that could be a possibility, let's talk more."

From there, they connected with Channel One and got the ball rolling to work together as a partner agency. Clients of the Bricelyn Food Pantry venture from all over, from Albert Lea and even Mankato. Some drive 20 to 30 miles to visit the pantry.



Barbara Carlson and Tiffany Isaac-Ruiz founded and now help operate the Bricelyn Food Pantry.

Support from the city and community

The city was supportive and very open to the pantry using part of the city building — which includes the city office, community center, and small community library — to house the food shelf. The space was once a medical clinic but had been vacant for decades.

"They (the city) just willingly offered that space rent-free," Isaac-Ruiz said.

Carlson agreed that the city has been receptive to their ideas for the pantry. She recalled Mayor John Goette stopping by one day: "And he just said, 'We are so excited that this is here. The space is being well-utilized and kept up,'" Carlson said. She added that the community has also been very generous with donations.

Isaac-Ruiz said they're also grateful for their area sponsors and other funding that comes from state grants, which are essential to their operations.

The pantry provides monthly updates to the City Council, and statistics show a steady increase in visitors, many of whom are working families. From June through December 2024, the pantry recorded 478 household visits and distributed 19,224 pounds of food. In January 2025, there were 114 household visits, and 4,217 pounds of food distributed.


"They're very, very supportive," Isaac-Ruiz said of the City Council. "They like hearing the statistics and the fact that it's not just people in Bricelyn — it's people from all over who are coming here and receiving the help that they need."

"I think that helps everybody feel really good about their decision. They've been great."

A model for other communities

For communities that might be looking to start a food pantry, partnerships between a nonprofit and the city can be a key factor in success, Isaac-Ruiz said.

In Bricelyn, if the City Council hadn't stepped in with the suggestion to use city-owned space, there wasn't another available building to house the pantry.

"So truly, we would not exist as the food pantry that we are without the City Council of Bricelyn allowing us to be in that building," Isaac-Ruiz said. "So, they're hugely instrumental in all of this." 

Heather Rule is a freelance writer.



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Water Engineering and Beyond

Navigating Drug and Alcohol Testing: What Cities Need To Know

BY JOYCE HOTTINGER

Q: I've heard about drug and alcohol testing for employees, but with recent state law changes, I'm unsure whether my city is required to test and how to go about it. Can you help me understand?

A: In cities, drug and alcohol testing functions much like an airport security checkpoint — it's designed to catch anything prohibited before someone moves forward. Just as airport security scans bags for restricted items, drug tests screen for substances that may not be allowed in certain work environments. Some people may be randomly selected for extra screening, similar to a city's random drug testing. If something suspicious is found, further testing confirms whether there's an actual issue. And just as airline pilots face stricter travel regulations, employees in safety-sensitive jobs are subject to stricter drug policies.

Drug and alcohol testing is governed by two separate and distinct sets of laws: state and federal.

- ▶ **Minnesota law:** Cities that choose to conduct drug and alcohol testing must comply with the Minnesota Drug and Alcohol Testing in the Workplace Act (DATWA). DATWA outlines the rules for drug, alcohol, and cannabis testing for job applicants and employees. While it allows testing under certain circumstances, it does not require it. However, if a city elects to implement testing, it must follow specific procedures, including having a DATWA-compliant written city policy.
- ▶ **Federal law:** The Federal 1994 DOT Highway Administration regulations require drug and alcohol testing in certain situations for employees performing safety sensitive functions under a commercial driver's license (CDL). Many CDL drivers operating specific types of vehicles, such as vehicles weighting over 26,001 pounds, fall under these required DOT testing rules.

A city with both DOT-covered and non-DOT employees must follow both state and federal drug and alcohol testing laws. Generally, DOT-covered employees must be tested under federal DOT regulations, while non-DOT covered employees fall under Minnesota's DATWA if the city chooses to implement testing.



Recent cannabis law changes and their impact on testing

In May 2023, Minnesota legalized recreational cannabis and marijuana for adults age 21 and older. Then, in August 2024, the state introduced another law providing oral fluid testing as an alternative option to lab-based drug, alcohol, and cannabis testing.

These new laws impact how cities approach drug testing under Minnesota DATWA, but do not impact federal DOT drug and alcohol testing rules as cannabis remains prohibited under federal law.

Under a city's DATWA policy, the 2023 law change means cannabis, in many circumstances, is no longer classified as a "drug" for testing purposes. However, there are exceptions. DATWA still considers cannabis a "drug" for employees in "safety-sensitive" roles, including:

- ▶ Police officers
- ▶ Firefighters
- ▶ Child care workers
- ▶ Health care workers
- ▶ Other specified safety-related positions


For these unique job categories, cities can continue treating cannabis like any other drug under DATWA.

City testing requirements and best practices

Cities that choose to test non-DOT applicants and employees for drugs, alcohol, or, in some cases, cannabis, must:

- ▶ Have a written policy that complies with DATWA statutory requirements.
- ▶ Provide required notifications and uphold employee/applicant rights outlined in a city's DATWA policy.
- ▶ Use specific certified laboratories for testing, except for oral fluid testing, which does not require a laboratory.

Oral fluid testing is the only process exempt from Minnesota's laboratory requirements. However, cities using this method must follow strict collection and notification requirements. If an applicant or employee receives a positive, inconclusive, or invalid oral fluid test, the city must provide additional testing services through a certified laboratory at no cost to the employee.

For more information on drug testing, and to access a model non-DOT policy template, refer to the League's Drug and Alcohol Testing Toolkit at lmc.org/drugtest. 

Joyce Hottinger is assistant human resources director with the League of Minnesota Cities. Contact: jhottinger@lmc.org or (651) 281-1216.

Minnesota Supreme Court: Political Disagreements Alone Don't Grant Taxpayer Standing

TAXATION

Taxpayer standing

Clapp v. Sayles-Adams, 15 N.W.3d 648 (Minn. 2025)

The facts: Deborah Clapp is a Minneapolis homeowner who believed her property taxes were being used illegally by Minneapolis Public Schools. A provision in the district's teachers'



union contract included protections for underrepresented populations in the event of layoffs. Layoffs typically proceed on the basis of seniority, with least senior employees being laid off first. However, the 2021-2023 collective

bargaining contract exempted teachers from underrepresented populations from the normally seniority-based layoff and reassignment procedures. They were also given priority in the reinstatement process. Clapp was not a party to the contract and had no connection to the school district or the union other than residing in Minneapolis and paying property taxes.

The type of case: Clapp sought declaratory judgment and injunctive relief. Normally, a party bringing a lawsuit must have suffered some sort of damages or injury. A request for declaratory judgment asks a court to define the legal obligations or rights between parties when there is uncertainty and does not require a party to show they

have been injured. A request for injunctive relief asks the court to order the defendant to stop a certain action. Clapp alleged the contract provision regarding underrepresented teachers violated the equal protection clause of the Minnesota Constitution by discriminating based on race and ethnicity, and asked the court to stop Minneapolis Public Schools from spending public money on implementing that provision.

The issues: Even for declaratory judgment actions, a plaintiff must have some personal stake in the case, known as standing. An exception to this rule is taxpayer standing, where someone who does not have a direct injury can still sue to stop the unlawful use of public funds. Though Clapp lost at the district

court level, the Minnesota Court of Appeals reversed, finding she had standing to pursue her claim. At the Minnesota Supreme Court, the school district contended Clapp did not meet the requirements for taxpayer standing, which requires that the central dispute is about the illegal disbursement of government funds. Rather, the district argued, Clapp's challenge was based only on her disagreement with the contract provision, and she had not shown that there was any unlawful spending of taxpayer money.

The court's ruling: The Minnesota Supreme Court held Clapp did not have standing. Taxpayer standing requires a direct challenge to government expenditures. Here, Clapp did not point to any unlawful spending, only showing she lived in Minneapolis, owned a home, paid property taxes, and that a portion of property taxes helps fund the school district. She did not show any government funds were being spent illegally. Instead, her real challenge was to the constitutionality of the contract provision itself.

What this means for cities: A city cannot be sued simply because someone has a political disagreement with a city ordinance or other government action. A plaintiff would need to either show that they are personally affected by the ordinance or action, or point to specific allegedly illegal spending by the city.

TORTS

Discretionary immunity

Doe 601 v. Best Acad., No. A22-1236 (Minn. Feb. 26, 2025) (precedential opinion)

The facts: Best Academy, a charter school, hired Aaron Hjermstad as a physical education teacher in 2016. The school contracted with a nonprofit charter management company to manage the hiring process. Best Academy required candidates to provide three letters of reference, and those references were to be contacted. The school did not require calls to former employers. Hjermstad provided a list of references, but no letters. On his job application, Hjermstad did not answer two questions:

- 1) The reason for leaving Excell, his previous school.
- 2) Whether Best Academy could contact Excell.

In his list of references, Hjermstad did not include any supervisors, but did include volunteer coaches from Hospitality House, a previous position, and a paraprofessional from Excell. Best Academy did not contact either job.

Hjermstad had been accused of sexual abuse of a minor student at Excell, resulting in a criminal investigation. During the investigation, Hjermstad was placed on a leave of absence by Hospitality House. Though Hjermstad was not charged, Excell did not renew his employment contract for 2015-2016.

Taxpayer standing requires a direct challenge to government expenditures.

During his job interview, Hjermstad told Best Academy that his contract at Excell was not renewed due to budget cuts. While employed at Best Academy, he sexually assaulted Doe, a minor, though Doe did not immediately report the abuse.

In March 2020, a parent unrelated to Doe reported to the school that Hjermstad had sexually assaulted her minor son. Best Academy fired Hjermstad and reported him to law enforcement.


After the *Star Tribune* published a story about Hjermstad's sexual assault charges, Doe's mother showed him the article. Doe then disclosed that Hjermstad had also assaulted him. Hjermstad was later convicted of sexually assaulting Doe and three other children.

The type of case: Doe claimed that Best Academy's decision to hire Hjermstad was negligent because the school failed to perform due diligence during the hiring process.

The issues: Minnesota's Municipal Tort Claims Act (MTCA) makes municipalities liable for its torts and those of officers, employees, and agents acting within the scope of their employment. Charter schools are considered municipalities for this purpose. A tort is a civil wrongdoing that causes someone to suffer a loss or harm. The MTCA contains a discretionary-function exception, meaning that municipalities have immunity for discretionary judgments made in the context of policy-making. Best Academy contended that its hiring decision was a policy-level decision, and it was therefore immune. Both the district court and the Minnesota Court of Appeals agreed and dismissed Doe's negligent hiring claim.

The court's ruling: The Minnesota Supreme Court held that the district court and court of appeals made a mistake in determining that Best Academy's conduct was discretionary. In making the decision to hire Hjermstad, the school's agent's conduct did not involve balancing competing economic, social, political, and financial considerations for purposes of the discretionary-function exception to municipal tort liability. The school's agent did not follow established procedures, including reference checks, in the hiring process.

What this means for

cities: To invoke the discretionary-function exception, a city must show that the conduct challenged in the lawsuit involved weighing competing social, political, economic, or financial considerations. There is not a broad category of "hiring" that makes all actions in this operational area discretionary. 

Written by Lisa Needham, research attorney, and Amber Eisenschenk, research manager, with the League of Minnesota Cities. Contact: aeisenschenk@lmc.org or (651) 281-1227.

To invoke the discretionary-function exception, a city must show that **the conduct challenged in the lawsuit involved weighing competing social, political, economic, or financial considerations.**



Angela Amann



Korine Land



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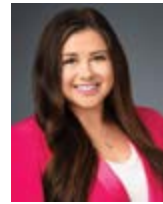
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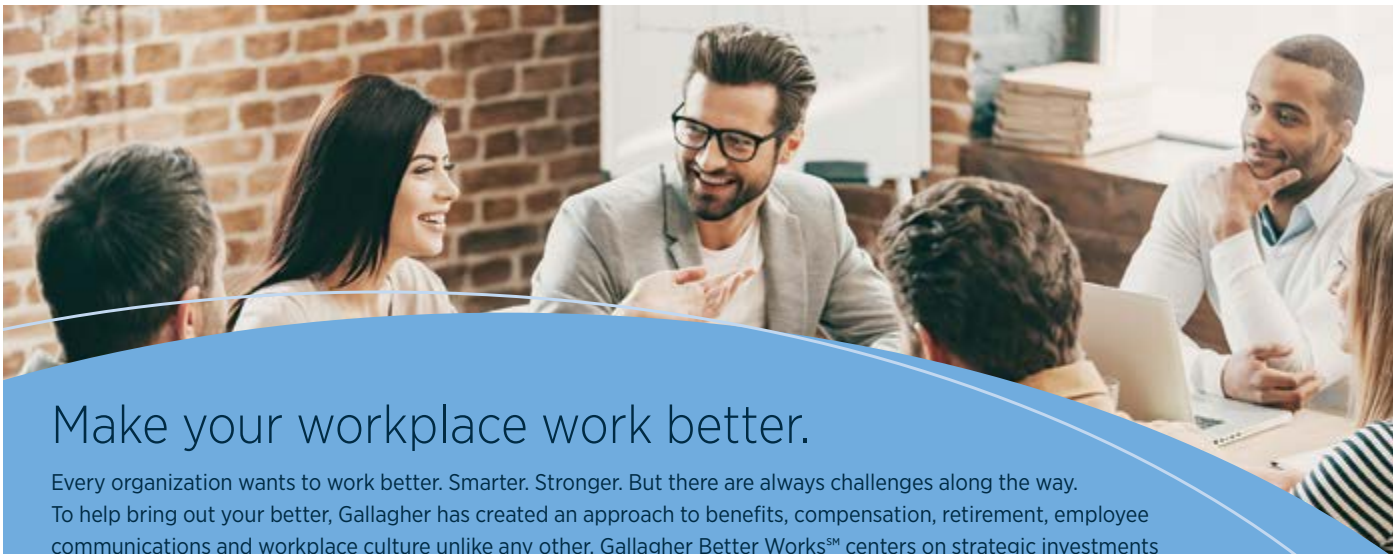
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What Unique Challenges Does Pickleball Noise Present?

Setback Planning



What unique challenges does pickleball noise present, and how might my city go about regulating it?

LMC Pickleball courts are popping up all over in response to growing enthusiasm for the sport, but the sport's distinctive noise poses challenges. The sharp "pop" of the ball makes the game up to four times louder than playing tennis. Factors like varying equipment, compact courts, fast-paced play, and enthusiastic player culture all contribute to pickleball's distinctly intense sound.

Local noise ordinances offer limited help because sound meters cannot reliably capture and isolate the pickleball noise. City councils must balance public demand with the concerns of neighboring residences. However, some proactive steps cities can take include:

- ▶ Establishing setbacks for city-owned courts.
- ▶ Developing a pickleball permitting process with setbacks for new, privately owned courts.
- ▶ Hiring a pickleball noise specialist to conduct a study before building new courts.
- ▶ Recognizing the limitations of noise barrier materials on the market.
- ▶ Discussing what role recreation should play in your city's values.

While finding sites with adequate setback from residences can be challenging, setbacks are one of the most effective tools in regulating pickleball noise. They provide clear, enforceable guidelines that provide for ease of administration. With setbacks, cities can avoid building costly barriers, conducting complex noise studies, and taking on the burden of ordinance enforcement. Most importantly, setbacks help preserve the residential character of your city's neighborhoods.

Answered by Law Clerk Sarah Sauer: ssauer@lmc.org.

City Events



Are parade participants allowed to toss candy?

LMC Parades are a cherished tradition that bring communities together in celebration. However, safety should always be a top priority — especially when it comes to distributing candy and small prizes.

Each year, cities ask this question. The League of Minnesota Cities Insurance Trust (LMCIT) has handled multiple parade-related injury claims and offers the following guidance to help keep parades safe.

To reduce risks and prevent injuries, consider enforcing a rule prohibiting candy or prizes from being thrown from vehicles or floats. While this has long been a parade favorite, the combination of excited children and large vehicles with limited

visibility creates a serious hazard. Instead, having walkers hand out these items ensures children stay a safe distance from moving vehicles, reducing the likelihood of accidents.

By implementing this safety measure and educating participants on its importance, cities can help prevent injuries and ensure that parades remain a fun and safe experience for everyone.

For more on parade safety, refer to the LMC Parks and Recreation Loss Control Guide at lmc.org/parks-rec-guide.

Answered by Senior Loss Control Consultant Julie Jelen: jjelen@lmc.org.

Overtime Pay



Our city employs regular, nonexempt city employees as paid-on-call (POC) firefighters. How should the city handle overtime pay?

LMC First, determine if the POC position is covered by federal minimum wage and overtime laws. Firefighters are exempt from Minnesota minimum wage and overtime laws. Depending on the compensation structure and size of the city, POC firefighters might be covered by the federal Fair Labor Standards Act (FLSA).


Assuming coverage under the FLSA, compute the number of hours worked for overtime eligibility and the regular rate of pay for overtime hours worked over 40 hours in a workweek.

Hours worked:

- ▶ Option 1 (rarely applicable to POC firefighters): Occasional and sporadic employment. If the employee is working in a different capacity and the POC role is occasional and sporadic in nature (as defined by the FLSA), the hours worked in both city roles might be treated separately for overtime eligibility.
- ▶ Option 2: Hours in both roles combined. Assuming Option 1 does not apply, the hours worked in both roles combined count toward the 40-hour overtime threshold.

Regular rate of pay:

- ▶ Option 1: Weighted average. The city calculates a weighted average by blending the rates of pay for the two roles together.
- ▶ Option 2: Advance agreement. The employee agrees, before the work is performed, to receive payment at one and one-half times the regular rate for the actual work that is being performed during the overtime hours.

For more information, refer to the LMC FLSA Police and Fire Information Memo at lmc.org/flsapf. 

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

Planning for a Change? Make Sure Effective Communication Is Part of the Plan

BY DON REEDER

The work of city government frequently involves policies and projects that can impact residents. Often these changes affect the entire community.

Change can take many forms. For some cities, it may mean receiving public safety or other emergency services from another city's police department or the county sheriff. For others, a new community center or recreational center could alter the type and volume of services available for a city's seniors or youth.

Change might also involve hiring a new person in a city leadership role. Or it could mean the opening or closing of a municipal enterprise, like a city golf course or liquor store.

Effectively communicating changes — small or large — is critical to helping your residents understand new programs, projects, or initiatives. Residents facing change need to have confidence that the city's decision-making process is transparent, thoughtful, and competent. They also need to know the change will lead to positive outcomes for the city.

Cities can effectively communicate with residents through many sources, including newsletters, social media sites like Facebook, X, or YouTube, and personal interactions, like one-on-one meetings, speeches to neighborhood groups, and city-organized events like council meetings, committee gatherings, or town halls.

Be aware that if you don't fill the information gap, someone else will do it for you. Rumors and misinformation can spread quickly and furiously. Work with your city's administrative staff to share plans and procedures early, and to make it clear that the city is the most reliable source for information.

When considering the following tips for your individual communication efforts, first take some time to think about your city's policies regarding appropriate spokespeople and messaging when talking about city business. Be clear about intent: are you speaking on behalf of the city, or stating your own views as an elected official? Establishing clarity will help to avoid confusion among audiences.

Sources of frustration for residents

During public discussions about policy changes or initiatives, at least three common frustrations arise:

- ▶ A lack of understanding about city government processes.
- ▶ A feeling that resident voices are not heard.
- ▶ A perception of inactivity or indifference among city officials.

These potential frustrations can be minimized through better communication. For example, city officials should ensure residents understand how public meetings — which are typical sources for news of coming changes — are structured and managed. Clearly explain when residents may speak and when city council members can respond.

Officials should also clarify the difference between routine council meetings and work sessions — the latter does not allow resident input. In any meeting, the city should communicate what the next steps are for discussion and decisions about specific change. Additionally, appoint an easily accessible contact person — available in person, by phone, or via email — who can answer questions or comments in a timely manner.

Organize your thoughts into key messages

Before delivering written or verbal communications, consider writing down your thoughts and organizing them into key messages. Key messages are statements that help tell your story, and the story of your city. They can help influence public perception, including what's being said in newspapers and through word-of-mouth.

Key messages can help you to focus on your remarks, retain the attention of your audience, and increase the chance that your exchanges about proposed change remain civil and constructive.

When delivering messages, start with the benefits of a completed project rather than temporary inconveniences it might cause. Consider what is the reason for the change? What will be achieved despite short-term challenges — enhanced safety, cost savings, durability, weather or climate impact mitigation?

Be sensitive to the fact that the proposed change may impact some residents negatively. Acknowledge these effects, show empathy for those affected, and outline planned remedies for disruptions.

Engaging in personal conversation

In one-on-one discussions, use active listening to understand resident concerns and ensure they grasp your perspective about the proposed change. Active listening can involve several steps, including:

- ▶ Focus intently on the individual you are speaking with. Maintain eye contact and use gestures like head nodding. Pay attention to the speaker's words and body language.
- ▶ Let them complete their thoughts before responding. Remember that sometimes they just need to vent.
- ▶ If something is unclear, paraphrase to confirm understanding.
- ▶ Use open-ended questions to encourage more detailed responses.
- ▶ Acknowledge feelings as valid; remember that every person is entitled to his or her viewpoint.

After the discussion, restate your understanding of the person's concerns. Avoid hot-button language or politically charged terms. Above all, remember people may not always recall what you said, but they will remember how you made them feel.

Preparing for discussions

Regardless of your stance on a particular policy change, it benefits you as a city leader to understand and be prepared to discuss all options related to a proposal or policy decision. At a minimum, be prepared to discuss:

- ▶ Costs and timing, with their pros and cons.
- ▶ Who benefits and who does not from the change.
- ▶ What the change means to the entire community.

In your preparation, be sure to consider diversity in your community. Do you need to address any unique concerns they may have based on their age, race, ethnicity, religion, or economic status? Are there potential change outcomes in your community that might affect those audiences, but might not affect other residents?

Develop an elevator speech

When time is limited, prepare a concise “elevator speech” to communicate key points. An elevator speech is a clear, brief message that is typically delivered in 30-40 seconds, or the time it takes to ride from the top to the bottom of a building in an elevator.

According to the American Planning Association, a good elevator speech is:

- ▶ **Engaging.** You want the person listening to respond with “tell me more.”
- ▶ **Memorable.** Ensure they can repeat it when introducing you to others.
- ▶ **Short.** Limit the length of your speech.
- ▶ **Simple.** Avoid jargon, acronyms, or industry terms.


Practice proactive media relations

Don’t ever be shy about touting your city’s accomplishments. Develop a media relations strategy and contact reporters whenever there is good news to share, such as the opening of a new business or the addition of a K-9 officer to your police department.

During controversial changes, residents will be more receptive to discussing concerns in a productive manner if they are aware of past positive developments. That can be best accomplished by spreading good news through local newspapers, radio, television, and digital media.

If you haven’t built a working relationship with the local reporters, take the time to introduce yourself. Offer to be a reliable source on city policies, budget issues, or new developments. Your willingness to do this not only helps you to communicate change to your residents, but it also helps the reporter successfully do his or her job.

Now, go forth and communicate

We all know that change is often necessary to preserve or enhance the livability of a community. With that, city leaders should recognize that change can create uncertainty among residents. Clear and effective communication fosters understanding and buy-in among residents who live, work, and play in your community. 

Don Reeder is public affairs coordinator with the League of Minnesota Cities. Contact: dreeder@lmc.org or (651) 215-4031.

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PHOTO COURTESY CITY OF MANKATO

Since the renovated Thomas Park softball facility opened in July 2024, it has hosted more than 1,000 events. Hundreds of softball players from around the state and region have practiced and competed on the modernized fields.

Mankato Unveils Premier Softball Complex After Years of Community Advocacy and Input



BY DEBORAH LYNN BLUMBERG

In southern Minnesota, generations of Mankato Peppers have unleashed their fastballs and stolen bases, honing their skills and strengthening the community. But for years, the storied girls' softball teams ranging in age from five to 18 shared city-owned diamonds in Mankato's Thomas Park, which was originally built for baseball in the 1970s.

When the park's five fields aged beyond simple repairs, the city built a new six-field youth baseball facility across town in 2015. Meanwhile, softball players continued using Thomas Park. Frustration grew among players, parents, coaches, youth softball league officials, and other community members, who had long advocated for a dedicated softball space for the Peppers and other players. The softball players needed a modern, reliable space where games and practices weren't at risk of cancellation because of persistent drainage problems. The City of Mankato listened.

With funding secured from sales taxes, the city launched a \$6 million effort to revamp the sports facility for softball, modernizing and upgrading the Thomas Park fields. Mankato was one of the recipients of the League of Minnesota's 2024

City of Excellence Awards for its softball fields initiative, winning for its "Creative Involvement of City Residents."

"This project has been a really positive improvement for the neighborhood, for tournament needs, and for the community's softball field needs," said Facilities Recreation Coordinator Claudia Hicks, who was hired to facilitate communication between stakeholders and city officials. "It was really exciting to see it all come together, and people are loving using the space."

Community input shaped the design

When Mankato officials decided in 2019 to convert Thomas Park into a state-of-the-art softball complex, they prioritized community collaboration. Gathering input from stakeholders ensured that the final product met the needs of players and nearby residents.

Mankato's public information team created a Communication and Engagement Action Plan and set goals for community participation. They set and reached their goal of a 30% feedback rate from neighborhood households (34 addresses) and input from 15% of ball field users.

As design planning got underway, board members from the Mankato Area Girls Fastpitch Association (MAGFA) were invited to walk the old softball complex and discuss needed upgrades. City officials also frequently engaged with Mankato Area Public Schools, Mankato Community Education, Bethany Lutheran College (whose players now use the new field), and residents in the surrounding neighborhoods.

Early feedback helped shape critical aspects of the facility, Hicks said. For example, stakeholders identified the need for designated team rooms, additional storage, warm-up areas, and additional accessible spectator seating.

Multiple conversations with nearby residents revealed a desire for greater field access beyond youth leagues, including more availability for community recreation, women's softball leagues, and school district use. They also shared concerns about parking, noise, fencing, trees, traffic, and drainage. The city incorporated their feedback into updated design plans.

"People started to get excited about some of the upgrades that were going to be made," Hicks said, including improv-

ing drainage, which benefited both the facility and nearby homes. New sidewalks connected the park more seamlessly to the adjacent neighborhood, making the area more accessible for pedestrians, runners, and cyclists.

The project faced challenges, including pandemic-related delays, cost increases, two rounds of project bidding, and difficult weather conditions. Officials also had to make hard decisions related to project cuts in order to stay in budget.

Despite these hurdles, the initiative got back on track in 2021, and construction kicked off in 2022. The city continued to work closely with stakeholders. Officials invited youth league board members to don hard hats and tour the ball complex during construction, and continued to solicit regular feedback on the project's progress.

"For any tweaks or last-minute changes needed, they knew they could have a voice," Hicks said.

Addressing parking and maximizing use

Because the complex shares parking with adjacent Mankato East High School and nearby protected greenspaces prevented expansion, parking coordination became a top priority. Hicks worked closely with the high school's athletic director to balance field use and school events, ensuring smooth operations.

The redesigned facility features four youth tournament practice fields arranged in a pinwheel layout, converted from the previous three. A former 300-foot adult softball field was transformed into an artificial turf NCAA-compliant field with lights, concrete masonry dugouts, a scoreboard, and bleachers. Other additions include new trails and paved walking paths, batting cages, and new water detention ponds for storm water management.

The premier softball facility made its debut in July 2024 during Mankato's largest softball tournament of the year, the Fourth of July Tournament.

"Stress-testing a brand-new facility with a giant tournament was a little nerve-racking," said Hicks. "But fortunately, it went remarkably well."

Continued engagement and future enhancements

During the event, project planners observed how attendees navigated

the space and made final adjustments before permanent signage was installed. "We wanted to get feedback and make sure we had signs in the right spots," Hicks said. "When you finish any project, you have little nips and tucks here and there."

One discovery was that attendees gravitated toward a narrower path instead of the wider, more central walkway. In response, officials increased signage to alert people to the option of the wider path.

Weeks later, on July 25, Mankato opened its facility to the public with a grand opening. City Council members and stakeholders attended the festivities.

Since then, Thomas Park has hosted nearly 1,000 events, including 20 softball tournaments. Hundreds of softball players from around the state and region — from ages five and up — have practiced and competed on the modernized fields.

"The youth softball community has waited a long time for a facility that they could call home and be proud of, and the reception has been positive," said Mankato Director of Administrative Services Parker Skophammer.

Players, their families, and coaches are thrilled with the new amenities, Hicks said, including a new concessions and restroom building with multiple restroom stalls for men and women, an inclusive restroom with an adult changing table, environmentally friendly low-flow restroom fixtures, two team rooms, and ample storage space for the city and users. A second building in the pinwheel provides additional restrooms.

"Teams love coming to Mankato to play at Thomas fields," said Mankato Peppers President Marty Ray. "We get teams from Canada, Iowa, Wisconsin, South Dakota, and North Dakota for our tournaments, and they rave about how great it is to play at such a nice facility. The Mankato Peppers appreciate the work the city has put in, and continues to put in, to offer us such a great place for women's sports."

Spectators have also enjoyed new features, including wireless control scoreboards, LED lighting, a championship scoreboard at the artificial turf field, specialty lighting controls on the adult field, power outlets along spectator


areas, picnic table seating, and the more than 600 new trees and shrubs planted as part of the project.

Since the fields reopened, the city has continued to check in with players, coaches, and youth softball league board members for feedback on

"Teams love coming to Mankato to play at Thomas fields. We get teams from Canada, Iowa, Wisconsin, South Dakota, and North Dakota for our tournaments, and they rave about how great it is to play at such a nice facility. The Mankato Peppers appreciate the work the city has put in, and continues to put in, to offer us such a great place for women's sports."

MARTY RAY
PRESIDENT
MANKATO PEPPERS

additional improvements. For example, users have suggested adding shade structures to the pinwheel area and a portable concession stand at the park's north end. Dialogue with stakeholders will be ongoing, Hicks said.

"It's so crucial to make sure that engagement process is really strong up front, throughout the project, and even after it ends," she said. "Just because you think you know what your user group needs doesn't mean you don't have to talk to them." 

Deborah Lynn Blumberg is a freelance writer.

ON THE WEB

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

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