



# Rewriting the Rural Narrative: Living in the Middle of Everywhere

*Speak softly and carry statistics*

Benjamin Winchester  
Rural Sociologist  
Extension Department of Community Development

# THE NARRATIVE

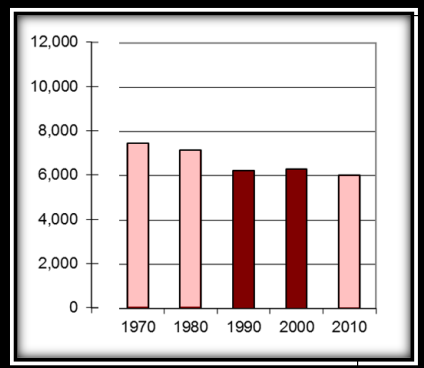


- There's a brain drain
- **We live in the middle of nowhere**
- We are a sleepy town
- Everyone knows one another
- Nobody locks their doors
- The lucky few escape

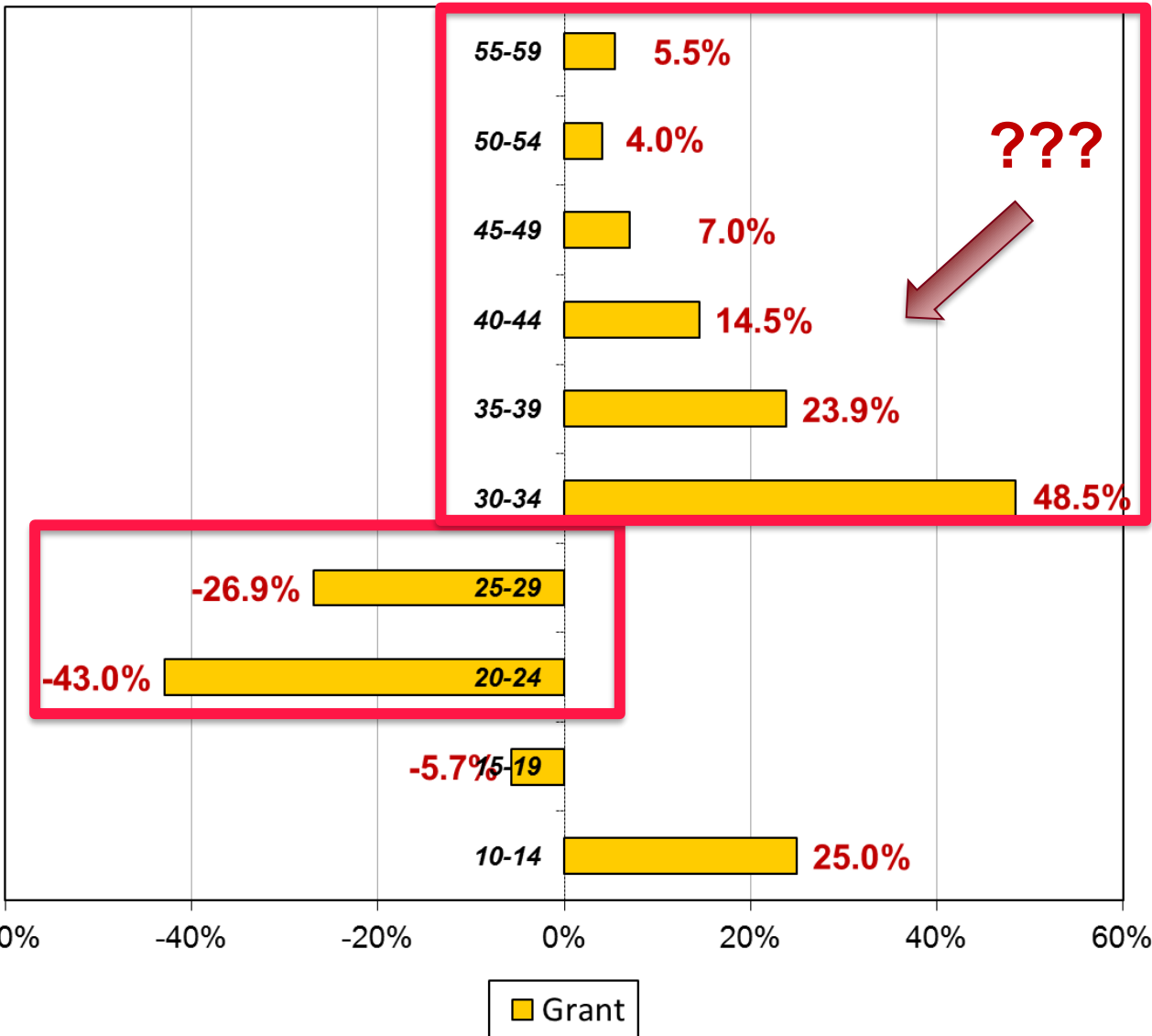
*Rumors of my death have been greatly exaggerated. –Mark Twain*



Rural is **changing**,  
not dying.



1990-2000, Percent Cohort Change



Brain Drain →



# UNIVERSITY OF MINNESOTA EXTENSION

**Nebraska Buffalo Commons  
Research 2012**

**Workforce Movers  
University of Minnesota,  
2004, 2012, 2019**



# MONTANA STATE UNIVERSITY

## EXTENSION



MONTANA  
COMMUNITY  
FOUNDATION



**Montana Movers Study, 2021**



# Newcomers: Why?

Simpler pace of life



Safety and Security



Low Housing Cost



# Newcomers: Who?



	MN 2019		MT 2021
Moved primarily for a job	41%		35%
Lived in the community before	25%		34%*
Have children in household	47%		39%
Household income >\$50k	75%		78%

**\* Social housing supply?**

Source: 2020 University of Minnesota Extension Center for Community Vitality. Rural workforce movers study. Funded by the U. S. Department of Agriculture.

2021 Montana State University Extension Movers Study.

# The Rural Brain Gain

They choose rural age

**30-49**

And also when they are 50-64  
(since the 1970s)

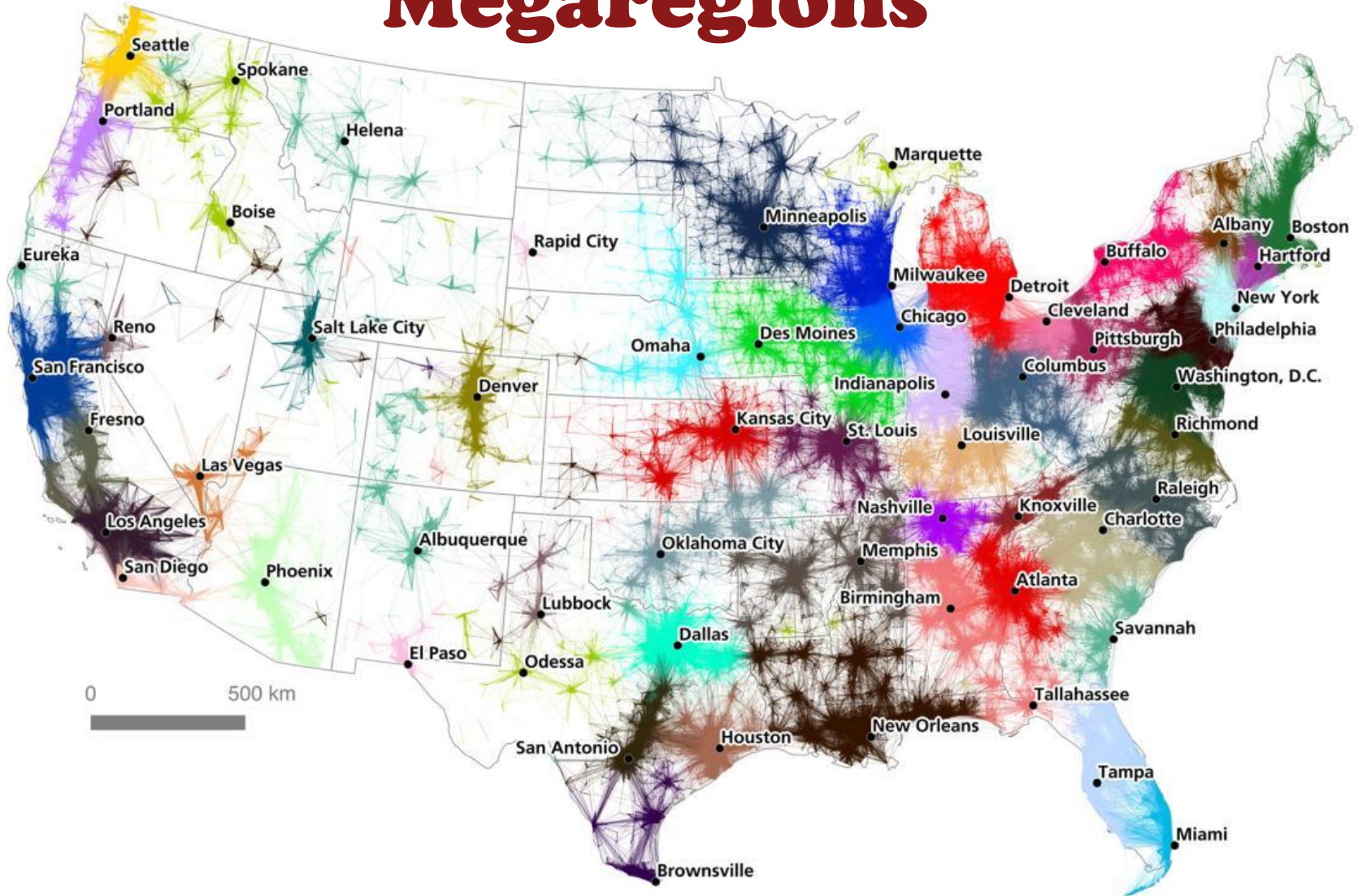


**Middle of Everywhere**

**Jobs and the Economy**



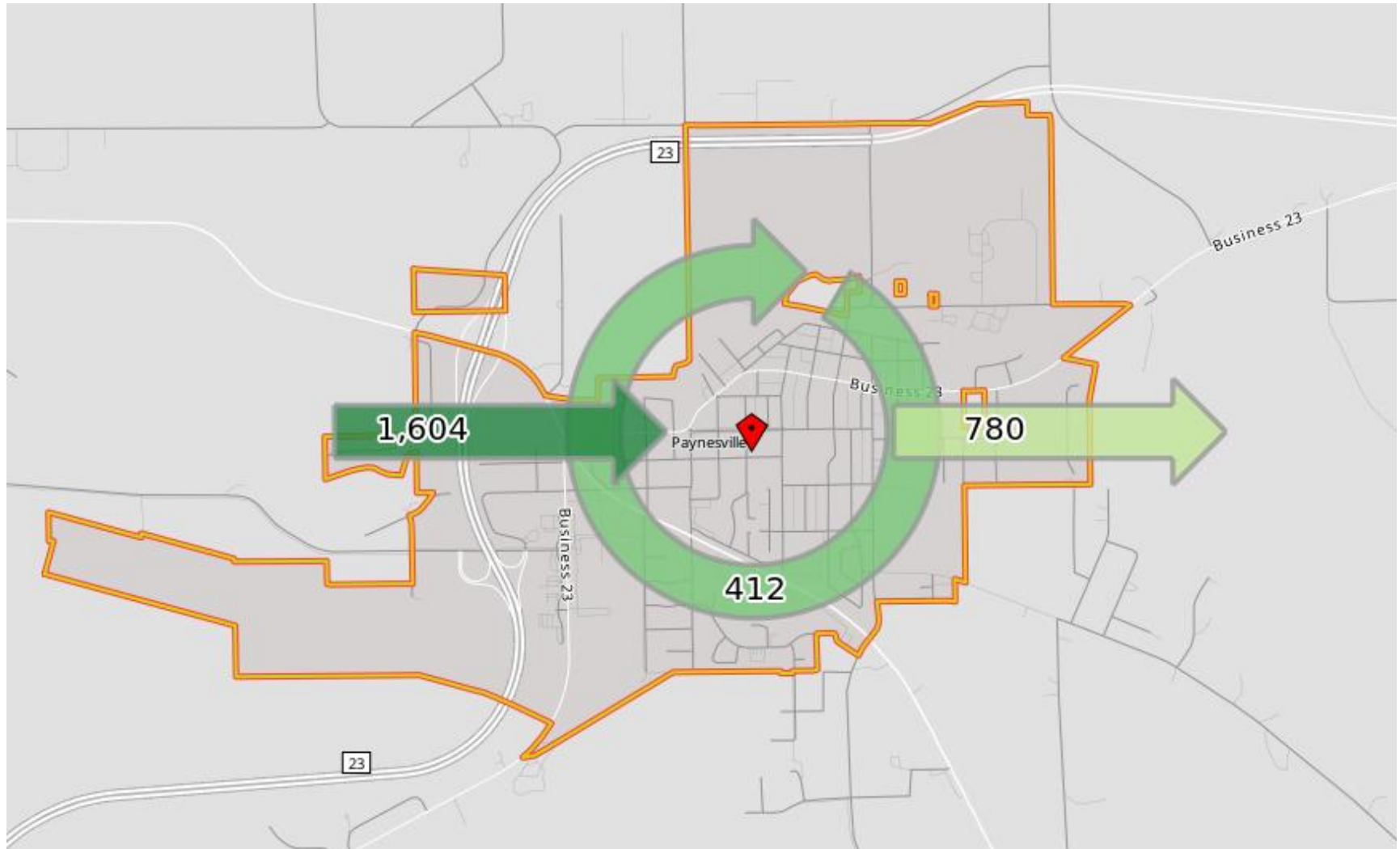
# Megaregions



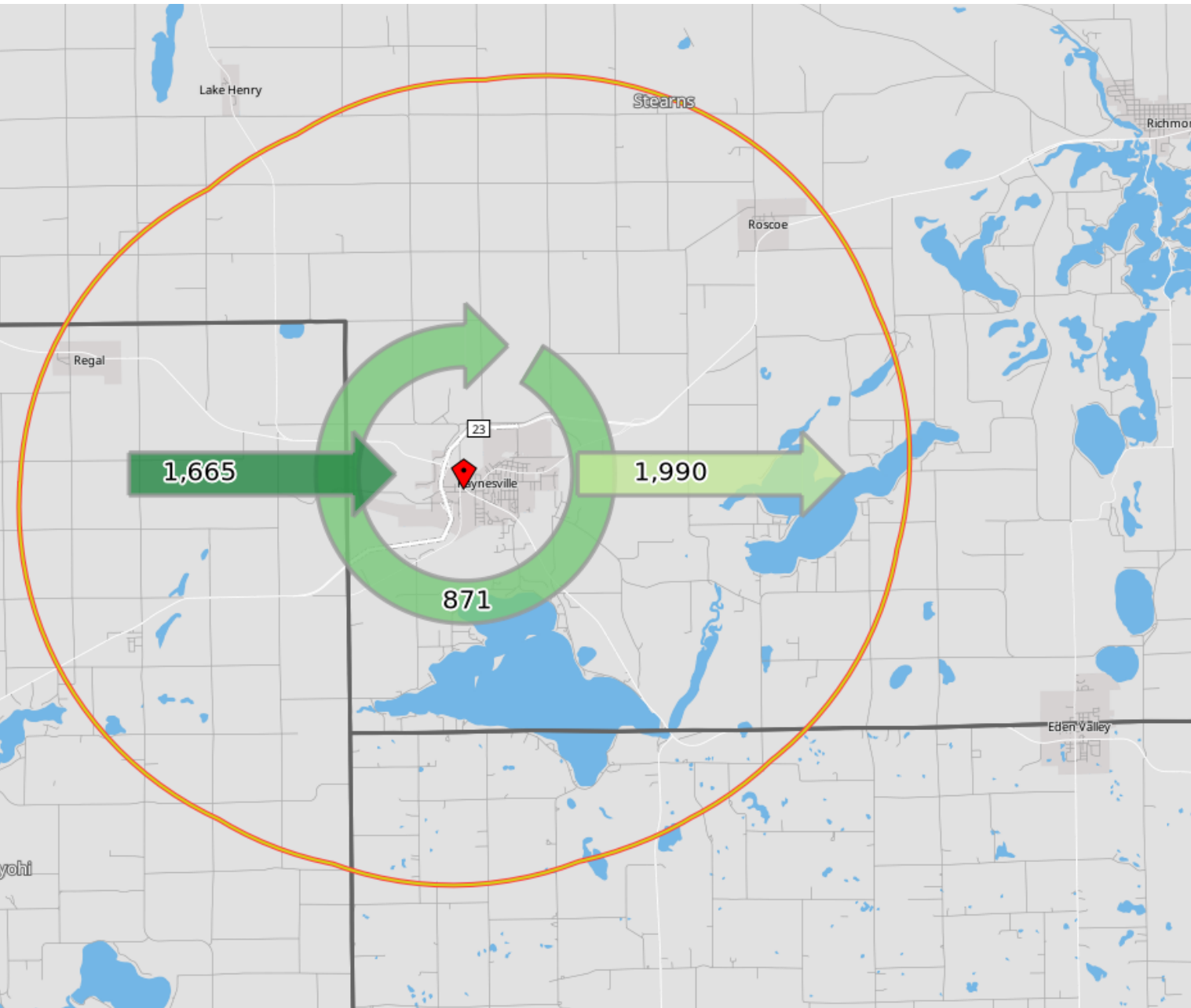
<http://discovery.dartmouth.edu/megaregions/>



**Paynesville City (2,016 employed)  
35% Employed and Living in city**



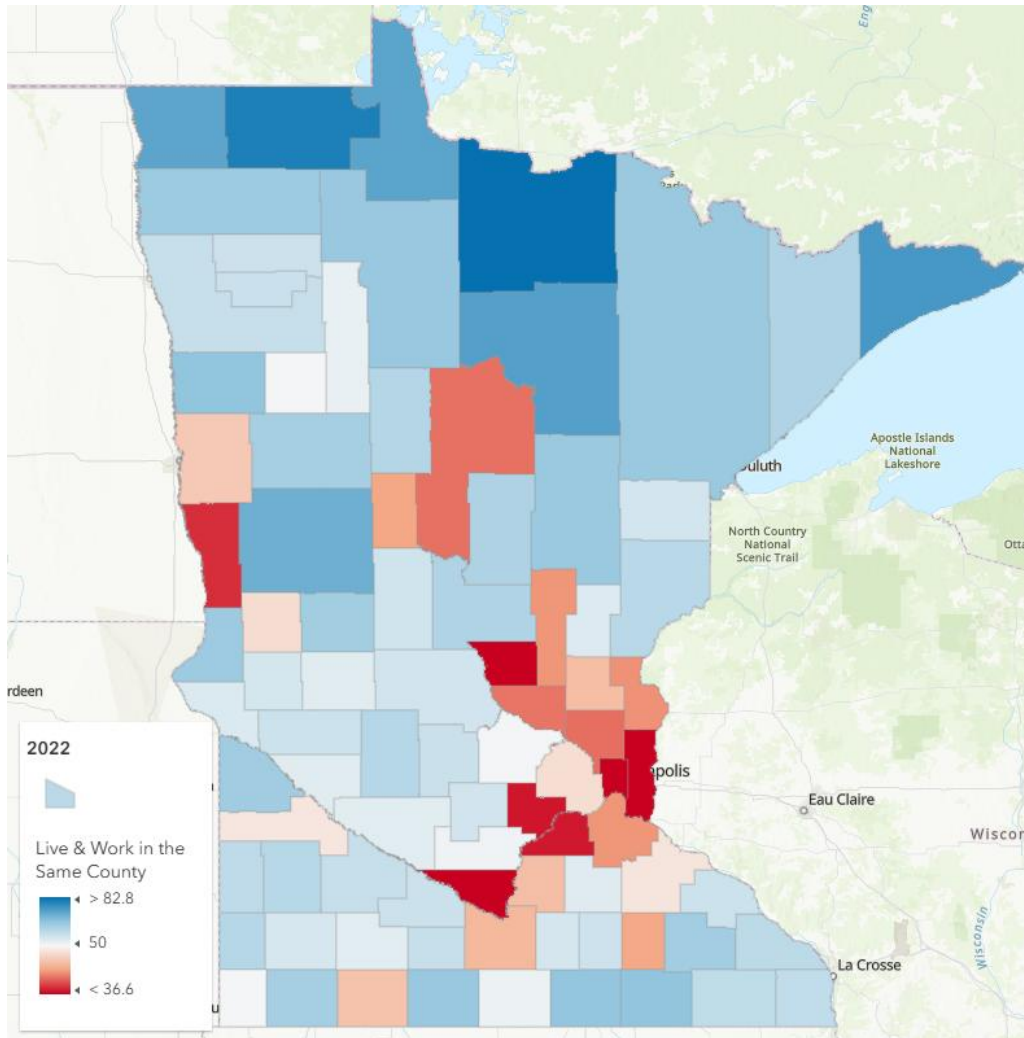
# Paynesville Area (5 mi radius) 30% Employed and Living in area



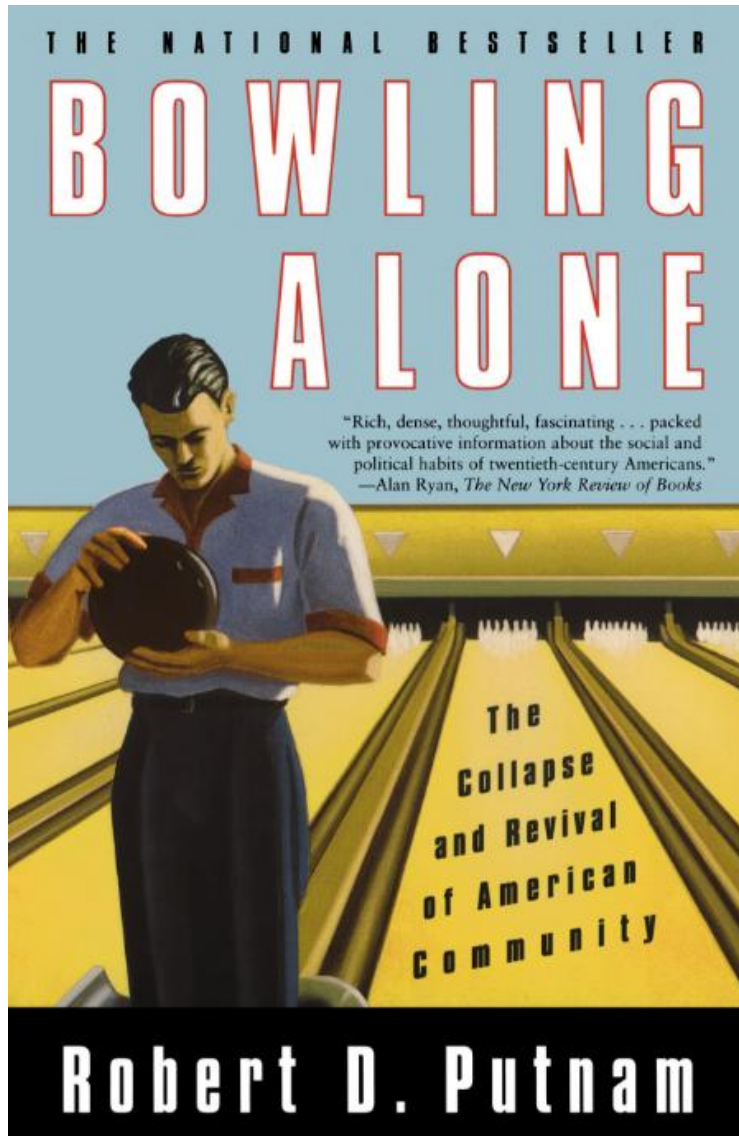


Kathryn Leys

Extension Educator, Community Economics  
Regional Office Marshall



***Decoupling of Home and Work, 2022:  
Across Minnesota, 52% work OUTSIDE their home county.***



# Middle of Everywhere

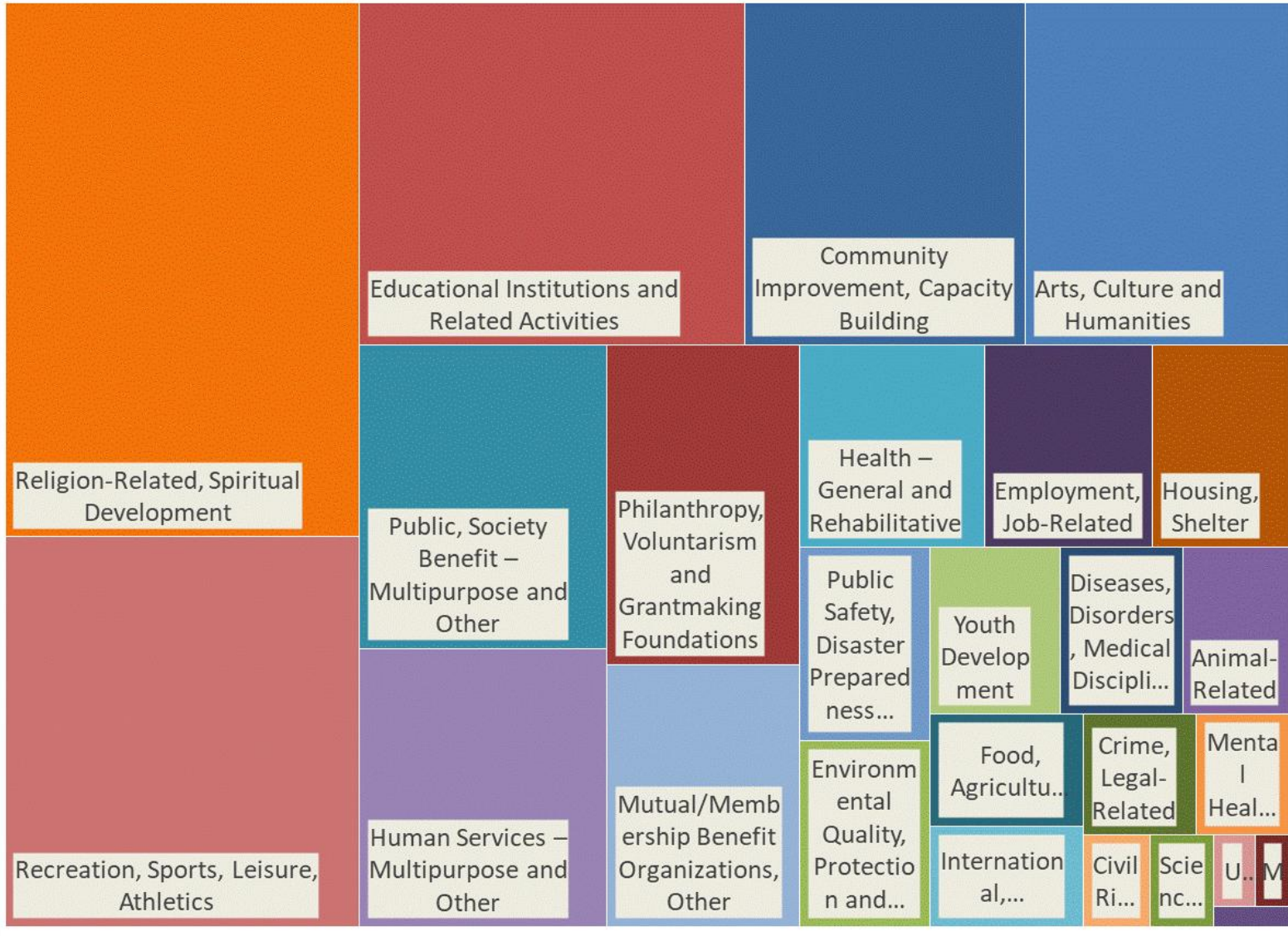
# Social Life



# Minnesota

Nonprofit NTEE composition

2020

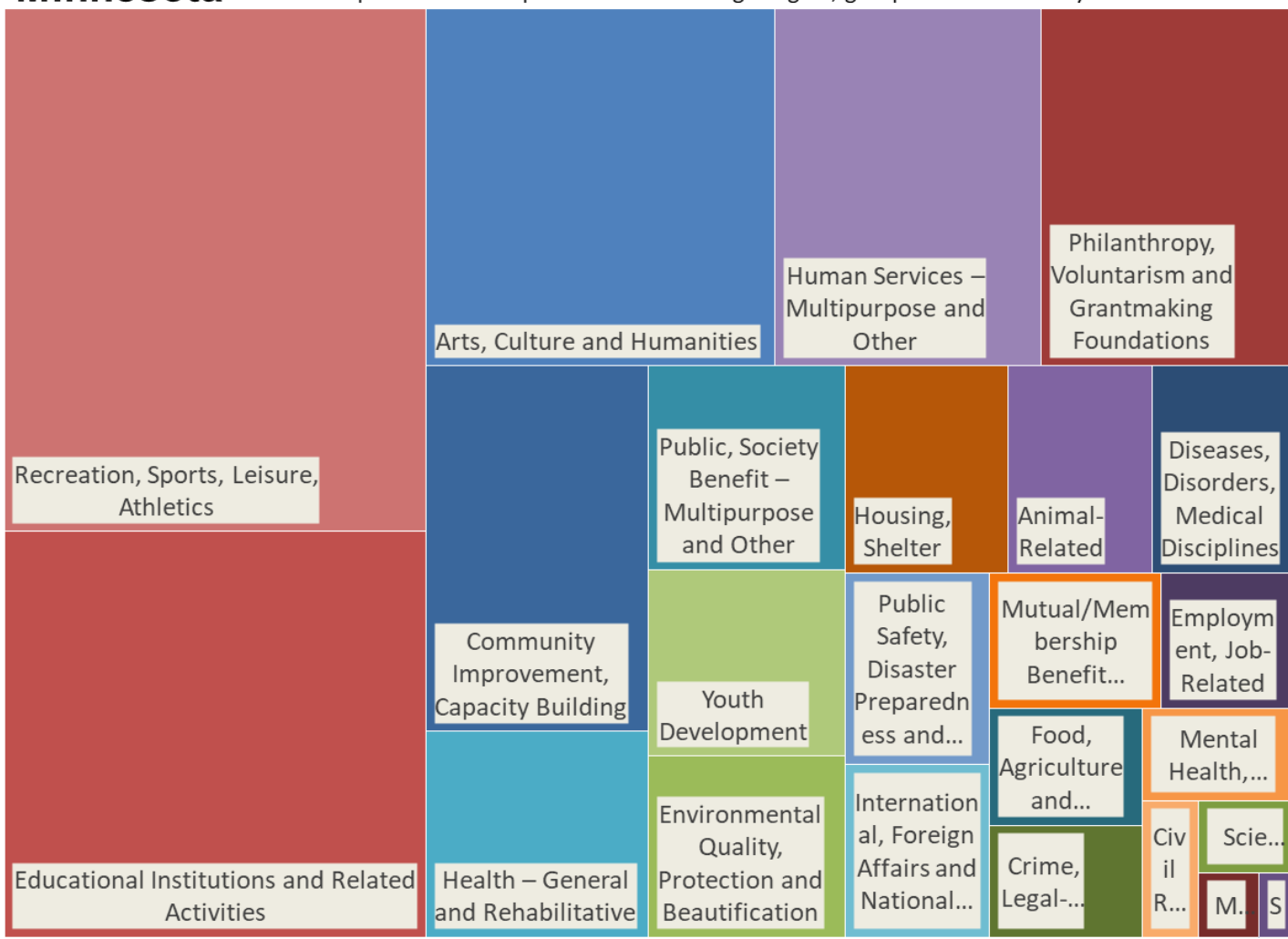


# 17,753 of the 31,603 (56%) nonprofits were formed in the past 30 years

## Legacy Amendment is visible

### Minnesota

2020 Nonprofit NTEE composition not including Religion, groups formed last 30 years



The Legacy Amendment increases the state sales tax by three-eighths of one percent beginning on July 1, 2009 and continuing until 2034. The additional sales tax revenue is distributed into four funds as follows: 33 percent to the clean water fund; 33 percent to the outdoor heritage fund; 19.75 percent to the arts and cultural heritage fund; and 14.25 percent to the parks and trails fund.

# *SHIFT in Engagement*



**Narrow geography  
Broad focus**

**Broad geography  
Narrow focus**



**We live in a REGIONAL  
COMMUNITY.**



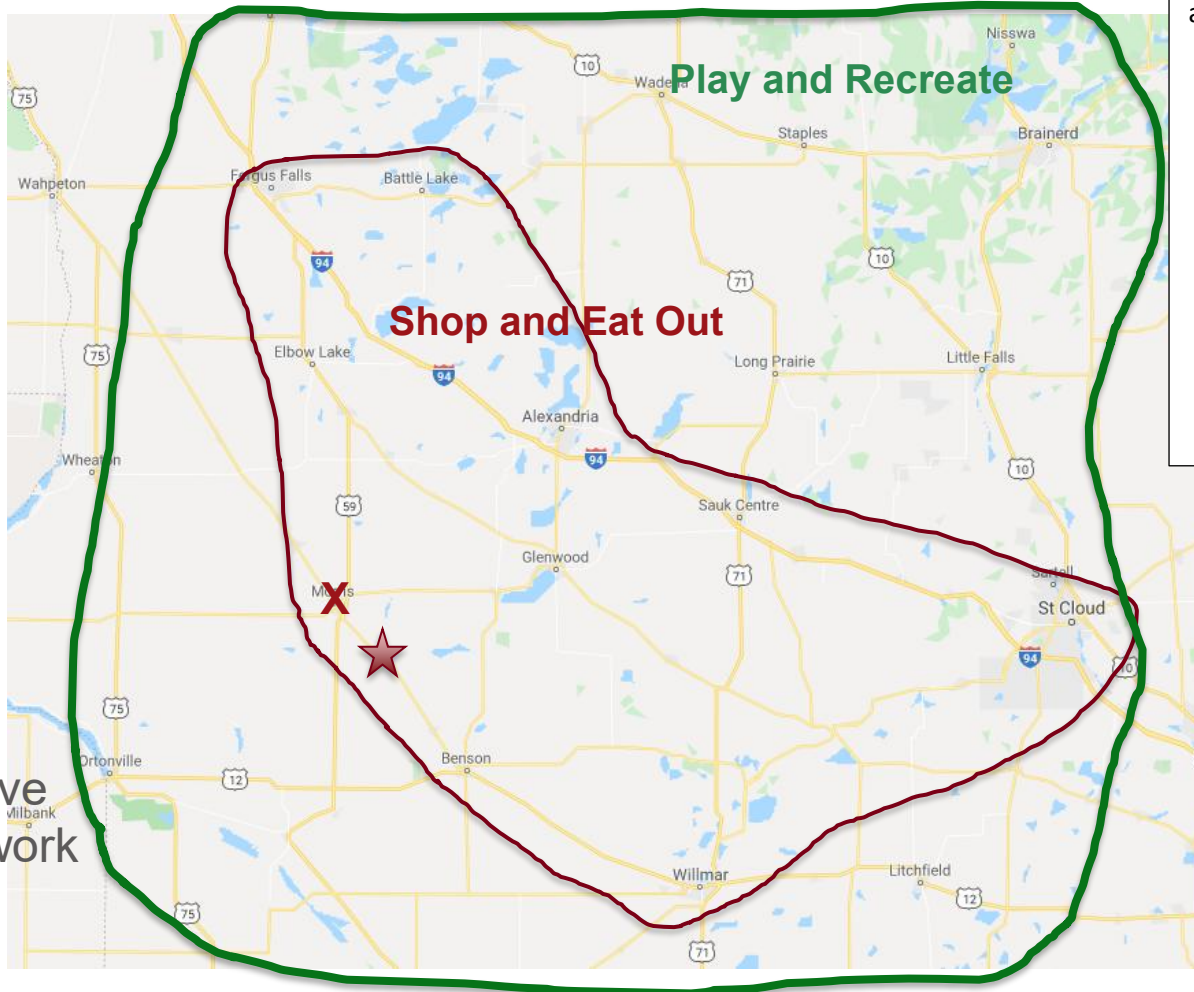
**in the Middle of Everywhere**



# The Middle of Everywhere Exercise

Age: \_\_\_\_\_'s

List 3-5 of your favorite assets in your region:



★ where you live  
X where you work

- Circle around:
1. Shop / eat out
  2. Play / recreate

# Latest Economic Development Tool

*Cell phones are nearly ubiquitous.*



DeeDee LeMier  
Extension Educator  
Community Economics

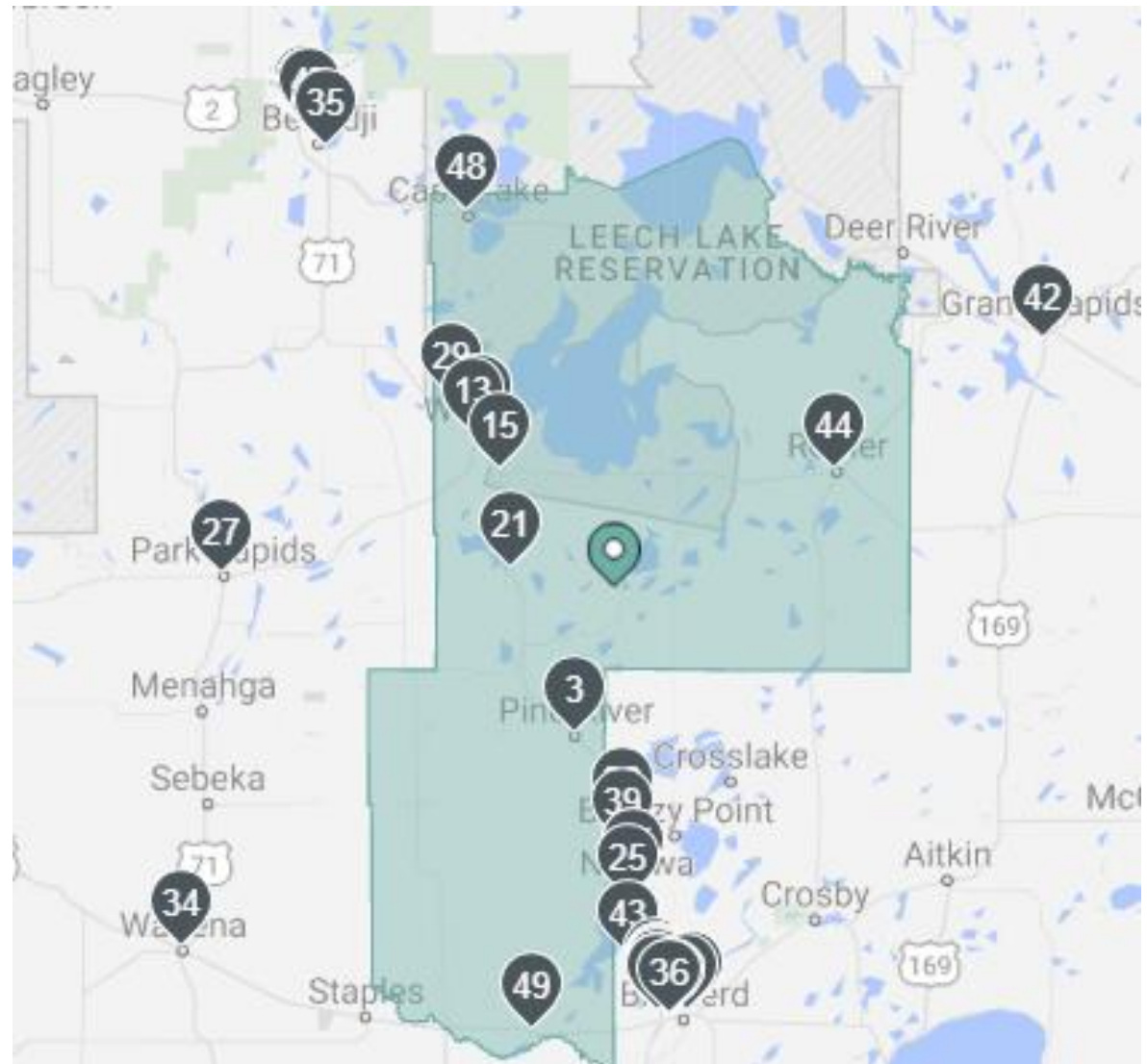


*Mobile Data*



## Where do Cass County residents go out to eat?

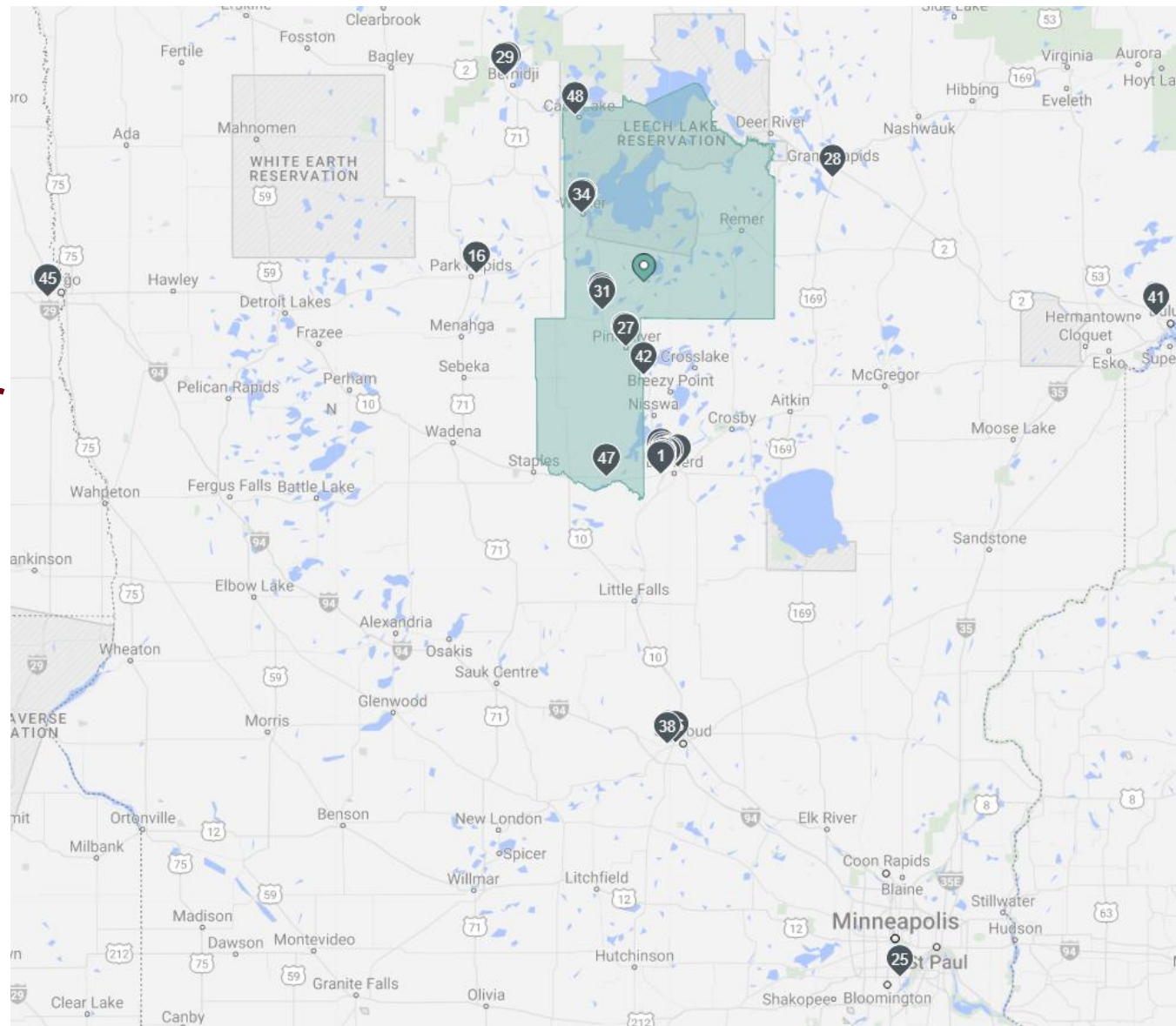
- Dining options along 371 are frequent choices
- Brainerd/Baxter
- Neighboring small cities and towns



Cass County Residents, Top 50 Favorite Dining Locations, 2024  
DeeDee LeMier, Community Economics

## How far do Cass County residents go for retail and shopping?

- Brainerd/Baxter
- Westgate Mall, Fargo
- Mall of America
- Bemidji
- Miller Hill Mall, Duluth



**Cass County Residents, Top 50 Retail and Shopping Locations, 2024**  
*DeeDee LeMier, Community Economics*



# MIDDLE OF EVERYWHERE

How can we make local decisions while at the same time respect the reality of lives?

**The REGION is the primary unit of interest**

**Mayor, how do you market your town if you don't know what's going on around you?**



# THE COMMUNITY IS WELCOMING OF NEW RESIDENTS BY THOSE LIKELY TO STILL LIVE IN COMMUNITY IN 5 YEARS

The Community is Welcoming	Likely to Live Here in 5 Years
Strongly agree	86%
Agree	77%
Disagree	68%
Strongly Disagree	44%
<b>All respondents</b>	<b>78%</b>

# resident recruitment

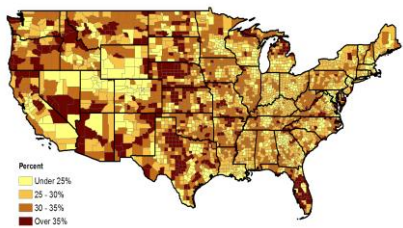
Community Development

Economic Development

Tourism

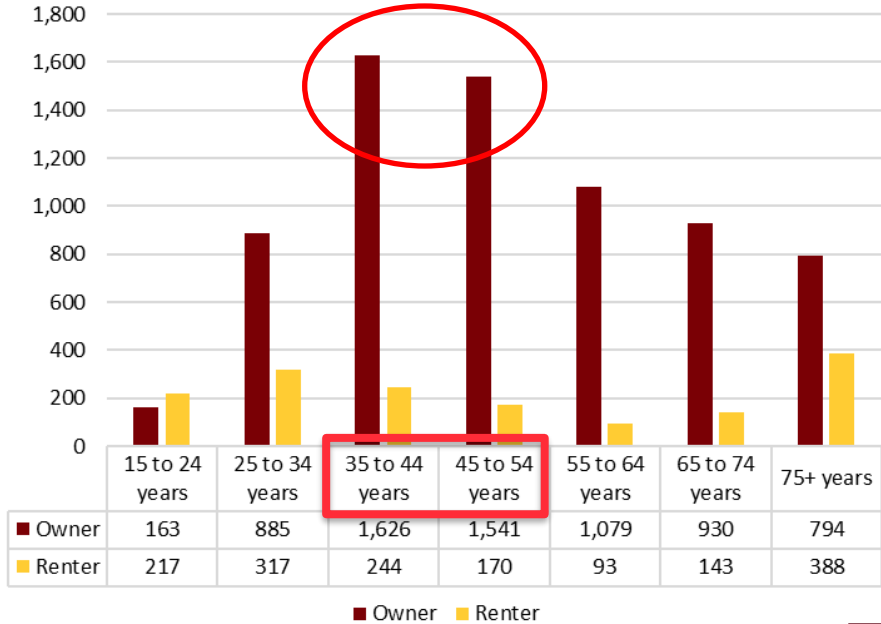
*On the Map – Over the Edge – Welcome Home*



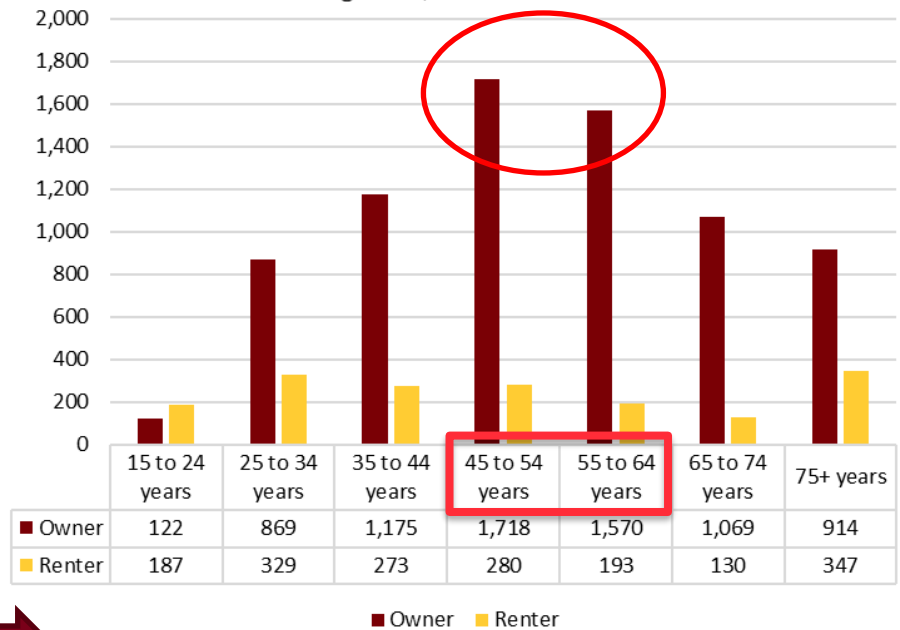


Baby Boomers

Meeker County, Minnesota  
Housing Units, 2000



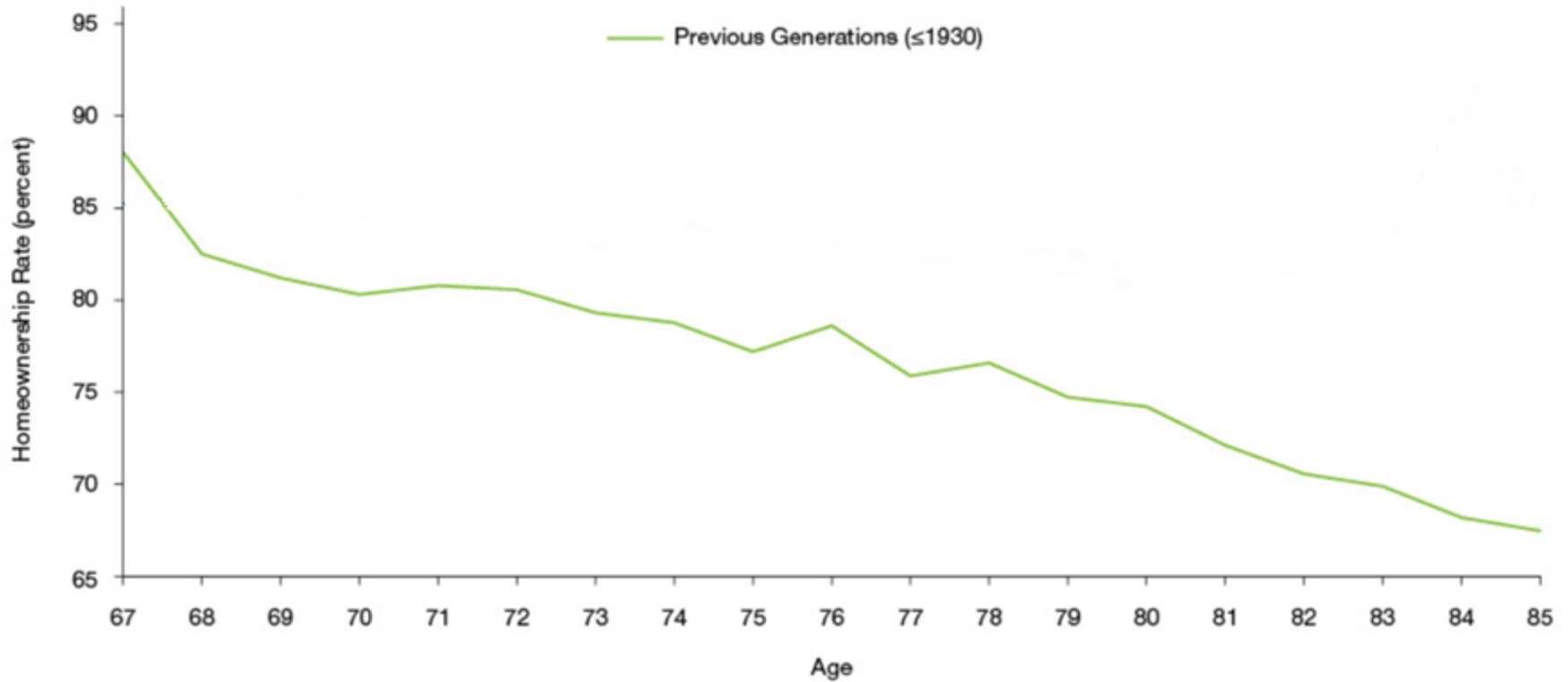
Meeker County, Minnesota  
Housing Units, 2010



+10 years

## Historical homeownership rates for household heads aged 67–85

Current generations of older homeowners are holding onto their homes for longer than previous generations

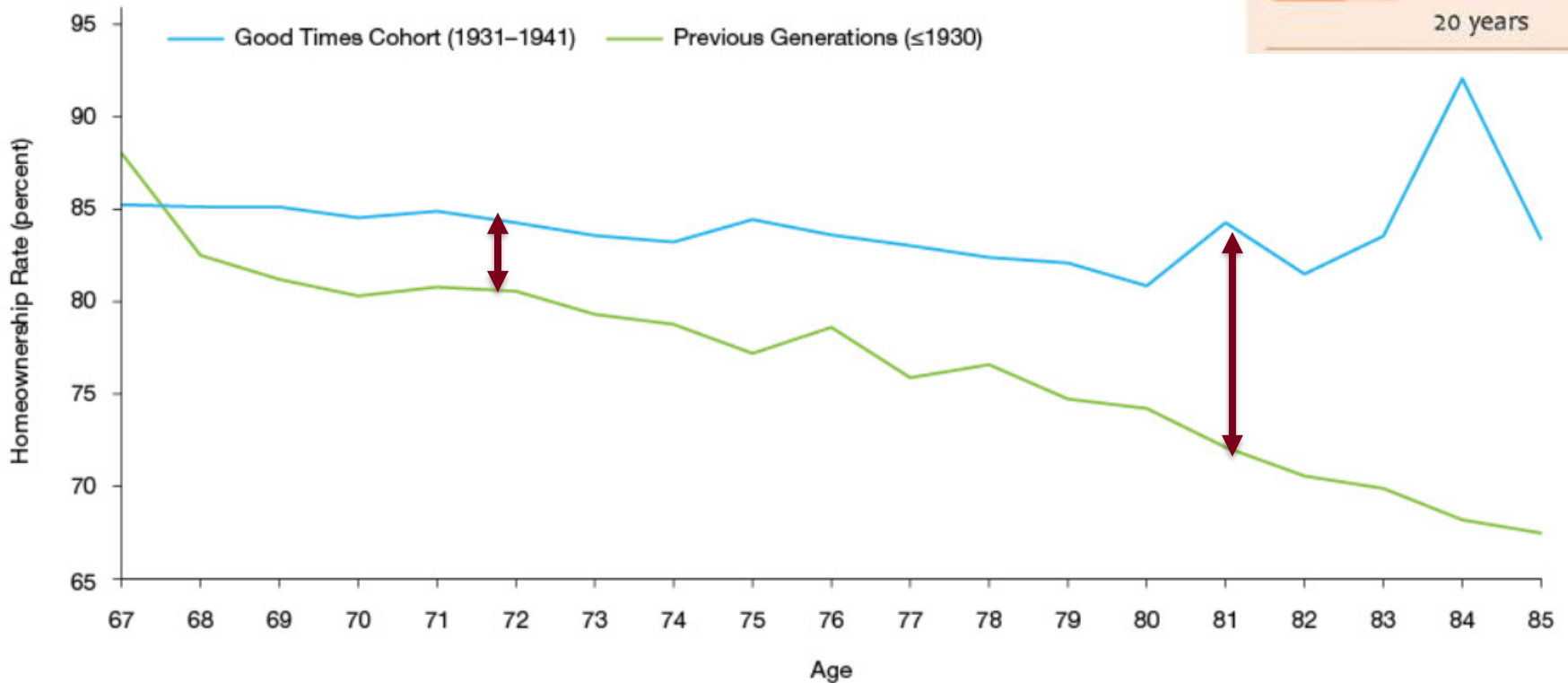


<https://familymattershc.com/the-united-states-of-aging-survey/>  
[http://www.freddiemac.com/research/insight/20190206\\_seniors\\_age\\_millennials\\_wait.page?](http://www.freddiemac.com/research/insight/20190206_seniors_age_millennials_wait.page?)

### Historical homeownership rates for household heads aged 67–85

Current generations of older homeowners are holding onto their homes for longer than previous

**58%** of older adults have not changed residences in more than 20 years



# Aging in home long-term

*The relatively higher percentage of seniors living in rural communities, which, combined with their tendency to want to age in place, the emphasis on helping them do so, and the lack of assisted living facilities in rural communities, is causing not only a bottleneck in houses coming on the market but also **increasing the likelihood that the number of dilapidated housing will increase in the future.** – Kelly Asche*

*What is the public cost of private inaction?*

<https://www.ruralmn.org/the-workforce-housing-shortage-getting-to-the-heart-of-the-issue/>





# FIND YOUR INNER OTTER

OTTER TAIL COUNTY, MINNESOTA

# Economic Impact of a Rural House



**Brigid Tuck**

Applied Research Specialist, Community  
Economics  
Regional Office Mankato



**Aiden Opatz**

Extension Educator, Community Economics  
Regional Office Rochester



## Comparison of Construction and Habitation of 100 Units Between Unit Types

Unit Type	HH Income (Construction Cost)	ONE-TIME Construction Impact per unit	ANNUAL Impact per unit
Apartments	\$60k HH income (\$200k construction)	\$298k	<b>\$41k</b>  (\$35k income = \$27k annual impact)
Twin Homes	\$100k income (\$300k construction)	\$446k	<b>\$70k</b>
Single Family Homes	\$150k income \$350k construction	\$520k	<b>\$95k</b>

<https://extension.umn.edu/cd-exchange/economic-impact-rural-house-private-benefit-public-action>

# New Discussion

## The Private Benefit of Public Action

Can homes be a public community good? They are the launching point for social and economic activity in a community and the region.



# Community Succession

**Maybe one of the best things you can do for the future of your community is to ensure there is somewhere for people to live.**





UNIVERSITY OF MINNESOTA EXTENSION

Driven to Discover<sup>SM</sup>



Thank you.

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