

Bemidji Leads.

*“Creating a Future of Promise
for the Bemidji Area”*

**A joint project of the
HRDC and the JEDC**

July, 2003

Background

During a retreat this spring, the Joint Economic Development Commission (JEDC) chose to provide leadership to help the Bemidji area assess its current role in north central Minnesota, and to develop a strategic agenda for the future. The JEDC, comprised of most of the influential private, public and institutional leaders of the area, is well-positioned to undertake this leadership role.

This effort comes at an opportune time, just as fundamental demographic and economic trends begin to shape a future that will look very different from the past. Continued growth will put pressure on growth management efforts, and threaten the area's quality of life. A shift in the age distribution – significantly less school-aged youth, a slower growing labor force, and increasing number of elderly – will present challenges to both private and public institutions.

The nature of economic activity is also undergoing fundamental change. The new economy – the profound influence of technology on every facet of our economic and social life -- holds both great promise and potential threats to the area. At a time of a skilled labor shortage, and when most businesses and jobs are not tied to any one particular area, competition between communities for strategic advantage will be intense. This effort jointly proposed by the JEDC and the Headwaters Regional Development Commission (HRDC) is designed to help the community better understand the present context, and to then chart a compelling future that will position the community to thrive.

Proposal

The JEDC and the HRDC jointly propose an ambitious fifteen month effort to strategically position the community to compete in the future (see attached work program and time line). The objectives are three-fold:

- *To forge agreement among a broad spectrum of the Bemidji community on a bold, compelling strategic direction for the area;*
- *To identify specific critical issues, strategic initiatives to address those issues and to move toward that future; and*
- *To develop and nurture a broad-based leadership council for the area that can be effective at realizing the community strategic direction.*

A key step in the planning process is to create a buzz in the community. The community's leaders and key organizations need to know this effort is *critical, significant* and *different* than what has been done in the past. This project will accomplish this by:

- Seeking the vocal support of the community's most influential leaders and organizations. When a press conference is held to announce the project, the area's most visible leaders need to play a part and stand up and be counted as supporting and encouraging the project;

- Developing a meaningful and stirring title for the effort. The project should be easily recognized by its name, and talking points will be developed that can be used by the project's key leaders;
- Developing a comprehensive media campaign to introduce the effort. The Bemidji Pioneer will run a series of articles (perhaps written by HRDC staff) challenging the community to identify and act on its future. Chat-about, Lakeland news, and a speakers' circuit are all effective ways to get the word out; and
- The HRDC will develop a web-site specific to this project that educates, informs, challenges and seeks input from a broad spectrum of the community.

The first parts of the planning process are designed to create a full understanding of the present situation for the Bemidji community. The local context includes the present demographic and socio-economic status of the community, and the changes now occurring. The broader context, equally vital to this community discussion, will include changes now underway in the economy as a result of the rapid change in technology. For this piece, the thoughtful work of the Morrison Institute, Arizona State University will be liberally used.

Next, this effort will focus on the development of a bold strategic direction for the community (the use of the word "community" in this proposal is meant to imply an area broader than the city limits, and one that includes a broad range of interests). This strategic direction will be a concrete expression of the community's desired future, derived through an analysis and understanding of its competitive assets, an assessment of the economic opportunities presented by new technology, and an awareness of the attitudes and character of the community. This is not meant to be a conceptual exercise; rather, this will be a specific characterization of a target that mobilizes and focuses community leadership and action.

A rigorous assessment of existing community positioning with regards to the strategic direction will follow. This process will be designed to generate a candid conversation that identifies the critical issues that need to be addressed if the community is to move forward. The assessment, and subsequent issues identification, will focus on three broad areas – *technology, quality of place, and knowledge and skills*. These three are the cornerstones of long term community success in the new economy.

Throughout this process a broad-based leadership structure will be nurtured. This structure is vital as an influential, and sustainable, force that can help the community make positive changes over the next two decades. Similar successful work in Tupelo, Mississippi will be used for reference in this effort.

The planning process that will be used acknowledges the critical role that leaders play in creating a community's future, but we are also aware of the need for broader community involvement and community ownership of the results. Therefore, a community leadership council, consisting of members of the JEDC, along with other community leaders, will be used to direct the effort. Numerous other public forums and other avenues will be used to secure views from a broad range of interests, and, eventually, to help inform those same interests of the proposed strategic direction.

Other tools will also be used in the extensive public involvement program. The newspaper has already agreed to be a partner in this important initiative, and the HRDC has experience using web-based technology as an integral part of a comprehensive public involvement program.

Summary

The next several years are a critical time for the greater Bemidji community. Fundamental changes in technology and the economy, dramatic changes in demographics, and growth in the community all present major opportunities and major threats. This effort comes at the right time, and will be led by the right people in the community – its leaders committed to a better future.

BEMIDJI LEADS!

Work Program and Timeline

Timeline					
	2003		2004		
	4 th Qtr	1 st Qtr	2 nd Qtr	3 rd Qtr	4 th Qtr
1) Creating A Buzz: Community Awareness What is being done Who is doing it Why is it being undertaken			Methods: Newspaper Article Series Web site Radio Talk Shows		
2) Planning Context: A Review - External The changing economy Technology revolution Demographics - Internal Community – demographics, socio-economics			Methods: Analysis of Data and Trends Use of Media to Inform		
3) Our Present Strategic Position Who we are Our competitive assets			Methods: Expert Interviews Comparative Analysis with other Communities		
4) Creating the Future: The Community's Direction - Answering fundamental Questions What kind of future can the community get passionate about? What could drive our economic engine? What could we be great at? - Creating our Future What does a bold strategic direction for the future look like?			Methods: Broad Range of Public Involvement Initiatives		
5) Honest Assessment in Key Areas <i>In the Context of the Community Direction:</i> How are we positioned in regard to: State of the art technology? Knowledge, training capacity and workforce? Quality of place issues			Methods: Technical Analysis		
6) Moving Forward: Key Strategic Issues and Initiatives Issues, initiatives critical to move forward			Methods: Community Forums Expert Recommendations		
7) Creating Sustainability Community awareness of agenda Sustaining Leadership Council			Methods: Media Use Meetings of Group		

