In 1999-2000, Minnesota Planning sponsored 10 Listening Posts across the state. In late 2002, the agency returned to the regions to learn if citizens’ priorities had changed. The Mora meeting was the third of the second phase Listening Posts. It was hosted by Region 7E Regional Development Commission and attended by approximately 50 public officials and citizens.

Minnesota Planning is a state agency charged with helping develop a long-range plan for the state, stimulating public participation in determining the state’s future and coordinating activity among all levels of government. In addition to Minnesota Planning, Senator Mark Dayton’s Office, the U.S. Department of Agriculture, and the Minnesota Departments of Agriculture, Economic Security and Natural Resources were represented at the meeting. State Representative Loren Jennings also attended.

Bob Voss, Executive Director, Region 7E Regional Development Commission, thanked Minnesota Planning for sponsoring this Listening Post. He said that the agency has been an excellent resource for the RDC, providing geographic information systems support, demographic information and help with boundary adjustments at the regional and local levels. This second round of Listening Posts was taking place in a different context because of changes like the downturn in the national economy. Minnesota Planning wants to find out if citizens in the region are still on the same trajectory.

Dean Barkley, Director of Minnesota Planning, emphasized that these Listening Posts are apolitical. Minnesota Planning is here to listen. Listening Posts will be held around the state because there is not one set of solutions that will suit every region. He said that he wanted to hear citizens’ priorities and their views on the relationships between state and local officials. Since the Listening Post in 2000, some significant events have affected the area:

- Governor Ventura signed bills for sales tax rebate checks, lower license tab fees and tax-rate reductions. At that time money was flowing in St. Paul. This is not the case now.
- In 2000, there was a 10,000 acre fire at the Carlos Avery Wildlife Center near Wyoming. Hundreds of people were evacuated and homes were destroyed.
- A new proposed residential dwelling ordinance brought to public attention the fact that model homes condemned for use in the Twin Cities were being brought into Mille Lacs County and sold as affordable housing.
- The Mille Lacs County Board sought release from the East Central Solid Waste Commission as a result of a new solid waste management fee.

George Johnson, GEIS Manager, Minnesota Planning, said that Minnesota Planning is a great resource for people making zoning and land use decisions. He introduced the Generic Environmental Impact Statement on Animal Agriculture and explained why it can make a difference in this part of the state. This project was initiated as a result of complaints made in the late 1990s. The Legislature had assigned $3 million to the Environmental Quality Board, staffed by Minnesota Planning, to carry out the study, supported by a Citizens Advisory Committee of 25 people and research by universities and other institutions. An encyclopedia of animal agriculture in Minnesota was produced. Among the issues examined were:
Policy recommendations to guide priorities have also been developed and will be presented to the next Legislature.

**Todd Graham, Regional Analysis and Outreach Manager, Minnesota Department of Economic Security**, spoke about economic development and its relationship to workforce issues. The department has regional economists working throughout the state, who act as extension agents and analysis consultants. Their objective is to understand what is going on in the regional market, so people can make better decisions.

The proposed merger of the Minnesota Departments of Economic Security and Trade and Economic Development is now on hold, but from the process has emerged a renewed emphasis on the regions and what can be devolved to local communities. As things presently operate, local groups have to lobby the state, usually after the dollars have gone to the relevant state agency. This is not the best way of doing things. As a result, the Governor’s Workforce Council is currently seeking Requests for Proposals to convene regional planning discussions linked to budget proposals and thereby improve services in workforce development. This will be a real process, in which regional economists will provide technical support. Hopefully it will line up with the priorities of the new Governor.

**Representative Loren Jennings** was invited to speak by Dean Barkley. He said he was delighted to see such a big crowd. The next few years will be challenging with the state budget facing a massive deficit. Eighty-three percent of the state’s budget goes to K-12 education, local government aid, services for seniors and corrections. It is difficult to cut budgets in any of these areas, but local government aid is most vulnerable. If the state is 14 percent short at the start of the budget process, the Legislature will have to raise taxes and cut services. They will not be able to cut services for all $3 billion of the deficit, so citizens must buckle in for hard times. The key question is, which services are you willing to lose?

He commended Dean Barkley for the great job he has done at Minnesota Planning and assured participants that the agency would use the information it receives at the Listening Post. “*When you think about priorities, truly think about priorities, because there will be less money available next year.*”

**Tom Gillaspy, State Demographer**, said that the last 25 years have been very exciting, with a tremendous amount of change in the state. New census data, population projections, business and job market data are all pointing to growth. Once the economy starts growing again the job market is going to tighten very quickly.

Minnesota is the fastest growing state in the frost belt. It is an exceptional place. Most of the growth is in the Twin Cities and up through the central part of the state. Region 7E is part of that growth area and this has implications for local government. “*People move into townships and expect city services.*” Much of the growth will be in the young adult population but particularly in the age group between 50 and 60. Communities must ask themselves how they can keep these people involved in the workforce and in volunteer activities.
In terms of population growth, this region is similar to the state and the nation. However, populations of color are much smaller. Income trends vary across the region, with two counties showing incomes higher than the statewide average and three counties showing more modest income. This disparity is also reflected in the poverty rate, despite an overall reduction in poverty and increase in the proportion of the population at work. The region has a very tight housing market with a low vacancy rate and a high proportion of seasonal properties. Housing trends are being watched closely, along with the economy.

Discussion – Facilitator, Barbara Ronningen, Minnesota Planning

Participants were asked to work in small groups and consider the following question: If you had three minutes with the new Governor, what would you tell him are the three most important priorities for this region?

Feedback from groups

Group 1
- New industries leading to jobs.
- Affordable housing.
- Transportation.

Group 2
- Lack of jobs paying livable wages.
- Land use and sprawl issues.
- There is lack of intergovernmental cooperation. The state should relocate industry first before spending money on roads.

Group 3
- Affordable housing.
- Creating jobs in rural Minnesota would also help the metro area with its problems.
- Transportation.

Group 4
- Transportation.
- Affordable housing.
- Living wage jobs.

Group 5
- Transportation.
- Affordable housing and sufficient housing for the elderly.
- Infrastructure to meet the service needs of a growing population.

Group 6
- Economic growth.
- Transportation.
- Financial issues at the state and local level; the removal of levy limits.
Group 7

- Education and the need for high speed Internet access.
- Educate planners on the importance of land use.
- Increasing need for industry to help the tax base because of the tax shift from vacation homes.

General discussion

Transportation

Lindstrom has a large number of commuters who spend a lot of time daily on I-35. They leave early and get back late, so their willingness to get involved in the community is limited. If there were higher paying local jobs, the community would benefit and the transportation system would be under less pressure.

The cost of owning a car is prohibitive for many local people on low and moderate incomes. There is no public transport and the transit available for seniors is stretched to the limit where it exists.

The region needs more funding for roads and bridges and needs to get ahead of the game. The upkeep of Highway 8 is expensive. There should be some kind of low interest loan program. For instance, Wyoming had to undertake a $1.2 billion project it was not ready for. A loan program would have helped.

The state needs to take a good look at how railways are used. Trains can be used to transport people as well as goods. It worked in previous generations, so why can’t it work now? The Legislature needs to be open to alternative transportation systems. Even in the present situation, bridges need to be built to get vehicles, particularly emergency vehicles, over the railroad. There are safety issues when so many people cross tracks at a stop sign.

There should be more sharing of information between state and local government. The Star Tribune’s recent series on transportation in other states has been a revelation. For instance, in Atlanta, 12 lane highways are not uncommon. In Minnesota, there are lines of traffic all the way from the metro area to Mora.

A study of commuting patterns during the week is needed, but also of weekends when the patterns are different with everyone driving through the area to get north. The Department of Transportation is committed to the development of transportation corridors, but this is confined to the seven-county metro area. This policy has application in other parts of the state and needs to go beyond the metro area. Could Highway 65 be a development corridor?

Development is good but local government needs help to determine how it is going to move its traffic. The city of Cambridge continues to struggle with issues over Highway 95. Things are happening in Isanti that the county has no control over. Cities need good access for safety and emergency services. Planning is needed for back and frontage roads.
There is a highway task force working with the Minnesota Department of Transportation on Highway 8 issues, but it is meeting a lot of opposition. Four hundred people attended one public meeting. If the state is looking to do any corridor studies in this region it can expect significant resistance.

Communities working together

All the issues are intertwined. You cannot solve one with out the other. “We need a sense of who we are and where are we going. We don’t have a sense of community any more, but are this community and that community.”

The identity issue is crucial. “Some counties and townships identify our area as part of the suburban commuter belt; others think it’s rural. So opposing decisions get made by different communities.” Road quality changes between one jurisdiction and another. Everybody gets different levels of funding and there are turf issues because everyone is competing for the same dollars. “A bus could go down I-35, but if there is no cooperation between counties it will not work. Funding should go to the region.”

Getting communities to work together is not going to be easy because of historical grudges. However, citizens are demanding that locally elected officials try to make this happen. One of the specific problems for this region is that the five-county area is chopped up piecemeal by the state. For instance, it is in three different MnDOT districts. There needs to be one organization that covers the region. Perhaps the RDC should be the unit for all services.

Another problem is that towns with populations less than 5,000 do not get Local Government Aid for roads so there is no incentive to sit down and talk. The state could create an incentive by making state aid for roads dependent on cooperation that leads to a regional transportation plan. “Get resources close to the people and support grass roots citizen involvement.”

Jobs and housing

Jobs and housing are integrally connected. The region needs more high tech jobs with incomes sufficiently high that people will be able to support their families, maintain their lifestyles and afford the available housing without having to go down to the Twin Cities to work. The average wage in the region is $10 an hour. A Department of Trade and Economic Development study shows the need to pay significantly more – probably around $18-20 an hour – to enable people to stay in the community.

There are vast differences within the region, for instance between Pine and Chisago counties. The Department of Economic Security provides an online calculator so that job seekers can assess the relationship between salaries and living costs. They really need to factor commuting times into this, so that people can work out how much more they need to earn in order to justify commuting to the Twin Cities. However, it was pointed out that even if people were willing to accept lower wages, there are no jobs available in the region. A radical solution is necessary. For instance, Michigan and Pennsylvania have introduced tax free zones to encourage businesses to relocate.
Declining school enrollment is another problem in the region. However, it is felt that the shortage of jobs is at the root of that problem also, since families with children are not able to live here. “Sort that out and other problems will be solved.” Space, place and natural resources are the region’s biggest advantages but although people are sold on the pluses of the area, they still have to drive to the Twin Cities for work. “We need to have job creation strategies that enable people to work where they play.”

Housing is a related issue. The price of housing is too high for people to work and live in their own communities. Prices are pushed up by people coming up from the metro area, because they get better value for money up here. This drives property values up for everybody because ininers will pay more than houses are worth. The rental market is poor, with a housing stock that is old and not well maintained. “We have too many slumlords up here.” Even when people are working, those on low incomes cannot find decent housing they can afford.

The metro area has designated a lot of land for permanent agriculture, so people are moving out to the “collar” counties. “The metro and collar counties need to work together. The collar counties are paying the price for some of the decisions the Met Council is making.” Chisago County is in the metro area but does not have representation on the Met Council.

There have been some successful initiatives in Minnesota and in other places with regard to housing. One cooperative development has supported houses with lot widths of 80 feet rather than the normal 100 feet. These look good but the smaller lots reduce infrastructure costs by a third. Region 5 has a housing program using prison labor. California has enacted some interesting property tax reforms. There is a need for houses under $100,000. Many low-income people in the region would not even qualify for a $50,000 loan. “Let’s get back to the basic two bedroom rambler. Houses have just got bigger and bigger. It is a mindset that needs to change.” Seniors who want to downsize but retain their own place would also appreciate smaller houses. Double-sides – two linked manufactured units – are much nicer than they used to be and could also be part of the solution. However, many are still viewed as trailers and zoning is prohibitive. The work of Habitat for Humanity is valued.

A good telecommunications system would enable people to work from home. High-speed Internet access has only been available for the last five months and the Internet business center in Cambridge has closed.

Budget concerns

Budget problems at the state level only get magnified at the local level. The $3 billion shortfall will be taken from local governments. “If the state takes away Local Government Aid we might as well just shut the door.” If the state takes away LGA it must give communities the ability to levy back what they have lost. “We urge the state to get money close to the people and where services are happening.” The Legislative Commission on Minnesota Resources was cited as an example of a program where the majority of the money went to the metro area. There was also concern about having to return unspent LGA dollars, because cities that have been fiscally responsible and put money away are now going to be penalized.