

OUR VIEW

## MANKATO AREA MATTERS TO MINNESOTA

Some 100 Mankato area residents took to the halls of the Capitol in St. Paul on Thursday to meet with legislators and other state leaders to promote the region as one that is growing and coming into its own as a major state regional center.

It was the first event of its kind for Mankato and was prompted in part by an effort to help the region stay competitive with other regional centers that have rallied their troops for years. The effort came in part from a notion that the strength and significance of the Mankato region has been under-recognized at the state Capitol.

Certain events of past legislatures suggest Mankato has been considered not quite as important as other regional centers.

Indeed, MnDOT studies had ranked Mankato as a secondary market area for road improvements just a few years ago. Of course, in late 2008, Mankato received the federal recognition as a "Metropolitan Statistical Area," a designation that ranks the region on par with other such cities as St. Cloud, Duluth and Rochester.

If legislators or state agency heads were looking for reasons they should give Mankato its due, there is no shortage. The state benefits when Mankato is successful economically and when the region gives the state a high rate of return on its public investments.

Mankato was ranked in the top 10 micropolitan areas by Site Selection magazine for expanding facility projects in 2006, and in the top 25 for three years running before that.

One-third of our businesses compete in the global marketplace, and some 29 businesses were in the process of locating and/or expanding in Mankato in 2009 and 2010.

Seven major employers have 500 or more workers, and Mankato has a diversified economic base, which leads to unemployment rates consistently far below state and national averages. The average weekly wage in the region rose 15 percent from 2004 to 2008. From 2007 to 2008 Mankato/North Mankato payrolls grew 3.5 percent.

The diversified base keeps the local economy level during ups and down of the national economy. About 43 percent of payroll is in professional, health care and educational economy, about 40 percent is manufacturing and construction, with volatile retail making up only 10 percent.

In 2008, Mankato ranked in the top 10 percent of all metropolitan areas in nation and number one in Minnesota on Policom Corps. Economic Strength Rankings.

Mankato Area Public School students consistently beat state averages in standardized tests and continue to exceed in many instances, previous year's levels. The Mankato school district examines the test scores and immediately begins looking at weaknesses in the school curriculum.

Mankato's kids are ambitious. Some 87 percent of high school graduates continue on to post-secondary education, far exceeding the state average of 68 percent.

Legislators and state leaders will find a region where state, local and federal governments have found ways to collaborate. Nonprofit sectors have found a way to work together to provide a high level of arts and entertainment delivered at reasonable cost.

There are dozens of partnerships between high schools, colleges, and even junior high schools to work with business on connecting skills to jobs of the future.

Legislators and state leaders will also find progressive county governments in Blue Earth and Nicollet counties running statewide pilot programs on how to help the mentally ill and homeless but at the same time providing taxpayer value.

Blue Earth County is the 5th highest county in terms of farm cash receipts — some 1,247 farms generated \$360.5 million in business in 2008.

Blue Earth County farmers grow seven million bushels of soybeans per year, process much of that at two of the largest soybean processing plants in the world (located here) and sell to overseas markets. The 11 counties in the Mankato region are the number one soybean producing region in Minnesota with 55 million bushels in 2008.

If legislators and state leaders need a place to invest increasingly scarce dollars, Mankato would be one bet hard to pass up.

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#### The Issue

Some 100 community leaders participated in Mankato day at the Capitol.

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