

# Long-Range Planning Issue Brief

## Planning Assistance for Small Communities



Minnesota has a long tradition of investing in communities and building local leadership, ensuring residents' voices shape the state's future. Across the state, people engage in civic life—serving in elected roles and on boards and commissions, speaking at public meetings, and supporting community advocacy. Their lived experience brings essential knowledge to local planning, reflecting the values, diversity, histories, and aspirations of their towns.

Yet many small communities lack the staff and resources to fully realize their visions and respond to emerging challenges, highlighting the need for more support—including funding, technical expertise, and a pipeline of trained rural planners. By building local capacity, communities can create comprehensive, forward-thinking plans; address evolving issues like climate resilience and an aging workforce; and advance priorities that are rooted in community voice. **With strengthened capacity and resources, small communities can capture new opportunities and funding streams available at the state and federal level while ensuring that statewide policies and mandates align with their local needs and priorities.**

## Where Are We Now?

Small communities often face planning and implementation challenges due to limited leadership capacity, an aging workforce, and competing budget priorities. These shortages hinder their ability to develop infrastructure, secure funding, and respond to climate resilience and economic shifts. Recruitment and turnover issues are particularly acute, preventing effective long-term planning. Leadership gaps leave communities reacting to disasters instead of proactively preparing for issues like aging infrastructure and climate change.<sup>1</sup>

Although neighborhood groups, community organizations, and foundations provide valuable support for local planning, staffing remains a major barrier. Small communities struggle to attract planners and civic leaders, often due to lower salaries and limited housing options. Counties, which play a key role in regional planning and implementing state policies, also face staffing strains amid growing demands across Greater Minnesota.

State mandates can force counties to delay other projects or raise taxes to address these staffing shortfalls. Strengthening the local public sector workforce and leadership pipeline is critical to the vitality and resilience of Minnesota's small communities.

## By the Numbers

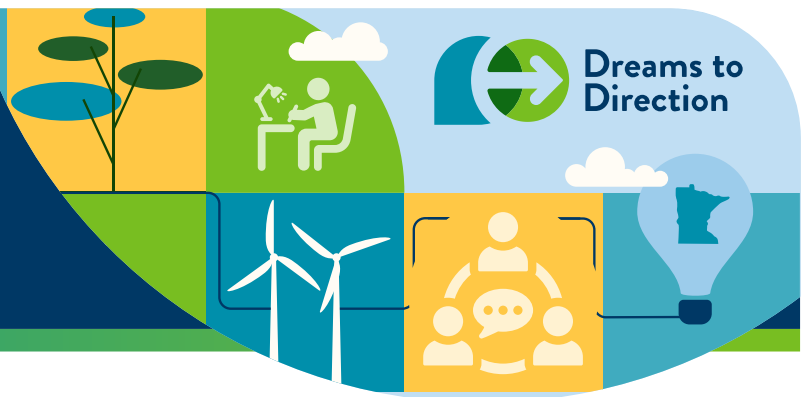
Rural-Urban Continuum Code	Leadership Demands
1 (most urban)	1 in 950
2	1 in 200
3	1 in 195
4	1 in 180
5	1 in 216
6	1 in 91
7	1 in 71
8	1 in 36
9 (most rural)	1 in 37

Source: [University of Minnesota Extension](#)

Ben Winchester from the University of Minnesota Extension describes a “leadership gap,” noting that the demand for leaders in rural areas often outpaces supply.<sup>2</sup>

The demand for government leadership in Minnesota varies widely by county. In the state's most urban counties, only 1 in 950 residents over age 18 must serve in a leadership role. In contrast, in the most rural counties, that demand rises sharply to 1 in 37 residents.<sup>3</sup>

# Planning Assistance for Small Communities



## What Could Progress Look Like?

Planning and implementation assistance for small communities could focus on building a coordinated system that addresses gaps in local planning capacity and workforce development. Small communities often struggle with limited operational budgets, competition for staff, and balancing resource preservation with local needs. Improving this landscape involves investing in leadership development, building technical assistance pathways, and expanding public sector workforce pipelines. A key area for improvement is rural workforce and leadership development. Many planning education programs focus on urban settings, leaving rural communities underserved due to gaps in experience and knowledge about rural issues and professional opportunities. Bridging this gap calls for collaboration among the State, universities, colleges, Minnesota Initiative Foundations, and rural research groups to expand the rural planning workforce pipeline and strengthen civic leadership and engagement. Programs like the Blandin Community Leadership Program and University of Minnesota Extension initiatives are already working to bridge these divides by cultivating local leaders. <sup>4,5</sup>

Technical assistance is also critical. Small communities need help developing and implementing plans, especially in navigating complex state mandates. Cross-sector collaboration involving state agencies, regional planners, and local leaders can pool expertise and resources to better serve these communities. Building on successful models like the University of Minnesota's Empowering Small Minnesota Communities (ESMC) program which provides technical support for resilient infrastructure projects –creating a community of practice to share best practices and innovative tools will foster continuous learning and partnership.<sup>6</sup> By investing in civic leadership, growing a pipeline of rural planners, and aligning technical assistance with local needs, Minnesota can nurture vibrant, resilient communities that honor their unique assets and values. This approach ensures the continued role of small communities as vital contributors to the state's economic, environmental, and cultural fabric.

## How Can Long-Range Planning Help?

The Long-Range Planning (LRP) team can help small communities advocate for their priorities, develop actionable plans, and implement them effectively. By providing tools and training, convening community leaders and public officials, analyzing data, and identifying state policy barriers, the team can support communities in advancing their goals. Establishing a platform to engage state partners ensures that community needs and solutions are clearly communicated. Ultimately, this support strengthens small communities' competitiveness for grants and funding opportunities.

Efforts to build local planning capacity and partnerships can identify planning gaps and advocate for investments in leadership development and training programs. This work creates a pipeline of skilled local planners and civic leaders who can champion equitable and sustainable planning. LRP can convene local governments, Tribal Nation representatives and partners to create a collaborative space to share best practices, innovative tools, and facilitate cross-sector partnerships that support community-led visions. LRP can also integrate technical assistance pathways into State-required plans and policies, ensuring small towns receive tailored support.

[mn.gov/planning](https://mn.gov/planning)

## Get Involved

Join us in shaping Minnesota's future! If you have questions or want to participate, contact the Long-range Planning team at [planning.mmb@state.mn.us](mailto:planning.mmb@state.mn.us).