

OUR VIEW

AREA HAS NUMEROUS STRENGTHS

This area is progressing well.

The Free Press concludes its three-part Progress 2011 series today that provides lots of evidence that this area is prospering for good reasons.

Census numbers confirm that Mankato grew by 21 percent from 2000 to 2010 with population increasing to 39,309. North Mankato grew by 13.5 percent in the same 10 years and now has 13,394 residents.

But population growth doesn't tell the entire story. With those additional people comes more business, more demands for services, more diversification and more activities.

As highlighted in Part I of our Progress section, strong educational institutions and health care facilities are big contributors to the economy in both the number of people employed and the services they provide to the community.

When jobs were cut, South Central College received an infusion of federal stimulus dollars to re-educate and retrain people to get them working again. The \$4.5 million grant beefed up the college's health care program offerings.

And although Minnesota State University has had to tighten its belt just as other public institutions have in the recession, enrollment is booming. MSU has seen its second-highest first-year enrollment numbers in history this year.

As this area becomes a regional hub for health care, the Mankato Clinic and Immanuel St. Joseph's — Mayo Health System have started new programs and expanded facilities. Mankato Clinic added the former Now Care clinic to its locations as well as a joint venture with Advance Pain Management at Madison East Center. ISJ — Mayo is building a new emergency department.

The region also is climbing out of the recession. The Mankato area had 1,100 additional jobs in January than 12 months earlier. Some jobs have been lost — including at major employer Taylor Corp. — but in other cases, manufacturers are expanding. Lake Crystal generator company Blue Star Power moved into a building seven times larger than its previous location. AmeriStar Manufacturing in Mankato received national recognition by a trade publication for being one of the most aggressive and successful facilities. Ziegler CAT is building a \$9 million facility in North Mankato.

Although jobs are often the draw to a region, it is quality of life that keeps people in a place. Today's Progress section focuses on some of the attractions and agencies that make the community a better place to live.

The new Mankato Marathon successfully showcased the area and will expand to include more participants during its second race this fall. Vikings Camp at Minnesota State University, as always, is a big attraction, drawing more than 50,000 visitors during summer training. Across the river in North Mankato at Caswell Park, 50 to 60 teams participated in each of a trio of tournaments in July and August, including the 60-team girls NAFA Nationals and the girls ASA Nationals.

And if sports isn't your thing, other options exist, such as visiting the growing number of wineries in the area, visiting the new Children's Museum of Southern Minnesota, or finding an arts events to attend as listed on the new Twin Rivers Center for the Arts database.

And as important as finding leisure activities to entertain us is having access to services in times of need. The Reach youth homeless center opened this winter. ECHO Food Shelf moved into a larger building. The Backpack program expanded the number of children it feeds on weekends and school breaks. VINE Faith in Action is making plans to move the senior center to the former Nichols Office Building. And these agencies, and many more, are valued by the community. The United Way, which funds many of the local nonprofits, exceeded its 2011 fundraising goal and brought in \$1,862,152 during its campaign.

Overall, there are bright beacons of light that signal this region is bouncing back from hard times and has the solid combination of business, education, industry, health care, community support and attractions to continue to make the area a great place to live.

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