

# Community Conversations

MINNESOTANS TALK ABOUT CITIES, SERVICES,  
AND FUNDING



How will city  
services be  
paid for?

What services  
should cities  
provide?

How should  
the services be  
delivered?

# What if your city were broke by 2015?

April 2012

Nearly two years ago, the Board of Directors of the League of Minnesota Cities authorized a project called “Cities, Services, and Funding: Broader Thinking, Better Solutions.” The project was based on two important points: that the current system for funding city services in Minnesota is not going to work much longer, and that the help of Minnesota residents is needed in developing solutions for the future.

The first two parts of the “Cities, Services, and Funding” project included research completed by the Hubert H. Humphrey School at the University of Minnesota for the League, and a public awareness campaign aimed at communicating the results of that research. The key finding of that research was cities of all kinds in all areas of the state would be dealing with a deficit situation by 2015. This publication outlines findings from the third part of the project—a series of “Community Conversations” conducted with more than 730 Minnesotans in 12 cities in May through October of 2011.

The publication details comments and ideas contributed by Minnesotans from all walks of life. Their perspectives, and not those of city officials, are the focus of these Community Conversations. The conversations also demonstrate the importance of civic engagement and public participation as we look ahead to the future of city services in our state: what services should be provided, how they should be delivered, and how they are to be paid for.

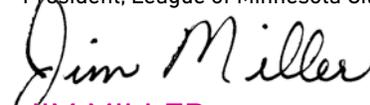
We think you will agree that the Community Conversations represent a compelling way forward in encouraging members of the community to be involved in identifying thoughtful solutions to service and funding challenges faced at the city government level—the level of government closest to the people.

A sincere thanks to the Bush Foundation InCommons project for its financial support of the Community Conversations. Similar thanks are extended to the University of Minnesota-Extension Services for its role in consultation and facilitation training, and to the city officials from the cities of Austin, Bemidji, Circle Pines, Duluth, Eden Prairie, Eveleth, Hastings, Moorhead, Northfield, St. Cloud, St. James, and St. Paul, who helped to plan and organize the conversations in their communities. And thanks most of all to the Community Conversations participants, who contributed their best ideas and comments.



**H. DAN NESS**

Mayor of Alexandria, Minnesota  
President, League of Minnesota Cities



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## PARTNERS IN MAKING THE COMMUNITY CONVERSATIONS HAPPEN

### THE LEAGUE OF MINNESOTA CITIES

The League of Minnesota Cities is a membership organization dedicated to promoting excellence in local government. The League serves its more than 830 member cities through effective advocacy, expert analysis, and trusted guidance.

### INCOMMONS

Throughout the state at in-person gatherings as well as on the Web, InCommons connects Minnesotans so they can find and share credible tools, knowledge and resources to solve community problems. The goal of InCommons is to help you improve the quality of life in your community and make sure you never have to tackle important issues alone. Lessons learned in one community can become starting points for addressing similar issues in other towns and cities

elsewhere in the state. Through InCommons, perfect strangers can become powerful allies in support of common endeavors.

### THE BUSH FOUNDATION

We support the Community Conversations efforts because they are a prime example of the citizen engagement and co-creation of solutions that begin to more deeply address the profound economic and demographic shifts across our state that have come to be called the "new normal." These are not temporary trends but significant and permanent changes that will affect us all and won't just go away. The "Cities, Services, and Funding" project aims to put the "public" back into public services. It shifts our thinking and behavior from being consumers of public services to co-creators prepared with enough knowledge and know-how to develop and advance sustainable solutions to the tough public problems we face."

# How do you talk to Minnesotans about the future of cities?

The goal of these Community Conversations was not to gather scientific data on Minnesotans' opinions but rather to talk to as many Minnesotans as possible from all walks of life about the future of cities.

A total of 40 cities submitted applications to be host communities for the conversations. The League chose 12 cities based on ability to identify and engage community groups that could invite community members from different walks of life. Those cities were Austin, Bemidji, Circle Pines, Duluth, Eden Prairie, Eveleth, Hastings, Moorhead, Northfield, St. Cloud, St. James, and St. Paul.

Four conversations were held in each location over the months of May through October of 2011. The first one dealt with the services cities provide and service preferences; the second—how services are delivered and preferences for service delivery; and the

third with how services are paid for and resident funding preferences. The fourth meeting addressed values and considerations that state and city officials should keep in mind when making tough decisions.

Rather than send out general calls for all city residents to attend one of the first three meetings, the League instead chose to work with community organizations that had regularly scheduled meetings or standard gatherings to invite community members. Community Conversations were held at meetings of the Chamber of Commerce or Rotary Club, at local colleges, at local churches, at senior centers, and other places where people regularly get together. For the fourth meeting, invitations were issued to all participants of the first three meetings plus any other interested residents in the community. All told, more than 730 Minnesotans representing a diverse mix of ages,

income levels, ethnic backgrounds, and political views took part in the conversations.

At each conversation, participants were given brief background presentations. Each presentation included an explanation of a projection that was prepared for the League by the Hubert H. Humphrey School at the University of Minnesota showing that, if all current trends were to remain the same, Minnesota cities of all types would be facing deficit situations by the year 2015. After some brief instruction from a facilitator, participants were divided into small groups to answer and discuss a series of questions for the remainder of the 90-minute conversation. Each of the small groups was led by a trained facilitator. The opinions and perspectives shared by participants flowed during structured yet comfortable conversations with friends, colleagues, and neighbors.

## DESIGNING THE PROCESS

The League wanted to do several things with the Community Conversations component of the Cities, Services, and Funding project.

Among them:

- To involve residents from Minnesota cities of all sizes and locations in serious discussions about the future of city services.
- To encourage participation among a diverse group of Minnesotans.
- To give background information in an objective way.
- To ask questions clearly and effectively, so that useful information and opinions could be collected from participants.

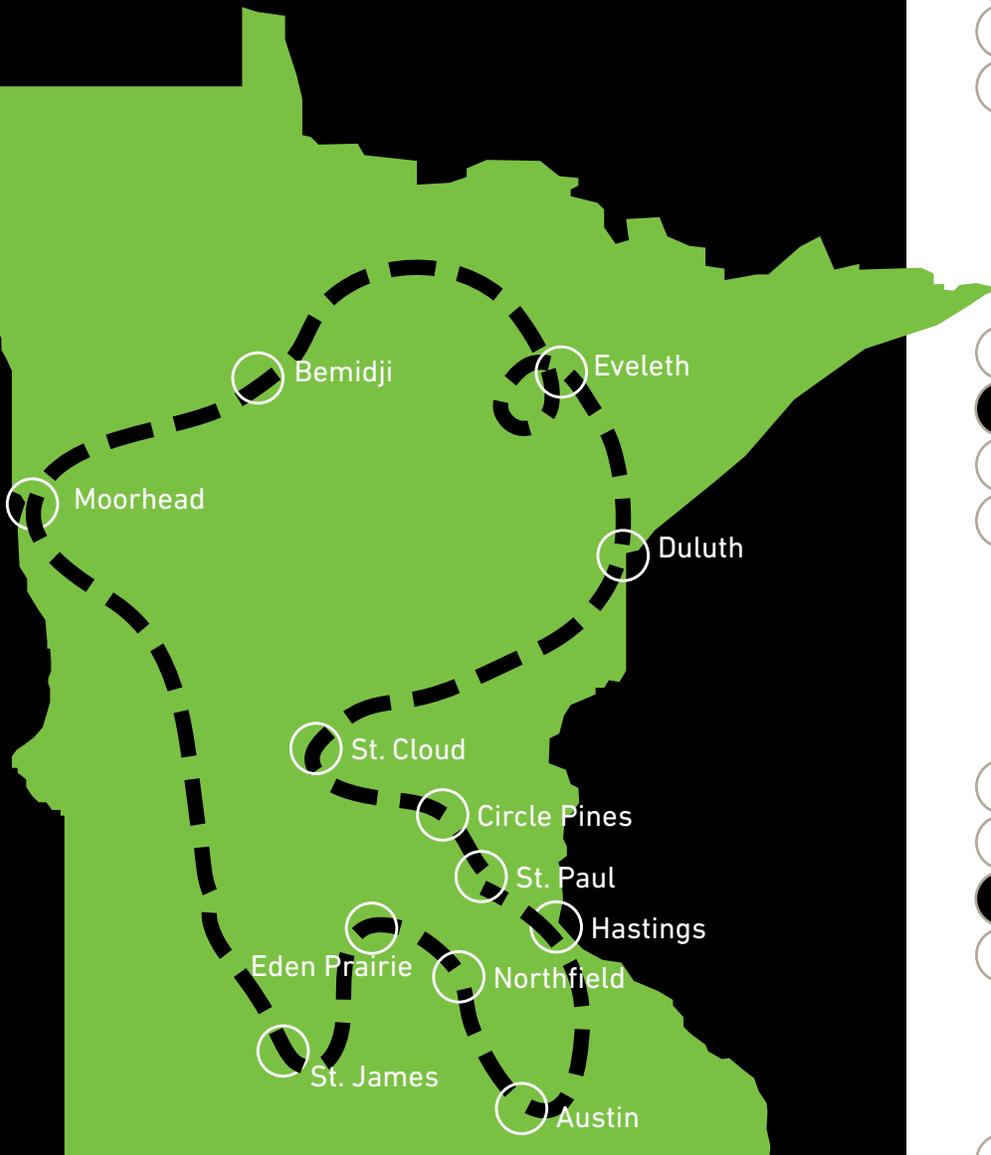
The League chose to gather information through town hall-like meetings known as community conversations. This information-gathering method was selected for several reasons. The format made for a casual and civil atmosphere, and provided enough time for discussion of sometimes complex issues.

Additionally, it was anticipated that the format would facilitate thoughtful discussion to help participants understand both positive and negative consequences of policy decisions, and lead to a meaningful dialogue that moved beyond the sound bite rhetoric that often dominates policy discussions.

In developing meeting content and design for the Community Conversations, the League partnered with University of Minnesota Extension Services. Educators from Extension Services were particularly helpful in providing small group facilitation training for League staff on how to best engage and encourage conversation among participants, handle potentially difficult situations among individuals or groups, and use active listening and reflecting skills.

To test drive the Community Conversations, League staff conducted a single-session pilot meeting in the City of Onamia.

FOUR CONVERSATIONS WERE HELD  
IN EACH LOCATION.



ALL TOLD, MORE THAN 730  
MINNESOTANS REPRESENTING  
A DIVERSE SPREAD OF AGES,  
INCOME LEVELS, ETHNICITIES,  
AND POLITICAL LEANINGS TOOK  
PART IN THE CONVERSATIONS.

### CITY SERVICES.

- 1 The first conversation in each community focused on what city services Minnesotans rely on today and the kinds of services they will need to rely on in the future.
- 2 In the conversations, we encouraged participants to think about cities in all parts of the state—where they have friends or family that they visit, where they work, where they go to shop or play or worship. We also asked people to name the services that they personally could do without, or with less of, and which ones communities in general could do without, or with less of.

### SERVICE DELIVERY.

- 1 During the second conversation we talked to Minnesotans about how city services should be delivered. The goal was to get reaction to delivering services in new and different ways, including city-county partnerships, contracting with a private business, and using volunteers. We asked questions about what people are willing to give up and where they are not willing to accept changes in how the services they use are provided. Minnesotans talked about which elements of the way services are delivered are critical and which are not.

### FUNDING.

- 1 The third conversation was focused on finding out how Minnesotans think city services should be paid for. We asked participants to share their preferences for paying fees for services versus paying taxes for services. The conversations also invited Minnesotans to talk about whether or not the state should have a role in providing city services and their opinions about the idea of financially supporting communities other than the community where they lived.

### VALUES.

- 1 In each community, the fourth and final conversation was for those who participated in any of the first three conversations and members of the broader community. We asked Minnesotans to share values they want state and local leaders to think about when they are making tough choices about the services that cities will provide, the ways those services are provided, and the ways to pay for them.

# How do you meet Minnesotans where they are?

In total, the League conducted 46 conversations in the 12 participating cities. Each host city selected for Community Conversations is home to a variety of groups and organizations in which city or area residents regularly and actively participate.

Organizations that hosted meetings included six business groups (employers, associations, chambers of commerce), six senior organizations, six nonprofit or civic groups, five Rotary clubs, four groups of college students/staff, two church congregations, two parent groups, two non-English speaking groups, and one youth council, among others.

In addition to the Community Conversations held in each of the 12 cities, the League invited individuals who were not able to attend one of the 40+ meetings to share their thoughts in one of two ways—through visiting the League’s “Cities Matter” booth sometime during the 12 days of the Minnesota State Fair or visiting [www.community-conversations.org](http://www.community-conversations.org).

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At the State Fair booth, visitors were asked to respond to this question: “Tough decisions need to be made about city services in Minnesota. What’s most important for state and city leaders to keep in mind?”

Visitors were asked to write their answers to the question on 4x6 note cards that were then collected and posted to a display board in the booth. Visitors were also asked to place “like” stickers on cards showing responses that they agreed with. All-in-all, the question prompted 372 idea cards and 393 “likes.” Because participants at the Fair did not get the same background information as people participating in the in-person Conversations, not all comments were specific to city government—many mentioned schools/education and state/federal politics. Top categories for “likes” related to the areas of governance, and what things cost and how to pay for them.

Participation was also encouraged online—via [www.community-conversations.org](http://www.community-conversations.org). At this web site, visitors were able to answer the same questions asked at the in-person meetings. A total of 16 individuals from 14 cities completed forms; many responded to more than one topic. Responses from questions related to meetings #1 and #2 were very similar to those generated from the in-person meetings. Those responding to questions related to meetings #3 and #4 were less supportive of concepts like revenue sharing between the state and cities and new ways to bring in money than those participating in-person.

Anna says city services “create a backbone for our community by supporting our economy through transportation, small business support, economic development plans, [and providing] our homes with basic amenities and services.”



Sheri says “being nimble and thinking creatively for solutions will be key.”



Carl says “that people do rely on [city services], and please keep the cost of these services at an affordable rate.”



Hal relies on “public safety because it’s there whether or not it is ever necessary.”

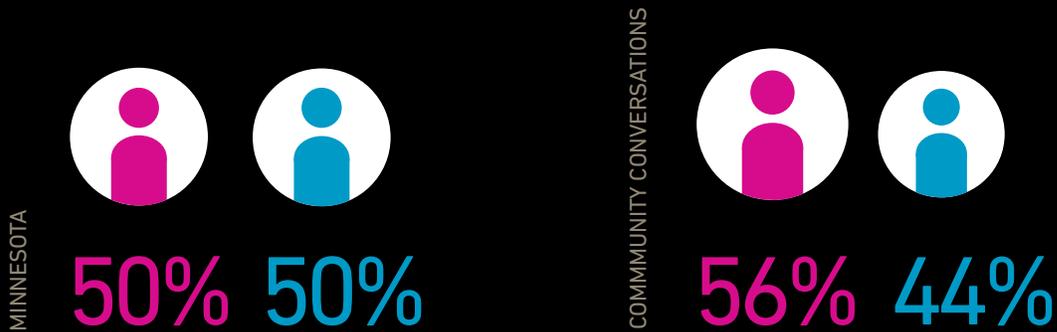


Violet relies on “water, electricity, snow removal.”

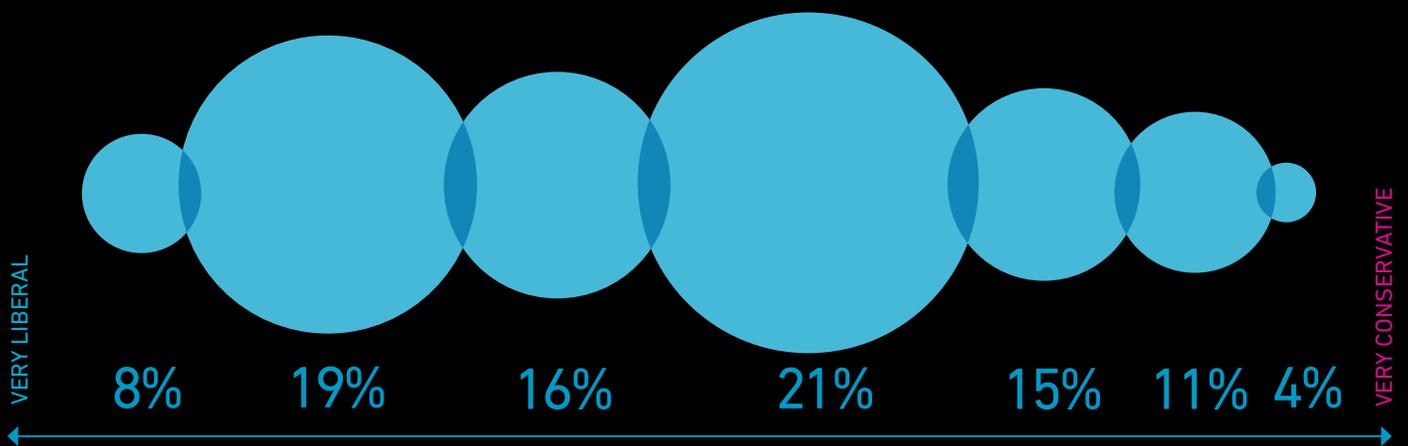
# Who do you include in the conversations?

The League set out to talk to a broad mix of Minnesotans. By working with host cities and partner organizations, the conversations brought together participants of diverse ages, educational levels, ethnicities, and political leanings. Efforts were made to talk with groups of different ages and backgrounds throughout the state. For example, conversations were held at senior centers, colleges, and with a city youth commission.

## Gender ARE YOU FEMALE OR MALE?

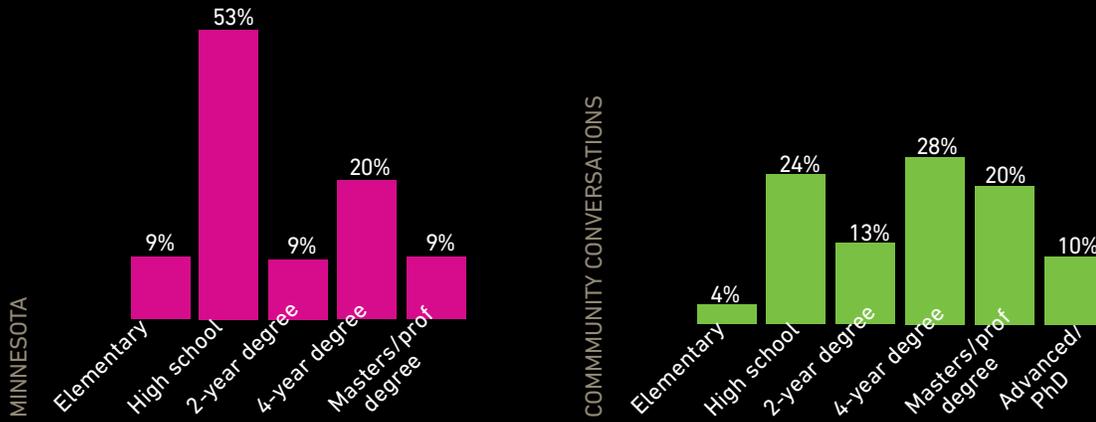


## Views WHERE ARE YOU ON THE POLITICAL SPECTRUM?



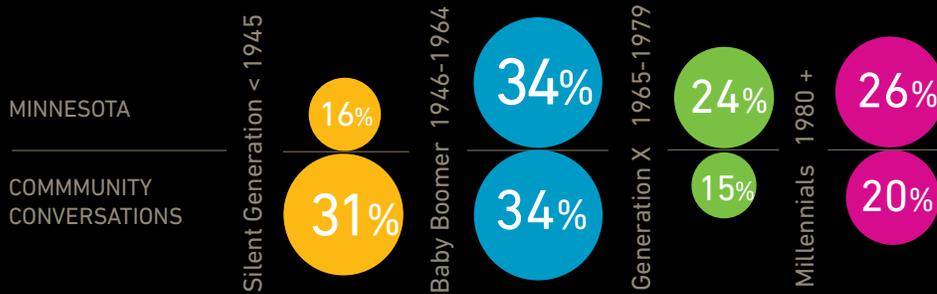
# Education

WHAT IS THE HIGHEST LEVEL OF EDUCATION YOU COMPLETED?



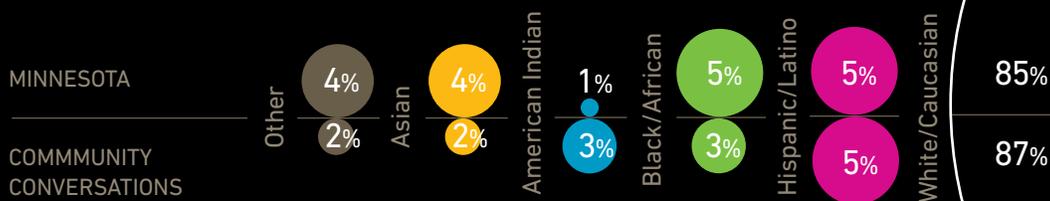
# Age

WHEN WERE YOU BORN?



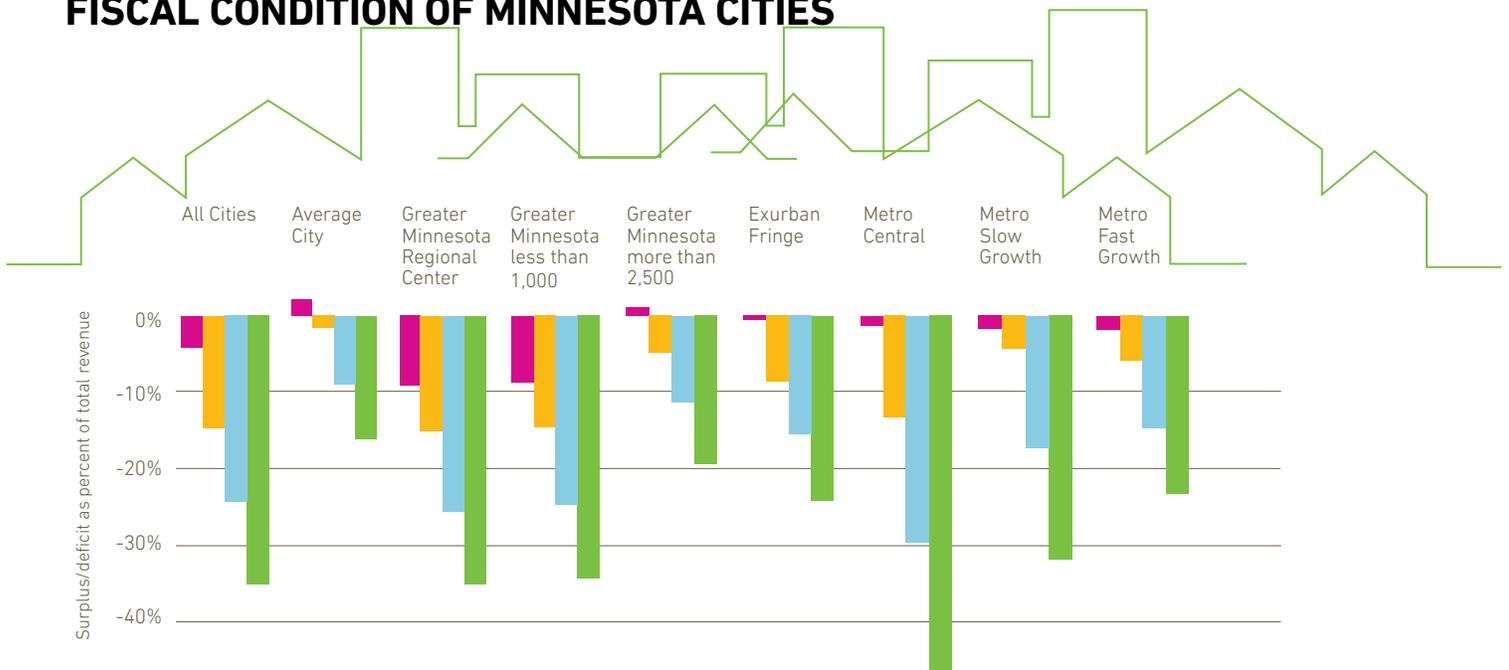
# Ethnicity

HOW WOULD YOU DESCRIBE YOURSELF?



# What do you need to be part of the conversations?

## FISCAL CONDITION OF MINNESOTA CITIES

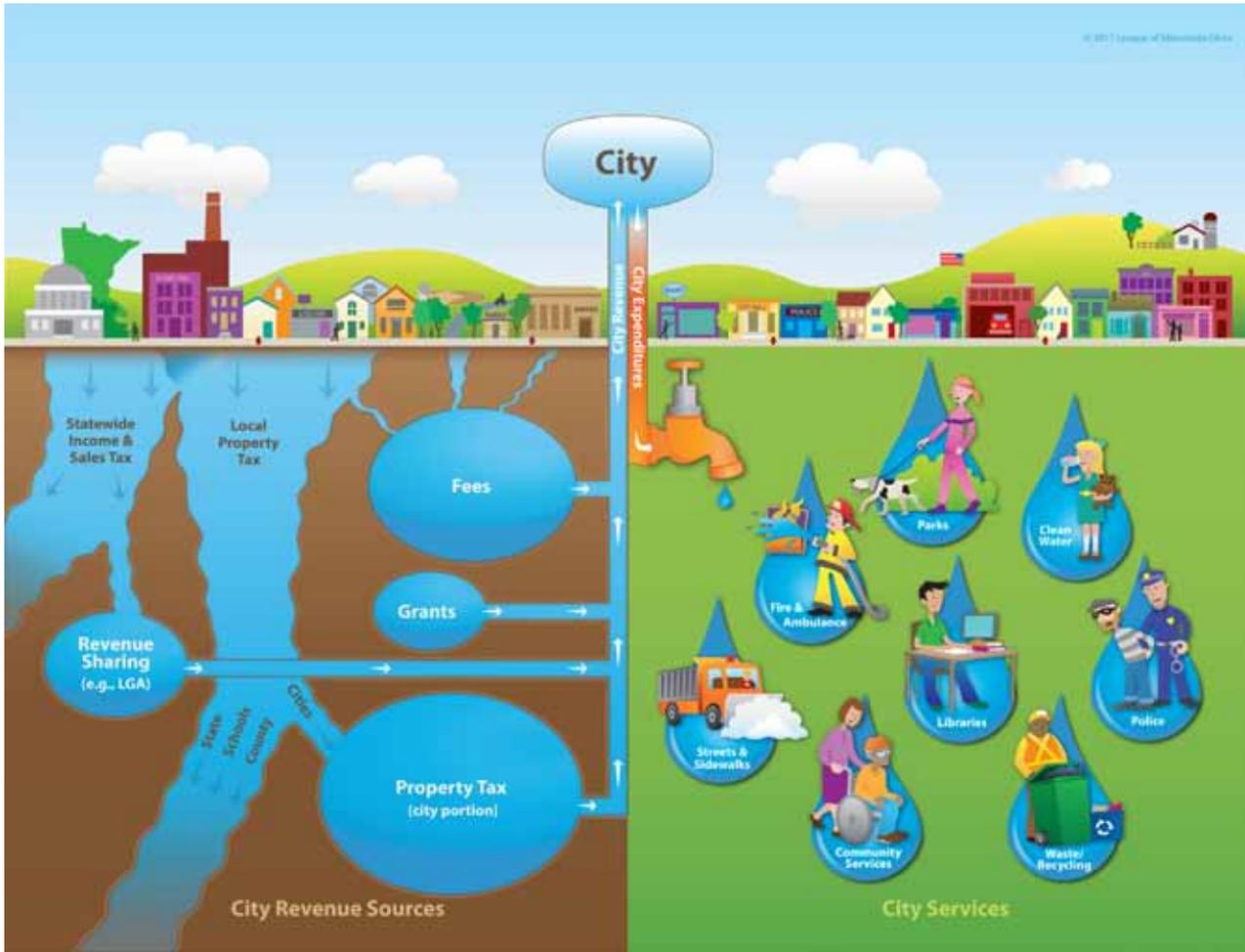


In the spring of 2010, the League of Minnesota Cities asked the Hubert H. Humphrey School at the University of Minnesota to conduct research on city budgets to learn how the finances of cities in our state would look in a few years. The study concluded that if cities remain on their current financial path and no policy changes are made, all types of cities in all regions of the state will be broke by the year 2015 (read the complete report at [www.lmc.org/citybudgetprojections](http://www.lmc.org/citybudgetprojections)).

The projection formed the foundation for Community Conversation discussions. The projection was included as part of a brief, informational presentation given by League staff members prior to the Community Conversation small group discussions.

Participants also heard about a number of the things contributing to challenges faced by cities when attempting to balance budgets, including economic trends, a decrease in state dollars sent back to the cities, and changing demographics.

**IF CITIES REMAIN ON THEIR CURRENT FINANCIAL PATH AND NO POLICY CHANGES ARE MADE, ALL TYPES OF CITIES IN ALL REGIONS OF THE STATE WILL BE BROKE BY THE YEAR 2015.**



## THE HANDOUT ▲

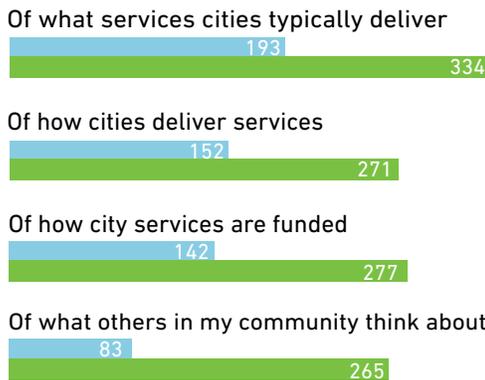
Each conversation participant was given a handout that showed what services cities deliver and how they are paid for with illustrations representing “reservoirs” of revenue sources. The back side of the infographic page also listed services that are offered by all, most, or some Minnesota cities.

## BEFORE AND AFTER: WHAT PEOPLE LEARNED

Post-conversation surveys showed that participant knowledge about city services increased dramatically after taking part in the Community Conversations. Most participants left the conversations energized and wanting more information. Many of them expressed interest in participating in future meetings/conversations on city issues hosted by their own cities.

Number of participants with high level of knowledge

■ before ■ after



# What services do you rely on today?

## MEETING 1 FOCUSED ON WHICH CITY SERVICES ARE IMPORTANT TO MINNESOTANS

Minnesotans who participated in Meeting 1 of the Community Conversations identified many different city services they rely on in their day-to-day lives: police, fire, ambulance, streets, water, parks, transportation, and libraries.

It was common for people to describe police, fire, and ambulance as essential or basic services, and others talked about water and streets in the same way. Participants also spoke fondly of parks and park programs, frequently describing having access to parks as something that people might consider when choosing a community to live

in, as well as a public resource to attract visitors. For many Minnesotans, the library is a community resource, a place to gather and connect as a community.

When thinking about city services that will be important to them in the future, participants tended to focus their comments on services for seniors—like housing, recreation, and meal services—and on transportation, parks, and the public library. They were quick to mention that aging Minnesotans in their communities,

themselves included, were likely to need help in getting to appointments, maintaining healthy diets, and living in safe homes. In many communities, people talked about transportation in general, pointing out that options

### PARTICIPANTS STRUGGLED TO NAME SERVICES THAT THEY WOULD CUT BACK OR ELIMINATE ALTOGETHER, CITING CONCERN FOR CITY RESIDENTS WHO WOULD BE HURT MOST BY THE CUTS.

would be needed for accessing health-care and jobs, to get rural residents to cities, to serve the disabled, and to reduce the number of people driving alone in the car. Some participants talked about using city parks more because they would have more free time in the future, and that population growth in cities would create a need for more parks and open space. Others talked about cutting back on park maintenance or relying on volunteers instead of city-paid staff.

Other conversation time focused on libraries. Some talked about using the library more in their free time; others commented that the idea of a library needing to be in a physical space might be an old idea because of advances in new technologies like e-readers.

It was hard for people to name the services that they would cut back or get rid of altogether. They were concerned for city residents who would be hurt most by the cuts. They shared ideas about how to do things differently instead of making cuts, including using volunteers to provide certain services,

sharing services between cities and/or other local government entities, or contracting with private businesses, among others. During the conversations, some participants made specific suggestions for cuts that would affect ice rinks, golf courses, pools, and park programs, but also acknowledged that cuts in recreational service amenities would affect the quality of life and ability to attract people and families.

# Police, fire & ambulance

Libraries

Streets

Social services

Development & zoning

Community services

Parks

Medical services

Water

Sewer

Economic planning

Senior Center

Trails

Garbage/  
Recycling

Snowplowing

Elderly services

Transportation

Utilities

## MEETING 1 THEMES

- City services that participants rely upon in their day-to-day lives include police, fire, ambulance, streets, water, parks, transportation, and the library.
- When thinking about the city services important to them in the future, participants tended to focus conversations on services for seniors—like housing, recreation, and meal services—and on transportation, parks, and the public library.
- Parks and libraries were mentioned by some participants as services they'll rely on more in the future as they expect to have more free time. Others thought these will be less important in the future.
- Participants struggled to name services that they would cut back or eliminate, citing concern for those who would be hurt most by the cuts. As an alternative, they shared ideas about how to do things differently instead of making cuts.

# What changes in city services are acceptable to you?

## MEETING 2 FOCUSED ON THE WAY CITY SERVICES ARE DELIVERED

Participants at Meeting 2 were asked to respond to several stories describing changes in the way a specific city service could be delivered. Participants were asked to assume that cities could save money by making the change. Scenarios focused on the kinds of tradeoffs cities might consider as they face difficult choices for how to deliver services.

People were generally more concerned about what would happen as a result of a delivery change than the actual change itself. For example, participants voiced more concern with a potential increase in response time resulting from forming a joint police department than with the idea of police departments merging or collaborating with other entities to deliver services. Additionally, many participants

thought that calls should be prioritized so that certain emergencies get fastest response time.

Generally participants don't care what organization or government

### PARTICIPANTS WERE MORE CONCERNED ABOUT THE OUTCOMES RESULTING FROM A DELIVERY CHANGE THAN THE ACTUAL CHANGE ITSELF.

actually provides the service. In other words, the name of the city or county shown on the side of a fire truck doesn't matter as long as it arrives in a timely manner when called. They want to know who is providing the service only for accountability

reasons. Some participants, though, felt strongly that seeing their city's name on the side of the vehicle can be a source of pride to the community.

People also seemed to accept changes that result in an increased personal responsibility, with perhaps less convenience. For example, in one scenario participants accepted having to drive further to obtain a building permit if operations were combined with the county. There was great support for potential changes in library services as well. Participants generally accepted having to adjust to a new library location or different hours, but were concerned about accessibility issues that might be experienced by residents other than themselves.

Across all scenarios, changes that impact police, fire, and ambulance



## MEETING 2 THEMES

- Overall, there was strong sentiment that changes to how city services are delivered are necessary given the current economic environment.
- Participants were generally more concerned about the outcomes resulting from a delivery change than the actual change itself.
- Participants said they don't care who provides a service as long as the service level remains the same. For accountability reasons, participants want to know who is providing the service.
- People seem accepting of changes that would make it less convenient or require them to do more to access a service.
- Across all scenarios, changes that impact police, fire, and ambulance service levels were less acceptable to most participants.
- There was much enthusiasm around the idea of providing services through volunteer efforts. However, participants stressed that there would need to be some sort of volunteer program with coordination or supervision provided by city staff.
- Generally, participants thought that consolidation might work for some cities such as small cities or cities sharing similar characteristics, although there were some regional differences in perceived barriers or downsides to collaboration.

service levels were less acceptable to most participants. Minnesotans were mostly uncomfortable with the idea of changes that lower the quality and responsiveness of those services they most rely on, such as public safety response times and frequency of snowplowing. Two groups with the youngest participants suggested reducing police coverage levels. Several felt that overlap from the county could make up for a decline in city coverage and didn't feel that a reduction would necessarily lead to an increase in crime.

There was much enthusiasm around the idea of providing services through volunteer efforts. Many felt that volunteers would be able to do things like park maintenance, some library services, and senior services. However, participants stressed that there would need to be a volunteer

coordinator or supervisor on city staff. Others had concerns about volunteer burnout, skill level, and liability.

Sometimes cities consolidate with another city, meaning all city services are merged or combined with another city. Participants were asked what they thought of this strategy, both in general and if their own city pursued it. In most conversations, participants thought that consolidation might work for some cities such as small cities or cities that are very alike. Participants in Greater Minnesota talked about consolidation differently than did participants in the metro area. Metro area groups talked about additional inconvenience with a larger city area resulting from consolidation, while non-metro groups talked about distance as a barrier to a merger.

# How do you want to fund city services?

## MEETING 3 FOCUSED ON PREFERENCES FOR PAYING FOR SERVICES

About half of the people who participated in Meeting 3 of the Community Conversations said that property owners should pay most of the costs of city services in their own cities because they are the main users of those services. Few participants, however, felt that paying for services should be the responsibility of homeowners or business owners only. People were quick to recognize the demand on city services created by workers, college students, visitors, shoppers, and others.

They were less sure about how to collect payment from non-resident users—whether it should involve fees, special taxes, or something else.

The vast majority of participants indicated a belief that the state government has a financial interest in making sure that basic or necessary city services are available in all parts of Minnesota. Participants talked about budget challenges faced by small towns and areas affected by the economic downturn as reasons for state involvement.

When asked if they generally preferred paying fees or property taxes to fund services, about half of the participants stated no preference. As discussions got more

in-depth, some clear preferences did emerge, including a preference to pay property taxes for services that are accessible to all residents, like streets and parks. Those expressing that view think that property taxes are more fair—services are provided because all residents contribute.

People said that fees should fund services with direct benefit to a specific user—like ski trail passes or building permits. Many, though, expressed concerns about the ability of some residents to pay fees,

and worried that too many fees and/or moving to funding more services through fees would limit access to services and activities for those residents.

Participants had mixed opinions on local sales taxes. If the tax is for a specific project—like a water treatment plant—and is in place for a limited amount of time, they are more willing to pay it. Some people said they support this kind of revenue source for cities if they get

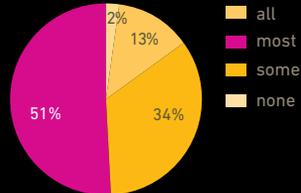
to vote on it. Others do not like the idea of a local sales tax to pay for general city services that are currently paid for through property taxes and other sources. They were concerned about being able to track where the money goes, and about how spending decisions for the money would be made.

**THE VAST MAJORITY OF PARTICIPANTS INDICATED A BELIEF THAT THE STATE GOVERNMENT HAS A FINANCIAL STAKE IN ENSURING BASIC OR NECESSARY CITY SERVICES ARE AVAILABLE IN ALL PARTS OF MINNESOTA.**

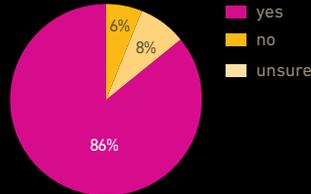
# WHAT DID MINNESOTANS SAY?

Meeting participants answered several questions about paying for city services

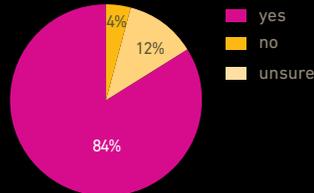
To what extent should people who have a home or business in a community pay for city services provided in that community?



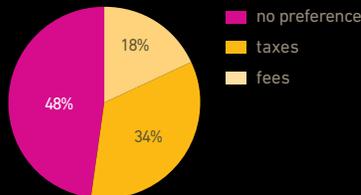
Should people who don't have a home or business in the community pay for some of the costs too?



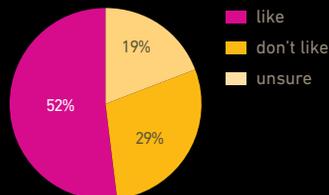
Should the state spend money on making sure there are quality services for all regardless of where people live in the state?



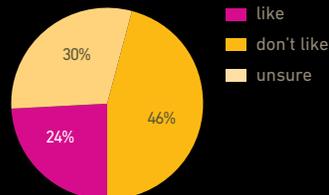
Do you prefer paying fees more than taxes? Taxes more than fees? No preference?



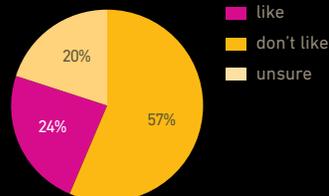
What do you think of a local sales tax only for a specific city resource like a community center, athletic facility, or something else?



What do you think of a local sales tax for general city services, meaning the sales tax dollars could be used to pay for any of the services the city provides?



What do you think of a special fee for regular maintenance of city streets such as for pothole repair, street sweeping, etc.?



## MEETING 3 THEMES

- Roughly half of participants felt that property owners should pay most of the costs of city services because they are the primary users of those services. Participants were quick to recognize the demand on services created by non-residents such as workers, students, visitors, and shoppers.
- The vast majority of participants think that the state government has a financial stake in ensuring that basic or necessary city services are available in all parts of Minnesota.
- Roughly half of participants had no preference for funding city services with fees or property taxes. Upon deeper discussion, many voiced preferences to pay property taxes for services accessible to all residents, like streets.
- Fees were favored as a way to fund services with direct benefit to a specific user, like building permits.
- Participants had mixed opinions regarding support for local sales taxes. A temporary tax for a specific project was more acceptable to many than a tax that could support general city services.

# What values do you want decision makers to keep in mind?



# MEETING 4

## FOCUSED ON THE VALUES AND CONSIDERATIONS MINNESOTANS THINK SHOULD GUIDE TOUGH CHOICES

Throughout the state, Minnesotans offered many ideas and values for city and state decision makers to keep in mind as changes are made to city services, how they're delivered and how they are to be paid for. Generally, participants said that leaders should consider all of the needs of Minnesotans, paying attention to groups of different ages, capabilities, and socio-economic status. Fairness and equity were often mentioned as important to keep in mind. The need for leadership—for decision makers to be willing to make the hard choices—was also important to many participants.

Meeting 4 took place in a way that encouraged participants to share their values and considerations with each other in small groups, by writing them on notecards and posting them on the wall. Then people selected the three ideas from those generated by small group participants that they felt were most important.

Ideas that related to quality of life or the impact of decisions on the community as a whole got the most support. Those ideas often mentioned the word “community” or characteristics such as safety, well-being, and quality of life. Participants also wanted leaders to think about how decisions would affect different types of people.

The next most supported group of ideas related to service levels and availability. Many of these ideas were about protecting “core,” “essential,” “basic,” or “general” services. Those services were often described as services that people cannot do without or do for themselves, or those that private businesses are unlikely or unable to provide. Participants noted that those services, such as water, sewage, fire and police, contribute to the safety and well-being of the community. While some stressed support for these basic services, others urged officials to look at all city services when making tough decisions.

Ideas related to what things cost and how to pay for them rounded out the top three groups of ideas that received the most support. Some of these were about specific ways to bring in revenue. Others stressed that leaders should look at the costs versus benefits when making spending decisions. Participants also encouraged leaders to consider those who use services and those who pay for them—homeowners, business owners, residents and visitors—when making budgeting decisions.

### MEETING 4 THEMES

- Generally, participants indicated that officials should consider the differing needs of Minnesotans. Fairness and equity were often mentioned as important to keep in mind.
- Ideas that related to quality of life or the impact of decisions on the community collectively garnered the most support among participants.
- The next most supported group of ideas related to service levels and availability. Many of these ideas advocated protection of “core,” “essential,” “basic,” or “general” services.
- Ideas related to what things cost and how to pay for them rounded out the top three groups that received the most support from participants.

# Do Minnesotans share your ideas?

IN EACH OF THE CONVERSATIONS AROUND THE STATE, MINNESOTANS OFFERED THEIR IDEAS FOR HOW TO MEET NEW SERVICE NEEDS BROUGHT ABOUT BY THE CHANGING DEMOGRAPHICS OF OUR STATE. THEY HAD IDEAS ABOUT NEW WAYS OF DELIVERING CITY SERVICES IN ORDER TO CUT COSTS. THEY HAD IDEAS ON WHAT THEY COULD DO DIFFERENTLY AS INDIVIDUALS AND AS COMMUNITIES. AND THAT IS JUST THE BEGINNING.

**THE FOLLOWING CATEGORIES SUMMARIZE ALL OF THE IDEAS THAT PARTICIPANTS OFFERED DURING THE COMMUNITY CONVERSATIONS . . .**

**INDIVIDUALS SHOULD STEP UP ▶**

Many people had ideas that focused on residents stepping up to help cities meet the needs of their communities. These ideas included things like starting volunteer programs at the library, the parks, and the community center. At a few conversations, participants were energized by the idea of volunteer fire departments instead of having paid firefighters. Others suggested that seniors could form service exchanges in order to meet a variety of their needs. For example, those who could drive people to their medical appointments would do so in exchange for help with cooking meals. Those who could assist with meal preparation would do so in exchange for help with regular cleaning of their home.

**LOOK FOR PARTNERS ▶**

Participants suggested that city leaders consider partnerships with community groups like Rotary clubs as well as nonprofits to provide services. Many participants thought that adopt-a-park programs could play an important role in maintaining park facilities and park programs. Individuals, service organizations, nonprofits and other groups were identified as potential partners for such programs.

**MAKE SOME SERVICE CHANGES ▶**

People offered a few thoughts on how city officials could change city services in order to reduce costs. These included sending either police or fire or ambulance as first response to an emergency instead of all of them. Another idea was to build narrower streets without curbs and gutters in developing neighborhoods and areas. Having fewer traffic lights was also suggested.

**FIND NEW WAYS TO BRING IN MONEY ▶**

Participants in the conversations suggested that city officials think creatively about other ways to raise money. Some ideas offered up included renting out parts of city facilities, like the library or community center, and charging higher fees for non-residents to use city facilities and programs.

**DO THINGS IN NEW WAYS ▶**

During the conversations, Minnesotans shared ideas about how cities could do what they do now but in new and different ways. For example, some thought cities could contract out for certain services with private businesses. Many people wanted city officials to look at partnering and sharing with other cities, school districts, and counties in order to provide services. There was quite a bit of conversation around sharing staff across city departments, like street maintenance and park maintenance, and also with neighboring cities. Participants also suggested that local leaders think about how to use technology to be more efficient, particularly for permit and other application processes, and consider new ways to reduce overtime costs. Looking for ways to eliminate duplication of services, such as when a county and a city both provide the same kind of service, was also discussed.

# What do you think about what we learned?

COMMUNITY CONVERSATIONS WERE A POSITIVE EXPERIENCE FOR PARTICIPANTS IN MANY WAYS. >>>



Participants' knowledge about city services—what they are and how they are typically funded—increased dramatically after taking part in one of the conversations. They were able to have sincere genuine discussions with neighbors, colleagues, friends, and coworkers. The way information is presented really matters; providing solid, unbiased background information in a way that is accessible and avoids triggering ideology is key to having productive conversations.

Minnesotans were also energized to talk about their communities and what mattered to them. People did not use the meetings as a chance to complain about their city or to criticize local officials. They were able to move beyond rhetoric and ideology to talk about what different policy choices would really mean for them, for others that they know, and even for those they don't know in their own or other communities.

The residents that came to the conversations left the events wanting more—more information, more conversation, more input into future policy choices. Participants were given the option of sharing their name and contact information with their city in order to be considered for future public engagement opportunities and other events specific to the city—almost 300 of the attendees volunteered their information. Many participants thanked the presenters and facilitators for the experience; it was not unusual for folks to opt to stay longer and talk with staff.

The research efforts and experiences of many organizations focused on civic engagement have revealed that expecting people to come to you is not realistic. The Community Conversations model focused on going to where people are already gathering. The meetings piggybacked on existing meetings of existing groups in most cases. That meant that meetings were convened by a trusted, known, familiar individual or group. It was clear that receiving a personal invitation from someone familiar increased the likelihood that people would attend a meeting.

WORKING WITH PARTNERS IS CRITICAL TO ENGAGING THE PUBLIC IN CONVERSATION.

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## MINNESOTANS CARE ABOUT CITIES. >>>

Participants clearly value city services and the role city services plays in their lives. They place importance on a wide range of city services. It was easy for Minnesotans that joined in the conversations to think about the services that they use and rely on. People were also able to quickly identify services that others they know—family, friends, coworkers—use in their own communities. Minnesotans care about what happens in the future to the city services they rely on.



## MINNESOTANS CARE ABOUT MINNESOTANS.

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People participating in the conversations clearly demonstrated that they care about what services others use. The quality of life for people in communities across the state is important to Minnesotans. Reluctance to identify services that communities statewide should cut suggests that people care about services that others use even if they themselves do not use them.

## MINNESOTANS ARE OPEN TO CHANGE. >>>

Throughout the conversations, Minnesotans demonstrated that they are willing to support changes to the ways that services are delivered. People did not seem taken aback by the premise that changes will have to be made and in fact were already expecting their local leaders to be seeking out ways to do just that. New service delivery arrangements that would lessen quality or access to a service (for example, longer response times when calling the fire department) were the only ones that caused concern among participants. Minnesotans also are willing to change their own behavior patterns to accommodate some of the new ways that cities may do things.





“New communication bridges between the city and the citizen need to be built. A city cannot depend on the local newspaper or radio to get information dispersed.”

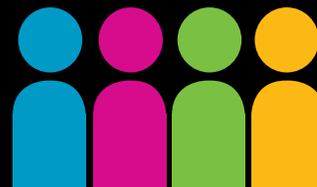
Mayor Mark Voxland  
City of Moorhead

**How will you  
be part of the  
conversation?**

“COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT IS VITAL FOR THE FUTURE OF OUR CITIES AS WE LOOK TO PROVIDING COST-EFFECTIVE SERVICES WITH THE FOCUS ON QUALITY OF LIFE. WE ALL NEED TO WORK TOGETHER TO FIND THE RIGHT DIRECTIONS FOR A PRODUCTIVE FUTURE, AND THAT MAKES EFFECTIVE COMMUNICATION WITH CITIZENS ESSENTIAL.”

Councilmember Janet Anderson  
City of Austin

START TALKING



The time has come for bold action: a complete rethinking of the services cities provide and how to pay for those services. The Community Conversations are simply a first step in that direction. To find better solutions for the people of Minnesota, a broader conversation must continue—in cities of every size, in every corner of the state.

The solutions are not obvious. We need more than just those who are typically involved in public policy to be thinking and talking about cities, services, and funding in order to ensure what we know and love about our communities will be there in the future. We need all Minnesotans to be engaged in conversation about the future of cities.

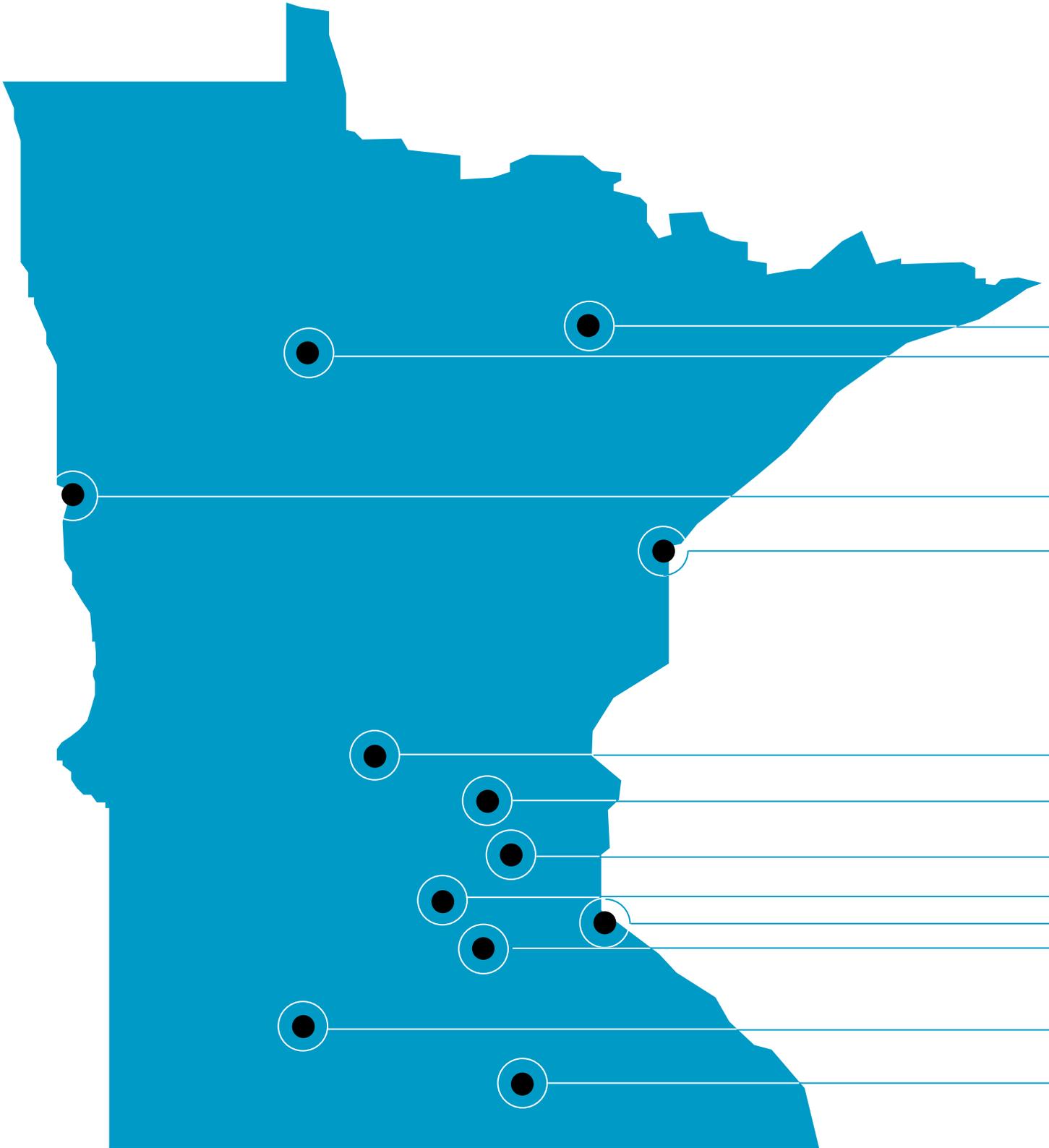
We encourage city residents across this state to start their own conversations and to ask city officials about how to be involved. City leaders around the state are encouraged to engage local partners in order to have conversations in their communities. City residents should participate and share their ideas and opinions with their local officials.

**During the Community Conversations, questions answered by Minnesotans included the ones listed at right. How would you answer these questions? How would your neighbors answer them? Your colleagues? Your family? Your fellow faith community members? Your fellow service club members?**

**For more information and resources visit:**

[www.citiesmatter.org](http://www.citiesmatter.org)  
[www.community-conversations.org](http://www.community-conversations.org)  
[www.youtube.com/outsidetheox](http://www.youtube.com/outsidetheox)  
[www.youtube.com/citiesmatter](http://www.youtube.com/citiesmatter)

- What city services do you and your family use on a consistent basis?
- What city services will you likely be using 10-15 years from now?
- What city services could you and your family use less of or do without?
- What changes are you willing to accept in how a service is delivered?
- Do you prefer paying fees more than taxes? Taxes than fees?
- Do you support some kind of revenue sharing between the state and cities?
- What are the most important considerations for city and state decision makers to keep in mind in making tough decisions about budgets?



**Photo credits:** Photos by Scott Strebler, page 6; page 7, top row and bottom left. Photos by Ann Arbor Miller, page 7 bottom right; page 24. Photos courtesy of Community Action Partnership of Ramsey & Washington Counties, pages 15, 22 and 23.

# Who helped make the conversations happen?

The City of Eveleth  
Americinn Hotel staff  
Rotary Club

The City of Bemidji  
Rotary Club  
Downtown Development Authority  
Northview Senior Apartments

The City of Moorhead  
Chamber of Commerce  
Bluestem Center for the Arts  
Moorhead Public Schools

The City of Duluth  
Minnesota Pipetrades  
Minnesota Council of Nonprofits  
University of Minnesota-Duluth—  
student group

The City of St. Cloud  
League of Women Voters  
McCarthy Center for Public Policy and  
Civic Engagement, College of St. Benedict/  
St. John's University

The City of St. Paul  
Counties Community Action Partnership  
Unity Unitarian Church  
Neighborhood House  
St Paul Second Shift Youth Commission

The City of Circle Pines  
St. Mark's Lutheran  
Northern Technologies  
Rotary Club

The City of Eden Prairie  
Rotary Club  
Eden Prairie Senior Center  
Eden Prairie Community Center

The City of Hastings  
United Way of Hastings  
Hastings Area Chamber of Commerce  
Hastings Ministerial Association

The City of Northfield  
Carleton College  
Growing Up Healthy  
Village on the Cannon Homeowners Association  
Chamber of Commerce

The City of Austin  
Mower County Senior Center  
Riverland Community College  
Chamber of Commerce  
KSMQ Public TV

The City of St. James  
Prairie View Assisted Living and Senior Apartments  
Rotary Club  
Adult Literacy Program



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of our state is  
what we make of it.

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[INCOMMONS.org](http://INCOMMONS.org)