THE MINNESOTA EQUITY BLUEPRINT:
INTEGRATING EQUITY AND SUSTAINABILITY INTO STRATEGIES FOR ECONOMIC AND COMMUNITY VITALITY ACROSS THE STATE

How do we achieve a more equitable prosperity and a more sustainable environment for all Minnesotans in every region of the state – Rural & Urban Together?

That essential and futuristic question spurred two of Minnesota’s pre-eminent “Think & Do” tanks: Growth & Justice and OneMN.org, to create the Thriving by Design Network (TBDN). Since early 2018, this unique, growing network of people (and organizations) has been working to leverage collective expertise and collect specific ideas for local community action as well as statewide public policy options. All of the ideas are aimed at assuring a vibrant and growing economy, with equal access to opportunity in a state without disparities across race or region, while also accelerating climate action and reversing related forms of environmental degradation.

The primary goal of this work has been to co-create the “Minnesota Equity Blueprint,” a comprehensive, non-partisan, long-term plan for shared prosperity in a healthier environment. The Blueprint is designed to reflect the interconnectedness of our state’s people and regions, as well as interconnectedness between the disparities and other challenges that cloud our future. We know that change can be hard and that obstacles to progress lie in our way. It may easily take a decade or more for this vision of a more prosperous, inclusive, equitable, and environmentally sustainable Minnesota to reach fruition.

The Minnesota Equity Blueprint has five chapters: Human Capital, Economic Development, Infrastructure, Climate Resilience and Natural Resources, and Democracy and Fiscal Sustainability. As a living document, each chapter is added as it is completed or updated. The entire Blueprint focusses on principles and solutions which fit a Triple Bottom Line framework, meaning that actions taken are good for people, good for the planet and good for profit. Although the chapters are presented sequentially, TBDN stakeholders recognize the deep interconnections between both the challenges and solutions proposed. For instance, improvements in education were identified as likely to also result in improvements in economic development and democratic participation.

“I want to better understand - How do we move beyond left versus right?”

— Stakeholder at Upper Sioux Community/Granite Falls Statewide Convening
Thriving by Design Network (TBDN)

The Thriving by Design Network (TBDN), is a unique statewide organization of residents, activists, experts, and partnering organizations. Since 2018, TBDN leadership has led a process of intensive dialogue, aspirational thinking, and documenting the wisdom of Minnesotans who are striving in myriad ways to lead their own communities toward the vision of the Minnesota Equity Blueprint, their Blueprint. TBDN’s “open collaboration” style of issue identification and analysis combines: 1) grassroots community input with 2) briefings developed by front-line experts, and 3) policy analysts’ traditional review of secondary sources and original data analysis.

How did TBDN do this? TBDN’s approach relies on community involvement which results in community-driven work. Its leadership hosted two state-wide gatherings (attended by about 200 Minnesotans), and about 15 community events across the state (with about 100 participants) and tapped the expertise of about 50 individuals with deep applied knowledge as writers, reviewers, map makers and other contributors. This last group of “experts from the trenches” developed 22 briefings on issues that have informed the Blueprint. These convenings and meetings are continuing as the Blueprint continues to evolve over time.

TBDN also has conducted surveys and collected written feedback during, between and after various gatherings, analyzed data obtained from sources at the federal and state levels, and well examined recent reports from non-governmental sources.

Resources and experts were, and will continue to be, selected based on constructive expertise, not ideology. TBDN is a non-partisan entity and is committed to evidence-tested policy, as well as outcomes that are good for business, good for people and good for the environment.

Please see the Acknowledgements Section at the end of this document to learn more about the individual and organizational participants who make up the Thriving by Design Network.

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"At the Hinckley Statewide Convening, I learned about the priorities for people from around the state; what issues resonated among the whole group as important,"
— Participant at Hinckley Statewide Convening

"I liked the good energy that fueled the process."
— Participant at Hinckley Statewide Convening

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1 “Open Collaboration” refers to a system of development powered by goal-oriented and semi-organized volunteers who work together to create a valuable product or service, which is then made available to others, regardless of whether they were contributors.

2 Examples of governmental sources include the U.S. Census Bureau, the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD), the Minnesota Department of Employment and Economic Development (DEED), the Minnesota State Demographer’s office, and Minnesota Counties.

3 Examples of NGO sources include the Minnesota Association of Development Organizations, the Minnesota League of Cities, the Minnesota Budget Project, and the American Enterprise Institute and the Brookings Institution.
A Shared Vision for a Better Minnesota Future

TBDN stakeholders envision a more evenly prosperous and environmentally clean Minnesota where every resident has equitable access to the opportunity to reach their potential and make their unique contribution. Today, underneath a superficial profile of a strong economy, Minnesota faces three corrosive and interrelated weaknesses: racial disparities, regional disparities, and environmental degradation. Combined with growing income inequality overall, these unjust and negative forces threaten Minnesota's ability to maintain and strengthen its reputation for both economic vitality and high quality of life for all.

Three Key Themes

TBDN participants emphasized throughout the process that equity and climate action have become existential imperatives, no longer secondary concerns. Demographic shifts, economic forces and climate change have combined to create pragmatic urgency for identifying the key collective actions that lead to success, to a Minnesota that benefits all Minnesotans.

1. Demographic Diversity and Inequity

Understanding the state's demographic past and projected future is essential in designing a thriving Minnesota. Overwhelming evidence shows that historic structures have perpetuated bias and discrimination. Minnesotans of color, women, and people with various disabilities have been denied full and equal access to opportunity, resulting in highly disparate rates of educational attainment, employment, health outcomes, incarceration, and homelessness. Like other Minnesotans, TBDN stakeholders agree that disparate access to personal and economic opportunity has always been morally wrong, costly to taxpayers, and has been a significant limiting factor on the state's economy.

Over the last 50 years, Minnesotans of color have grown from 2 to 20 percent of the state's total population. Students of color are the majority of children in school districts across urban and rural Minnesota. Between 2014 and 2016, Minnesota's crucial growth in labor force was almost entirely dependent on communities of color and immigrants. Contrary to commonly held beliefs about rural communities, diversity (including people of color, immigrants and low-income households) is rapidly growing in Greater Minnesota.

Exhibit 1 shows that people of color are substantial parts of the community in counties across the state. Cross-shaded counties are those with highest percentage gains in racial diversity from 2012-2017. All 10
counties with the highest percentage gains are in Greater Minnesota, tending to be in southwestern and central Minnesota.

Exhibit 1: People of color are substantial parts of the community in counties across the state, with the most rapid growth outside the Twin Cities.

Minnesota's future prosperity depends on the success of people of color, who live across urban, suburban, small town and rural Minnesota. The state’s economic and workforce growth is, and will continue to be, dependent on communities of color and immigrant communities.
2. Geographic Diversity and Inequity

Minnesota has a history of public-private, innovative statewide collaboration to ensure the vitality of all its remarkable regions and biomes – from big cities and sprawling suburbs, to hardwood savannas, northern forests, prairies and farmlands. Ever since the Progressive Era, the New Deal, and up through the creation of the Greater Minnesota Corporation and regional Initiative Foundations in the 1980s, Minnesotans have appreciated the economic and cultural interdependence between rural and urban regions of the state. Examples of public-private enterprise, in this regard, include the University of Minnesota’s development of the taconite process, which extended the viability of mining on the Iron Range for many decades, and the growth of the state’s bio-medical complex from the Mayo Clinic’s pioneering model in southeastern Minnesota.

Like people in many other states, Minnesotans are facing new challenges due to a variety of international and national forces that have diminished prosperity in rural areas and the urban core, while creating homogenous islands of affluence in the urban and suburban areas. Meanwhile, on the national front, the structures facilitating income mobility are corroded, especially for rural and urban regions. Increasing income inequality (where the benefits of economic growth are disproportionately claimed by a few) is also a significant shared barrier to opportunity.

Over the last couple of generations, advances in agricultural technology and corporate consolidation of agricultural production have resulted in a population shift from rural to urban and suburban areas and increasing income inequality between affluent suburban/exurban areas and small towns and inner-city neighborhoods. State policymakers have been under-responsive to the economic needs and potential of areas outside the cities by failing to adequately invest in human capital development and needed business infrastructure (such as roads, childcare, and affordable housing) outside the Twin Cities 7-County Metro area. Like the impact of racial disparities, regional disparities in public investment have constrained the entire state’s economic engine.

3. Climate Action and Natural Resource Protection

Deeply interconnected to racial and regional inequality are the disparate impacts of climate change and damage to our soil and water. Minnesota’s infrastructure, land, biodiversity, and weather are buffeted by climate change, decaying infrastructure and failure to stay current with technological advancements.

Consumer, agricultural, industrial, and infrastructure models have grown out of sync with conserving, protecting, and sustaining Minnesota’s natural resources. A growing chorus of governmental, business, academic, advocacy, for-profits and non-profit leaders affirm that climate action and environmental concerns must be integrated with social and economic equity to ensure a thriving, inclusive, and sustainable economy for all Minnesotans well into the future. Urgent and consequential changes are required to reduce the threats associated with human-generated climate change, which is now overwhelmingly supported by scientific evidence.5

Image by Danny Smith, Danny Photography

5 Upward income mobility is observed when children growing up in low income homes become adults earning substantially higher incomes.

“Why do urban people think they know rural people, and rural people think they know urban people, and yet neither feels understood by the other?”
— Participant at Upper Sioux Community/Granite Falls Statewide Convening
Minnesotans must individually and collectively play an active role in accelerating their transition away from fossil fuels and other harmful activities which degrade the quality of our air, soil and waters, towards more environmentally resilient (and job creating) forms of energy and infrastructure.

Environmentalists and a growing chorus of business leaders agree Minnesota must become more energy independent, environmentally sustainable, and must leverage advanced technologies and practices as we update the state’s outdated and dangerous infrastructure. All of this will benefit both climate resilience and a more sustainable economic model.

What Complicates This Work?

1. **Interdependency and interrelatedness are everywhere**

   TBDN stakeholders consistently emphasized that interdependency and interconnectedness characterize Minnesota’s problems and solutions. For instance, the connections between education (an element of the Human Capital section of the Equity Blueprint) and affordable housing (an element of the Infrastructure section of the Blueprint) are significant. Likewise, interdependence between transportation (an element of the Infrastructure section) and business development (an element of Economic Development section) are critical.

   As a result, any efforts to address these challenges must also be multi-faceted and coordinated. No problem identified exists in a vacuum. And none of the policy goals or solutions identified would, if enacted alone and in isolation, result in stable permanent improvements in equity or sustainability.

2. **Success requires coordination and investment**

   There are many levels of government and local, regional and national non-governmental organizations (NGOs) at work on the issues raised by the TBDN stakeholders. Often these agencies and NGOs focus primarily on one or two of the many interrelated issues. Working in silos is both less expensive and less impactful. Tackling complexity is difficult and often frustrating, but it results in better outcomes and longer-term, more sustainable solutions.

   One example of a cross-sector initiative which has shown impact is Heading Home Minnesota, the state’s Interagency Council on Homelessness which is made of all 11 State agencies (including Education, Corrections and Human Services), the Metropolitan Council and the Governor’s Office. The Council also works closely with non-profits and service deliverers.

   In conjunction with national efforts, the Council identified veterans experiencing homelessness as a target population. By marshalling and coordinating national, state and regional resources to identify vets and get them stably housed, the result has been a considerably reduced presence of veterans among Minnesotans experiencing homelessness.

   **TBDN’s Minnesota Equity Blueprint** emphasizes policies and community practices that work together to support increased rates of upward income mobility and more observable equity in that trajectory. For instance,

   “I think we can go further than just being resilient—what can we do to curb, cut down our carbon emissions? How can we connect economy to paving the way and cutting our emissions?”

   — Participant at Norway House Community Conversation
in 2017 one in five Minnesota families headed by single mothers lived in poverty. Family structure matters and policy changes that permit more of Minnesota’s children to live in two-parent or co-parenting homes will support greater income mobility. TBDN’s recommended changes to existing policies related to housing, safety net benefits, criminal justice, and employment would reduce barriers to being raised by two parents, increasing the ability of both parents to participate in the lives of their children.

In the pages that follow, TBDN hopes readers will find a range of ways to approach the many and interrelated challenges facing our state. Some solutions require legislative action; others can be accomplished by communities on their own initiative. All solutions require everyone to work together, with intention, with a sense of common humanity, a shared vision, and a common purpose. Please feel free to contact TBDN with your questions and ideas by visiting www.thrivingbydesignmn.org.

Endnotes


