

## Mankato visits Charlottesville, bringing back ... ?

About six years ago, Mankato began sending delegations made up of leaders from both the profit and nonprofit sectors — about equally split — to learn what other cities are doing.

The goal was to broaden perspectives and take home ideas that would benefit the region as a whole.

The delegation has been to Bellingham, Wash., Fort Collins, Colo., and most recently Charlottesville, Va., to meet delegations from those cities.

I didn't make it to the first two and the concept was intriguing, so this time I hitched a ride. On the agenda was learning more about governmental cooperation, town/gown initiatives, early childhood education programs, downtown rehabilitation and public affairs among other topics.

Here are some takeaways: On paper, Charlottesville has a lot in common with Mankato.

Population is about the same. It's close to a metropolitan area (Washington, D.C., and Richmond, Va.) A university town with a strong community college and governmental units were separate so they needed to cooperate on different levels.

But we couldn't be more apart in some important areas. The public-private partnership in the greater Mankato region is much stronger in sharing costs and investments. In Charlottesville, there are few business influences so it relies upon government to reach out for development of which they are loath to do.

- It's a conflict between preservationists in an area surrounded by the Blue Ridge Mountains and business growth. The fear is the area will turn into a tourist-laden commercial zone like Tennessee's own Gatlinburg or Dollywood. The pendulum has swung pretty heavily to one side. One story told of a major investor wanting to come to town and rather than work on incentives or pave the way to make it easier, the governments there said "We have no objection if you come."

The investor didn't.

- The region relies heavily on federal government contracts, especially in defense, and research parks being developed by the University of Virginia which reaps the benefits of research because it is a privately held institution.

- UVA has a huge influence in the city. Besides the research parks there are a number of medical centers built and staffed by UVA. And investments as donations proliferate in the city. It does not take its largess for granted reaching out to the community to discuss its own growth and changes within the neighborhoods. It also extends a large hand in assistance both from its faculty and students to the community. Tenure qualifications include community service.

- Education is highly valued in the Charlottesville area with strong support for elementary and secondary schools. Both county and city have their own districts. Student teacher ratio in elementary is 13:1 in the county and 10:1 in secondary.

- There are no "bars" per se in Virginia. If you want to sell alcohol about 60 percent of your receipts must come from food. Rationale is more safety, lower cost of enforcement, health and treatment.

Consequently, with some major investment for upgrades, its downtown area is healthy as a pedestrian mall with shops, restaurants, theaters and other small niche businesses including a book store owned and operated by author John Grisham and a children's museum.

At the end of the mall is a Telos Wireless Charlottesville Pavilion built by developer and manager of the Dave Matthews Band on land leased for a dollar a year by the city. DMB started in Charlottesville in the '90s and continues to bring big name bands to the city. Concerts are often free but the beer isn't.

- The city, counties and UVA share their comprehensive plans to ensure they are in synch with one another especially on

the edges.

More viewpoints on this trip will be coming from other participants later in The Free Press.

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