

WELCOME TO  
**GoNorthMn**  
 EMILY, FAIRFIELD, FIFTY LAKES, LITTLE PINE, OUTING



## GoNorthMn(Be Outside)

The entire existence of GoNorthMn encompasses five short years - challenging, draining, frustrating, yet educational and sometimes inspiring years. Fledgling aspirations, various financial and human obstacles, hundreds and hundreds of hours finally produced recognition and tangible results. The experience is likely reminiscent of several other efforts in Outstate Minnesota, so the report will feature a short background, success stories, and a few lessons learned.





Local telecommunications cooperative ECTC and a few elected municipal leaders met to consider the limitations to area growth, potential remedies and resources for changing the future. Five small communities in central Minnesota’s beautiful lake country (Fairfield, Fifty Lakes, Little Pine, Outing and Emily) were surviving, but they competed and had little communication. Full-time residents totaled around 2,000, with four times that during summer. “Who wouldn’t appreciate volunteers willing to work for good things in town?” was the consensus. Cooperation between small municipalities could help market the region, share services, aid the area to grow and thrive. It wasn’t an earth-shattering concept, but working together wasn’t as easy as understanding the need.

The original instigators sought and obtained grants from IF (the Initiative Foundation) and IRRRB (Iron Range Resources Rehabilitation Board), for a Thriving Communities Initiative (TCI) series of workshops. The Initiative Foundation had organized sixty of these previously, but this collaboration of adjacent communities was unique. The five governing boards/councils all agreed to invest. A foundation of knowledge was established with speakers on rural economies and population trends (Merritt Bousier and Ben Winchester, both UofM Extension Service). Region Five Development Commission ran asset-mapping meetings with input from locals on area strengths, and “what holds us back”. Workshops with dinner and structured discussions took place from July through November of that year. The TCI process gathered 125 participants and then twenty-five residents coalesced into three task forces intent on achieving results for the communities. A \$10,000 project fund was awarded back to the group for completion of the program. Funds were used wisely; examples are below under Outcomes. The GNM name, logo and mission statement were developed:



2015 Dinner Meeting

“GoNorthMn promotes sustainable, fulfilling, prosperous and healthy living for residents, businesses and visitors in our five rural lake communities”.



# Outcomes

2016-2017

Original TCI resulting project fund was divided between three task forces. An untold number of meetings and innumerable volunteer hours of work produced the following:

- **Marketing Task Force.** An area guide shows amenities, businesses and lists current events. The double-sided 18x24" map folds down to pocket size. A GNM Facebook page was also started. The goal of an information center was supplied by The Landing and will be expanded at the refurbished old post office, both located in downtown Emily.



- **Quality of Life Task Force.** A "GoNorthMn Kick-Off" outdoor evening in August, 2016 showcased the many existing services, clubs and connected residents with these. Presentations and live music drew 200 guests. "Love Our Waters" a year later featured the importance of water quality to the overall success of the area. State agencies down to local lake associations presented in booths, and live music, children's art projects and food were incorporated. Other Quality of Life goals included: services to help seniors stay in their homes and learn technology skills, a volunteer network, water quality, a swimming beach, a farmers' market, more activities, improved housing options, a barber shop, a safer intersection in Emily, a community garden, and connected trails. *It should be pointed out that a vast majority of all participants in the several GoNorthMn programs listed protection of the quiet lifestyle, natural areas, clear air and clean water as top priorities, regardless of improvements.*



- **Economic Development Task Force.**



The Landing Welcome Center & Marketplace was established by three TCI participants, with support from GNM and one year of municipal services. The cooperative opened in May 2017, providing local artisans with a retail

outlet. Other Economic Development goals included: support for existing and new local businesses, an online jobs hub (with a listing of local services available for hire), an intra-city ride service, attraction of high tech users, a small train project, improved area marketing, city park upgrades, architectural standards, an industrial park, a pharmacy, an auto service, mentoring to help students with future plans, utilization of empty commercial spaces, an ATV recreation area, RV facilities, and surveys to assess resident desires and interests. Several goals from each original task force have been accomplished or started, by GNM or others.



Welcoming Kiosks were designed by and for each community, as part of two new grants from IRRRB obtained in 2018, helping small towns with identity.



The area's main highway is heavily traveled and the goal was to create interest and entice visitors to stop.

## Welcoming Communities Advocacy Group



Region Five Development Commission and Sourcewell provided GNM with an opportunity to expand horizons and consider diversity, with a sponsored program and a grant for an implementation project. New and long-time residents and business representatives came together to enrich community. Volunteers of varied ages, skills and interests formulated an initial plan for a mentor/young entrepreneur competition and pop-up business trial.



The personal-contact nature of that project was waylaid by the pandemic situation, and so the group chose saving an old post office about to be demolished. This small historic building will become a visitor information center, with a back main room open for groups, classes or revolving art/student displays. The area has no iconic buildings, yet nostalgia for local history and quaint structures turned-out to be a catalyst.



## Lessons Learned

- 1 **Grantors want to see success** and they will help adapt programs. Our funders have been patient and have given leeway on parameters, so that GNM can complete projects and adjust to changing conditions. Two of our five towns voted to not contribute to a community welcoming kiosk with bench and planting after initially agreeing to participate. GNM was allowed to use already fabricated structures and dollars in other locations.
- 2 **Opinions and encouragement are easy to get** (using meetings, outreach and surveys), but donations of time or dollars are more difficult. Ten-to-twenty GNM individuals continue to participate regardless of what is asked and how dirty the work. Large cities, of course, experience the same attrition when working with volunteers.
- 3 **Gorgeous presentations draw negative reactions.** Talking with decision-makers before meetings to schmooze is likely more effective than having every angle considered, a great plan and full color illustrations. Officials sometimes seemed to look for negatives, rather than welcoming proposals and offering additional ideas.
- 4 **Volunteerism runs 'in the family'.** Whether they are spouses, grandchildren or weekend guests coerced into helping, the values of giving have produced great results for GNM projects. This group constitutes a core for the communities. Certain businesses continue to donate when asked.
- 5 **Local history creates nostalgia.** Quirky old relics can trigger fond memories and become amenities. The Landing, the historic post office, and the soon to be rehabbed original candy store are examples.
- 6 **Small is good.** GNM has received several different grants for projects or events. \$10,000 can be 'eaten up' by phased studies and paid contractors. Volunteers and donations from local businesses along with a small board of decision makers, however, can stretch the budget and accomplish great things. Deadlines of mere weeks can be met.
- 7 **Some fabulous ideas don't make it.** Many creative initiatives were proposed that have not happened. GNM truly hopes some of these will eventually come to fruition. Possible projects were noted above, under task force goals.
- 8 **Finding Help has to be personal.** An early mailed letter to every property owner explaining the GNM organization and asking for donations of any size resulted in zero response, though it may have helped market the overall effort. Personally calling someone for a specific day and task has gotten much better results.
- 9 **Visible projects help.** As photos of events and building projects made it into local newspapers on area Facebook sites, the GNM reputation elevated. These proved more valuable than carefully written summaries.
- 10 **Us and Them.** The need for improved relationships and communication between permanent residents/local businesses, and seasonal property owners/visitors still exists. GNM's mission is to work for both.

## Next Project

As the relocated 16x20' post office was being scraped and secured before winter, a second endangered building was offered to GNM. The early 1900's vertical log Emily candy store will be placed on the same downtown lot in late 2020 and will potentially be leased as a highly-visible seasonal business opportunity, with a larger open floor, ample windows and a vaulted ceiling, starting in 2021.



GNM continues to look for opportunities to connect area communities; ideas are always welcomed. One parallel improvement (for which we take no credit) has been improved cooperation between the governing bodies over the last few years, including emergency management plans and service agreements that share personnel, facilities and equipment.

## Gratitude

for contributions to GoNorthMn (Be Outside):

- 330 Central LLC, based in St. Paul, MN
- The Initiative Foundation, based in Little Falls, MN
- IRRRB, based in Eveleth, MN
- Region Five Development Commission, based in Staples, MN
- Sourcewell, based in Staples, MN
- LGU's of Fairfield, Fifty Lakes, Little Pine, Crooked Lake Township (Outing) and Emily
- Emily Volunteer Fire Department
- Local businesses: ECTC, Ace Hardware in Emily, Wes Hanson Builders & Emily Meats
- Dozens of individual volunteers for hundreds of hours for work or meetings, unreimbursed expenses and donated materials/tools/expertise.

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