

OUR VIEW

COMMUNITY SUMMIT SHOWS UNITY

A first- ever community summit was held last Wednesday to unite the voices of the greater Mankato area speaking to our state legislators on the needs for the region.

The debut meeting sponsored by Greater Mankato Growth and Southern Minnesota Advocates had both the expected and the unexpected.

Such a gathering of government officials invites the obvious questions on how the state provides funds for local government.

Right now, with the tax revenue shortfalls from last year and in the years ahead, local government finance is in a shambles, especially with the threat of further unallotments. The methodology of how the state determines payments leaves many anticipating rather than planning. There was a unified plea to streamline and provide consistency in determining payments so local government can determine now where to either cut its expenses or find alternative funds.

This is no small request. The funding gyrations many of the local governments were able to pull off in this latest go-around have all been exhausted. Going forward, given the economic forecasts from the state Department of Management and Budget, Minnesota will continue to see some significant shifts in funding from state to local governments. More creative solutions — such as combining government services between county and city or city with city will become more pronounced when residents see either taxes rising or services slashed.

Another expected result was some consensus on specific regional priorities behind which this area can rally and our representatives can champion. There were repeated calls for a better transportation investment in highways, especially Highways 14 and 169 corridors and bridges.

There was also the renewed push for performing arts capital projects for Mankato.

The unexpected development was the unity from both public and private groups in voicing concern and offering solutions on a particular problem. Normally when business representatives offer their solutions it calls for freeing them from the shackles of government regulation or taxation. And while those were part of Taylor Corporation's requests, one of its chief policy concerns included concentration on kindergarten readiness, pointing out that "success in kindergarten is the key indicator of success throughout the student's academic career."

It is refreshing to see the private sector acknowledge and call for leadership in such an obvious investment for success.

Another concern was for the state to facilitate the speedy accreditation of physicians needed to fulfill the health needs of the region, something that simple policy change can affect.

In the past, our representatives were pushed and pulled by various factions and special interests each looking for their piece of the pie. None of that is going away anytime soon. And without question, the state budget forecasts will force legislators to make some extremely tough decisions in the weeks ahead.

However, with this community summit, there at least is some weight they can tote to the Capitol and reasonably believe they are pushing for interests the region as a whole can fully support.