

REGION 7W 2022 COMPREHENSIVE ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT STRATEGY
BENTON | SHERBURNE | STEARNS | WRIGHT



A collaborative regional strategic planning effort.

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WHAT IS THE CEDS?

According to [U.S. Economic Development Administration](#), the Comprehensive Economic Development Strategy (CEDS) contributes to effective economic development in America's communities and regions through a locally-based, regionally-driven economic development planning process. Economic development planning – as implemented through the CEDS – is not only a cornerstone of the U.S. Economic Development Administration's (EDA) programs, but successfully serves as a means to engage community leaders, leverage the involvement of the private sector, and establish a strategic blueprint for regional collaboration.

The CEDS provides a vehicle for individuals, organizations, local governments, institutes of learning, and private industry to engage in a meaningful conversation and debate about what capacity building efforts would best serve economic development in the region.

VISION

Region 7W strives to foster a prosperous region that creates new business and employment opportunities essential for economic growth. Economic development strategies will drive the creation, retention, and reinvestment of resources that increase the economic opportunities and improve the quality of life for Region 7W citizens.

STAKEHOLDER INVOLVEMENT AND PUBLIC ENGAGEMENT

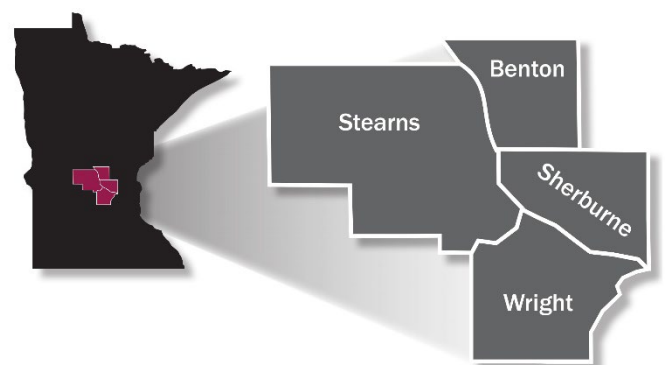
Public and private sector economic and community development leaders throughout the region participated in meetings focused on developing goals and strategies around the four cornerstones of community and economic health identified by DevelopMN. Key professionals in Region 7W made a collaborative effort to

promote the CEDS planning process at economic and community development meetings in the region.

[DevelopMN](#) was created to, "Help identify needed alignment and document a broadly supported strategy for creating shared prosperity." The purpose is to create regional alignment to take advantage of shared priorities and maximize the use of resources ([mnado.org](#)). The four cornerstones of human capital, economic competitiveness, community resources and foundational assets are discussed in detail in the strategic direction and action plan section of this document.

Region 7W Summary

Region 7W is composed of Benton, Sherburne, Stearns, and Wright Counties, centrally located in the State of Minnesota. Taking up nearly 3,000 square miles of land, the region is home to many lakes, city, and county parks, and is an industry leader in agriculture across the state. The Mississippi River cuts through the center of the region, which is also served by the railway and a regional airport. Manufacturing is the strongest industry in the region, while also emerging strongly in the areas of high-quality education, health care and human services. There is a more comprehensive demographic and economic profile ahead in the Regional Overview section of this document.



ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The 7W CEDS Staff Committee served as the Strategy Committee to steer the development of the CEDS document. The committee is composed of stakeholders across Region 7W that broadly represent the economic interest of the region. Thank you to all those who contributed to the development of the CEDS.

Region 7W CEDS Strategy Committee

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DEMOGRAPHICS

Population Change, 2016-2021

Region 7W is located in the larger 13 county Central Minnesota planning region and averaged nearly 12 new residents every day for the last 5 consecutive years. Wright County and Sherburne County have remained the fastest growing counties for the region. Region 7W was home to 444,325 Minnesota residents in 2021, increasing population by 5.17 percent in the last five years (see Table 1). The Region's population growth far outpaced the state of Minnesota, which experienced a 3.34 percent population increase since 2016.

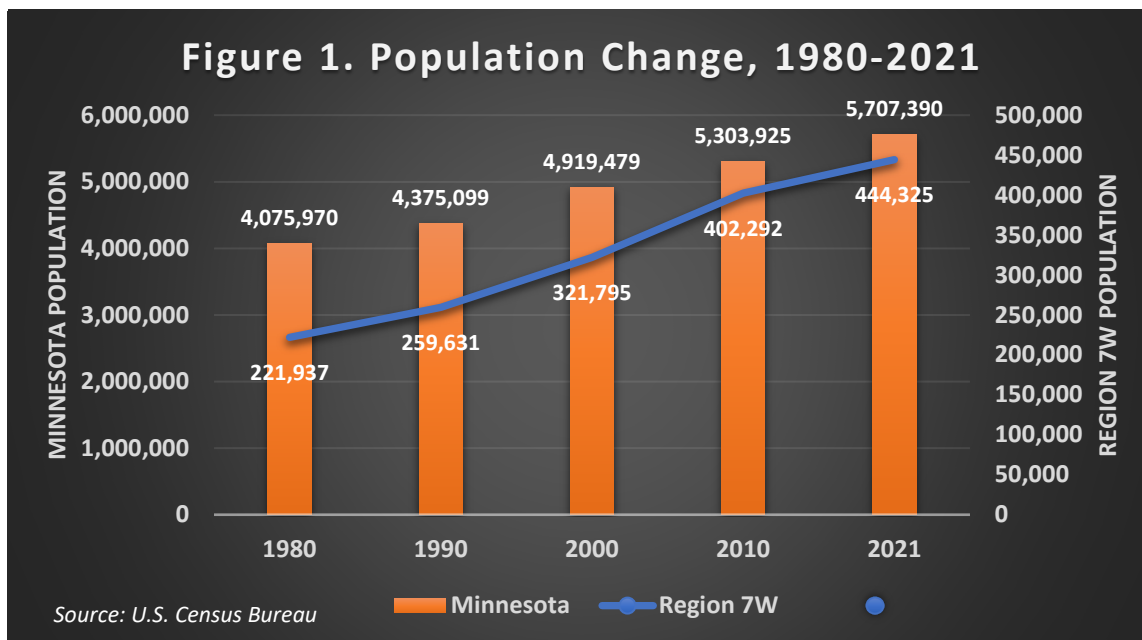
Table 1. Population Change from 2016-2021

	2016 Population	2021 Estimates	2016-2021 Change	
			Number	Percent
Region 7W	422,464	444,325	21,861	5.17%
Benton Co.	39,687	41,459	1,772	4.46%
Sherburne Co.	93,228	99,074	5,846	6.27%
Stearns Co.	157,225	158,947	1,722	1.10%
Wright Co.	132,324	144,845	12,521	9.46%
Minnesota	5,522,744	5,707,390	184,646	3.34%

Source: DEED Quarterly Census of Employment & Wage (QCEW)

Population Change, 1980-2021

The state of Minnesota has grown consistently over the past forty years, picking up an average of just over 400,000 new residents every decade. Region 7W grew remarkably from 1980 to 2010. While still experiencing significant growth from 2010-2021, the pace of growth did slow through this period



increasing by only 42,033 residents as compared to an average of 60,000 new residents the previous three consecutive decades. All four counties were among the fastest growing counties in the state in terms of growth rate, led by Wright County which lands at eighth

place overall, Sherburne at tenth place, and Stearns coming in at eleventh place. In 2021, Region 7W accounted for 7.8 percent of the state of Minnesota's population (see Figure 1). This is just a slight uptick from the 2016 data which put the region making up 7.6 percent of Minnesota's population.

Population by Age Group, 2016-2021

Region 7W as compared to the state, has a younger population. People aged 34 years and under make up 47.9 percent of Region 7W's population as compared to the same age group comprising only 44.9 percent of the state of Minnesota's population. 14 percent of Region 7W's population are age 65 and over, as compared to the states over 65 population which is 16.7 percent. Region 7W and the state of Minnesota have a very comparable population make up for ages 35-64, varying by only two-tenths of a percent (see Figure 2).

According to the data in Figure 3, Region 7W's population has increased by 6,402 people in the age range of 35-44 years, and by 5,427 people in the 55-64 age range. These two age sectors alone make up 11,829 people or 52 percent of the region's overall growth from 2016-2021. The region is also seeing a significant increase in

the retirement age population, also known as the Baby Boomers. The Baby Boom generation are people born between 1946 and 1964 and between the ages of 57-75 in 2021. In an article titled, [Aging baby boomers expected to impact Minnesota's workforce](#), author Liz Stoeber states, "As baby boomers age, private and state workforces are poised to face massive retirements." The population in the age range of 45-54 experienced the largest decrease in people with a loss of 3,723.

Figure 2. Percentage of Population by Age Group, 2021

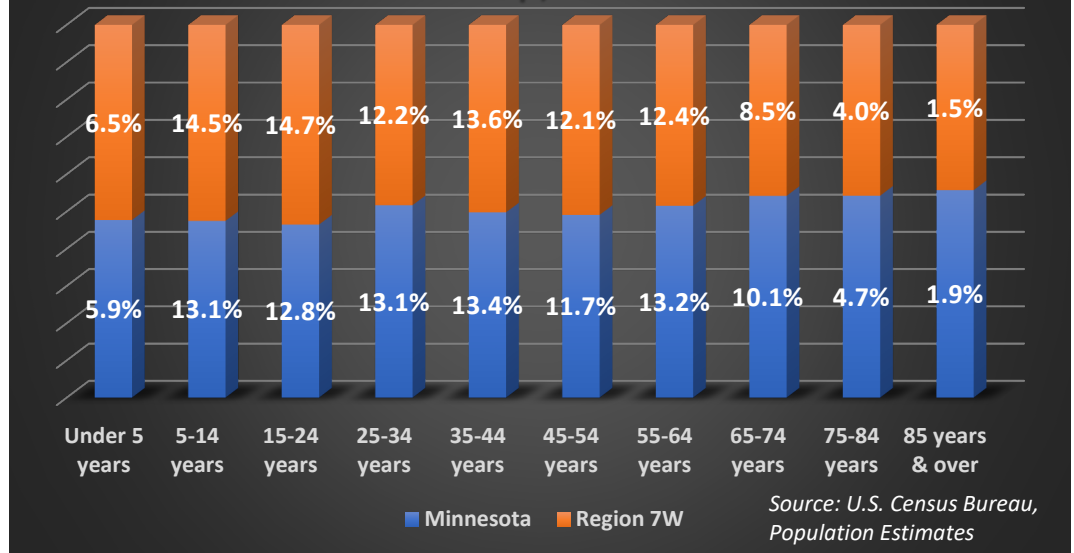
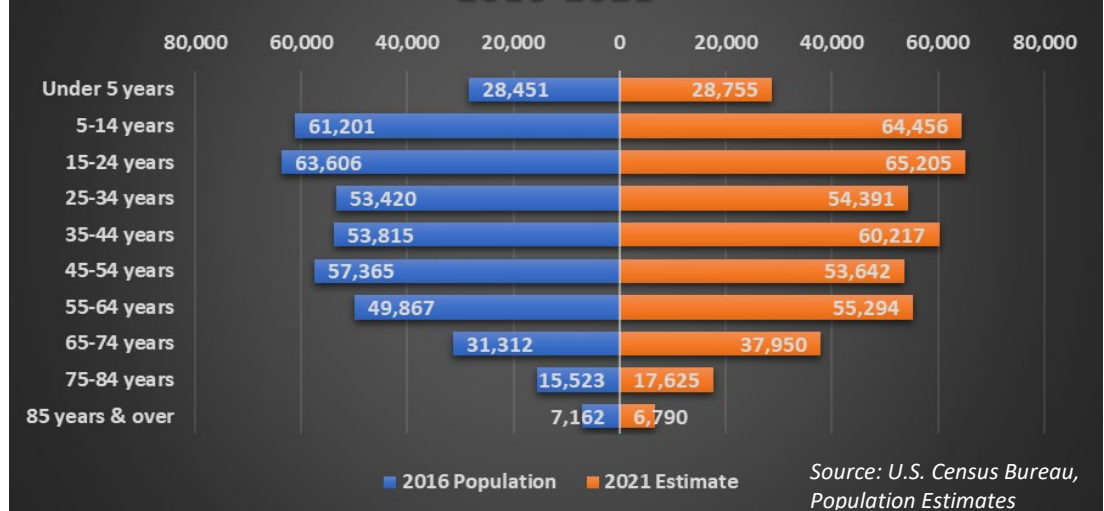
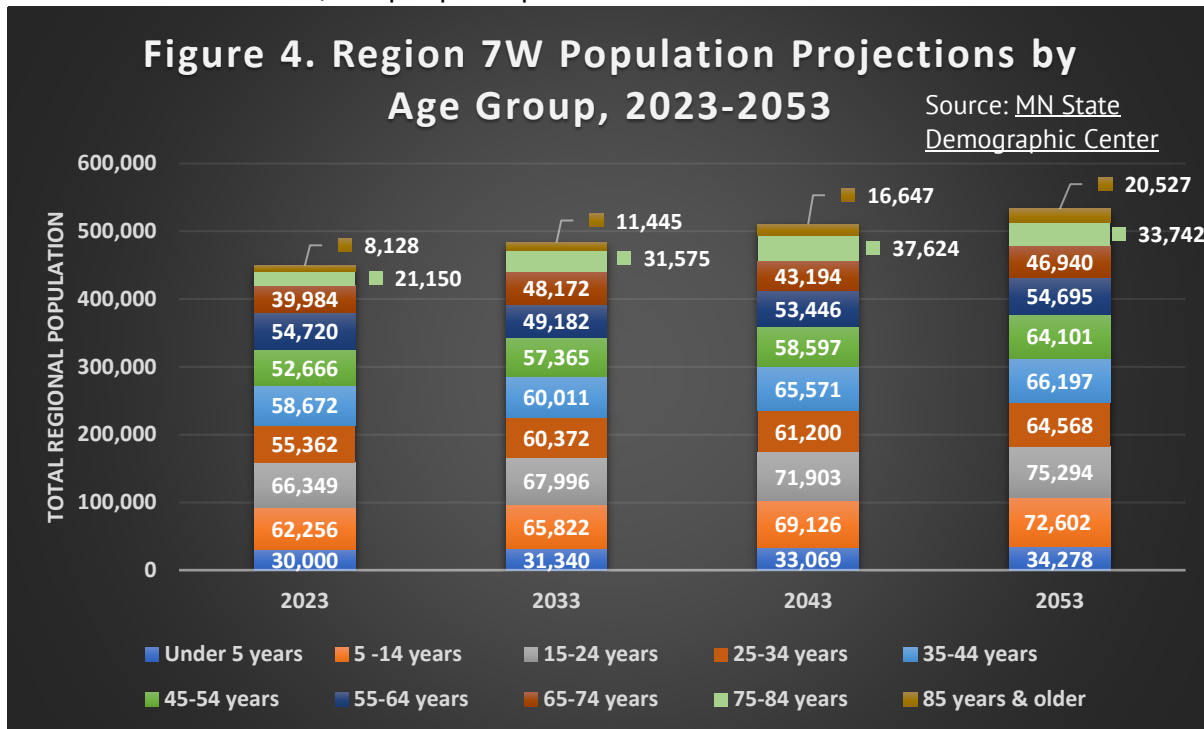


Figure 3. Region 7W Population Pyramid, 2016-2021



Population Projections by Age Group, 2023-2053

Region 7W is projected to continue to grow at a consistent pace over the next thirty years (see Figure 4). The region's growth will be most robust from 2023-2033, projecting a population increase of 33,993 people. From 2033 to 2043, projections predict a population increase of 27,097 people, and from 2043-2053 an increase of 22,567 people is predicted.



Region 7W is still projected to retain and increase a higher percentage of people that are between the ages of 5 and 44 which will make up 43 percent of the population growth over the next 30 years. This compared to people under

the age of 5 representing less than 1 percent of the overall projected growth of Region 7W. Also notable, is that the population of people over the age of 85 is expected to more than double from 8,128 people in 2023 to 20,527 people by 2053.

Population by Race, 2021

Table 2. Race and Hispanic Origin, 2015 & 2021

	Region 7W			Minnesota		
	2021	Percent	Increase from 2015-2021	2021	Percent	Increase from 2015-2021
Total	444,325	100%	8.13%	5,707,390	100%	4.1%
White	400,137	90.1%	4.6%	4,735,626	83.0%	1.3%
Black or African American	23,836	5.4%	145.3%	423,565	7.4%	25.7%
American Indian & Alaska Native	2,350	0.5%	37.0%	79,214	1.4%	7.1%
Asian & other Pac. Islander	8,454	1.9%	46.2%	311,620	5.5%	17.1%
Two or More Races	9,548	2.1%	23.5%	157,274	2.8%	20.9%
Hispanic or Latino	15,541	3.5%	41.8%	333,474	5.8%	17.4%

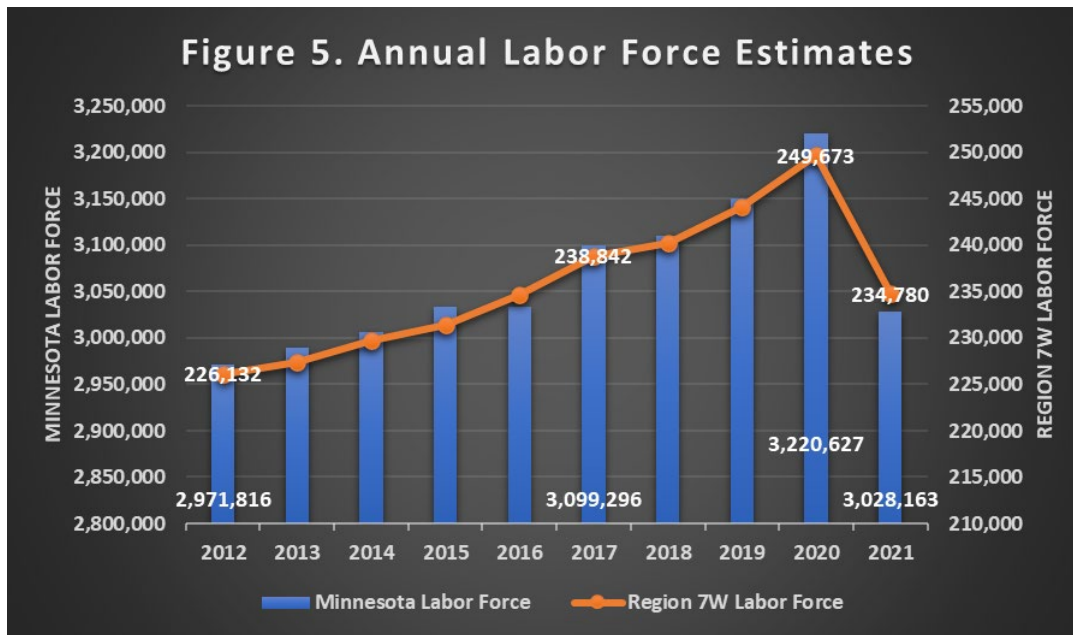
Region 7W 's population is less diverse than the state's but is increasing in diversity over time. In 2021, 23,836 people reported as Black or African American, that is an increase of 145.3% from 2015.

Region 7W outpaced the state of Minnesota in terms of increasing diversity in all measured races by more than two times over except for people reporting Two or More Races alone (see Table 2).

LABOR FORCE

Labor Force Change, 2012-2021

According to data from DEED's Local Area Unemployment Statistics (LAUS) program, Region 7W experienced steady growth in the size of the available labor force from 2000-2020, peaking at 249,673 available workers. Data recorded for 2021 shows the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on the workforce,



showing a steep decline to 234,780 workers, a loss of about 6.3%. The state of Minnesota experienced a very similar loss to the labor force at 6.4% decline (see Figure 5).

Labor Force Projections, 2023-2033

Region 7W's population is expected to increase over the next 30 years (see Figure 4), so is the region's labor force expected to increase by 4.1 percent over the next decade. The region will be experiencing a major shift in the age composition of the workforce. Projections show gains in workers ages 16 to 54 and over the age of 65. The labor force over the age of 65 is projected to increase substantially over the next ten years. However, there is significant loss in workforce projected for ages 55 to 64 (see Table 3). This is the result of the Baby Boom generation making their way through the population pyramid. The shift in the age composition of Region 7W's workforce will likely lead to a tight labor market and employers will need to respond to the lack of workforce availability.

Table 3. Region 7W Labor Force Projections, 2023-2033				
	2023 Labor Force Projection	2033 Labor Force Projection	Numeric Change	Percentage Change
16 to 19 years	15,603	15,761	158	1.0%
20 to 24 years	28,539	29,668	1,129	4.0%
25 to 44 years	102,078	107,762	5,684	5.6%
45 to 54 years	47,665	51,917	4,252	8.9%
55 to 64 years	40,718	36,597	(4,121)	-10.1%
65 to 74 years	10,208	12,298	2,090	20.5%
75 years & over	1,888	2,774	886	46.9%
Total Labor Force	246,699	256,777	10,078	4.1%
Source: calculated from Minnesota State Demographic Center population projections & 2016-2021 American Community Survey 5-Year Estimates				

Employment Characteristics, 2020

Table 4. Employment Characteristics, 2020					
	Region 7W			Minnesota	
	In Labor Force	Labor Force Partic. Rate	Unemp. Rate	Labor Force Partic. Rate	Unemp. Rate
Total Labor Force	241,823	72.2%	3.5%	69.3%	3.8%
16 to 19 years	15,238	58.8%	9.9%	52.0%	11.0%
20 to 24 years	27,189	86.1%	5.6%	83.8%	6.2%
25 to 44 years	100,213	89.5%	2.9%	88.7%	3.4%
45 to 54 years	49,761	90.5%	2.4%	87.6%	2.8%
55 to 64 years	39,338	74.4%	2.9%	73.0%	3.1%
65 to 74 years	8,537	25.5%	1.8%	28.4%	2.5%
75 years & over	1,547	6.4%	0.7%	6.8%	2.4%
Employment Characteristics by Race & Hispanic Origin					
White alone	220,840	72.2%	3.0%	68.9%	3.2%
Black or African American	8,741	74.3%	13.5%	71.3%	8.7%
American Indian & Alaska Native	476	50.8%	7.0%	57.9%	12.7%
Asian or Other Pac. Islanders	4,318	78.6%	5.7%	72.0%	4.0%
Some Other Race	2,943	72.0%	2.6%	72.7%	6.2%
Two or More Races	4,472	73.9%	7.3%	73.3%	7.1%
Hispanic or Latino	6,804	79.1%	3.9%	76.5%	6.3%
Employment Characteristics by Veteran Status					
Veteran, 18 to 64 years	9,449	81.8%	4.0%	79.5%	4.0%
Employment Characteristics by Disability					
With any Disability, 20 to 64 years	11,253	54.7%	7.3%	52.9%	8.9%
Employment Characteristics by Educational Attainment					
Population, 25 to 64 years	189,302	86.1%	2.8%	84.4%	3.2%
Less than H.S. Diploma	8,925	71.3%	3.6%	66.3%	4.5%
H.S. Diploma or Equivalent	45,302	80.8%	2.0%	77.9%	2.5%
Some College or Assoc. Degree	75,374	88.1%	3.0%	85.2%	3.3%
Bachelor's Degree or Higher	59,752	90.9%	1.3%	90.0%	1.9%

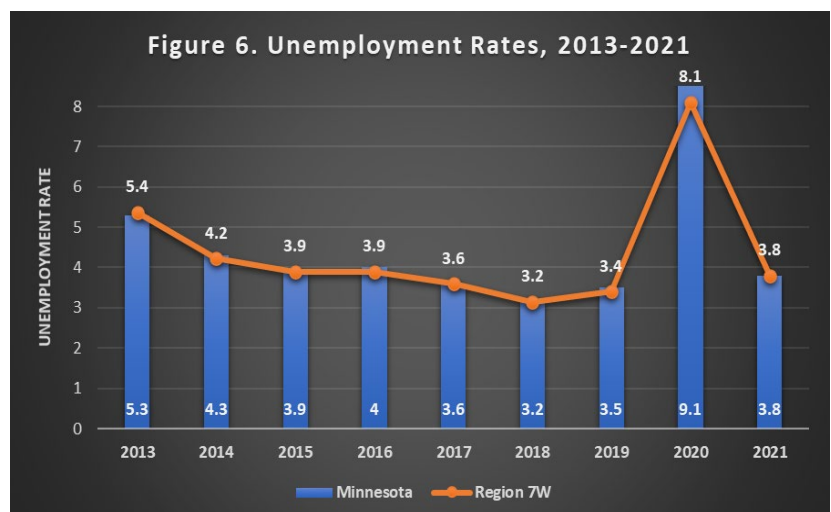
Source: 2016-2020 American Community Survey 5-Year Estimates

participation by Black or African American workers since the 2017 CEDS report and a 7.2 percent increase in labor force participation for Hispanic or Latino workers, landing the labor force participation rates at 74.3 percent and 79.1 percent, respectively.

Unemployment Rate, 2013-2021

Region 7W's unemployment rate has tracked closely with the state of Minnesota's unemployment rate, either matching or coming in less than the state for the last 8 consecutive years (see Figure 6). According to DEED's Local Area Unemployment Statistics, both Region 7W and the state of Minnesota saw unemployment rates more than double in 2020 because of the Covid-19 pandemic. Remarkably, both the region and the state experienced near full recovery by 2021.

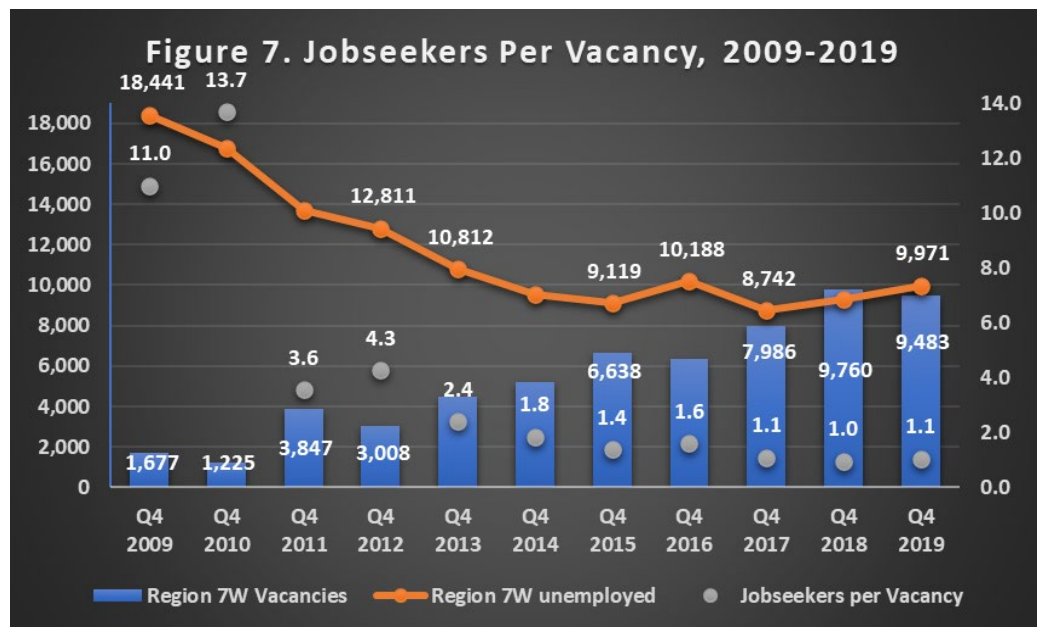
Region 7W has 72.2 percent of people aged 16 years and over participating in the labor force, three percent higher than the state participation rate. Region 7W has a higher labor force participation rate for workers aged 16 to 64 years old but falls below the state labor force participation rate for workers aged 65 years and older. Region 7W has low unemployment rates in all age brackets as compared to the state of Minnesota, even in the age range of 65 to 74 years and 75 years and over where the unemployment rates are 1.8 percent and .7 percent, respectively (see Table 4). Since the 2017 CEDS report, Region 7W has made significant progress in shrinking the unemployment rate in every minority group. American Indian & Alaska Native and Hispanic or Latino populations lowered the unemployment rate by two-thirds. Region 7W is experiencing an 8.5 percent increase in labor force



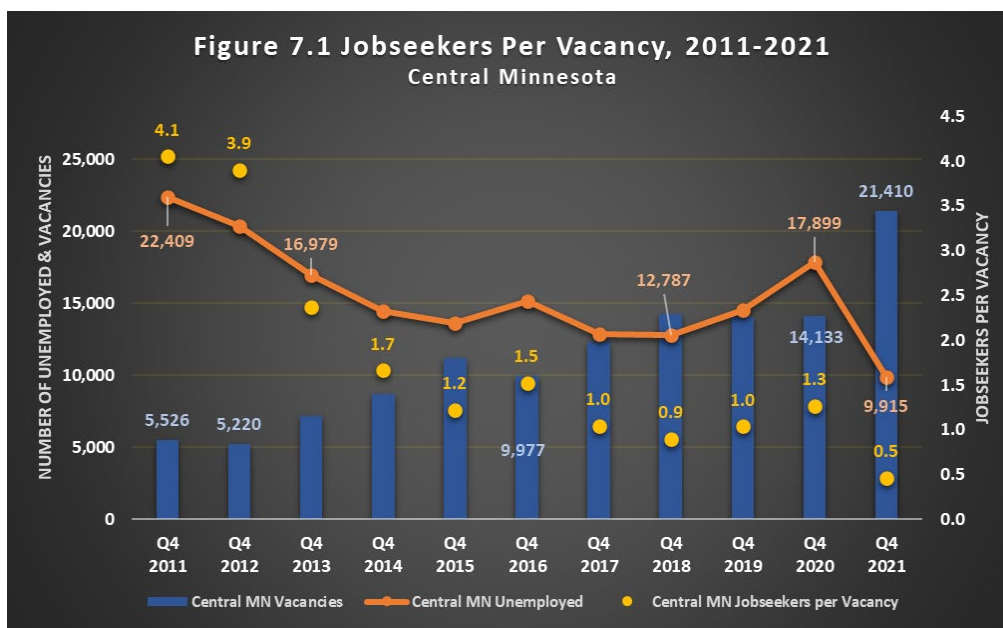
Region 7W Jobseekers per Vacancy, 2009-2019

EDR level Job Vacancy Survey (JVS) data was not produced by the state of Minnesota after 2019. As a result, there are data presented for Region 7W thru 2019 and Central Minnesota thru 2021. The labor market remained tight since the 2017 CEDS report. In Q4 of 2018, the region reported having more job vacancies than unemployed job seekers. In Q4 of 2019, the labor market remained incredibly tight with 9,483

job vacancies reported, with only 9,971 unemployed jobseekers looking for employment (See Figure 7). The most recent data does not include the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on the labor market, but as Figure 6 above shows an unemployment rate of 3.8 percent that is indicative of an increasingly tight labor market.



Central Minnesota Jobseekers per Vacancy, 2011-2021



Region 7W is included in JVS data for Central Minnesota and has statistically trended with Central Minnesota. Figure 7.1 illustrates the effect of the Covid-19 pandemic on job vacancy as we see a spike in unemployment in 2020. Figure 7.1 also illustrates in 2021 when workers re-entered the workforce post-pandemic. A major shift in workforce patterns emerged as job vacancies reached a ten year high, while

unemployment simultaneously reached a ten year low creating one of the tightest labor markets the region has seen in well over a decade. The amount of job vacancies coupled with the low jobseekers-per-vacancy rate depicts the mass exit of the workforce the Covid-19 pandemic caused.

Educational Attainment by Age Group, 2020

Region 7W has a greater population of young people aged 18 to 24 years old in comparison to the state of Minnesota. The region's younger population is demonstrating a commitment to higher education with 44.54 percent of people in this age bracket attending some college but having not yet received their degree. This is 6.22 percentage points higher than the state average for the same category (see Table 5). Region 7W also experienced an increased percentage in high school graduates for people aged 25 to 44 as 22.14 percent of this age group has a high school diploma or equivalent as compared to the 2017 CEDS, which reported 19.9 percent for the same category.

Region 7W has a higher percentage of people in the 25 to 44 and 45 to 64 age groups who have obtained some college, no degree and an associate's level education, but much lower levels of people with a bachelor's or advanced level degree in comparison to the state percentages.

Also notable is the increase in people with associate's degrees, bachelor's degrees, and advanced degrees in the age brackets of 45 to 64 years and 65 years and over for both Region 7W and the state of Minnesota. Since the 2017 CEDS report, all three levels of advanced education for both age brackets increased percentages of attainment demonstrating an increase in the older population holding college degrees.

Data has demonstrated that people are staying in the workforce longer. As the Baby Boomers come through the age brackets, we will continue to see an increase in education attainment levels for people holding college degrees in the 65 years and older workforce.

Table 5. Educational Attainment by Age Group, 2020			
	Region 7W		Minnesota
	Number	Percent	Percent
18 to 24 years	44,684	13.88%	11.60%
Less than high school	4,437	9.93%	11.80%
High school grad. (incl. equiv.)	12,401	27.75%	28.46%
Some college, no degree	19,903	44.54%	38.32%
Associate's degree	3,588	8.03%	6.80%
Bachelor's degree	4,058	9.08%	14.60%
Advanced degree	297	0.66%	0.74%
25 to 44 years	111,950	34.78%	34.20%
Less than high school	5,734	5.12%	6.20%
High school grad. (incl. equiv.)	24,782	22.14%	18.31%
Some college, no degree	25,084	22.41%	19.42%
Associate's degree	19,353	17.29%	13.44%
Bachelor's degree	26,258	23.46%	29.30%
Advanced degree	10,132	9.05%	13.33%
45 to 64 years	107,848	33.50%	33.60%
Less than high school	6,169	5.72%	5.90%
High school grad. (incl. equiv.)	31,284	29.01%	24.45%
Some college, no degree	26,398	24.48%	21.80%
Associate's degree	14,676	13.61%	12.41%
Bachelor's degree	20,087	18.63%	22.83%
Advanced degree	9,234	8.56%	12.61%
65 years and over	57,425	17.82%	20.64%
Less than high school	6,921	12.05%	8.55%
High school grad. (incl. equiv.)	22,993	40.04%	33.67%
Some college, no degree	12,195	21.24%	21.30%
Associate's degree	3,684	6.42%	7.21%
Bachelor's degree	7,391	12.87%	17.86%
Advanced degree	4,241	7.39%	11.42%
Source: 2016-2020 American Community Survey 5-Year Estimates			

Commute Shed and Labor Shed, 2019

According to the commuting data from the U.S. Census Bureau, Region 7W continues to be a net labor exporter, having more workers than available jobs with a net outflow of 39,503 workers.

There are 43,112 people who are employed in Region 7W but live outside the area as compared to nearly double the amount of people at 82,615, who live in Region 7W but are employed outside of the region.

Table 6. Region 7W Inflow/Outflow Job Counts (All Jobs), 2019

	2019	
	Count	Share
Employed in the Selection Area	140,426	100%
Employed in the Selection Area but Living Outside	43,112	30.70%
Employed and Living in the Selection Area	97,314	69.30%
Living in the Selection Area	179,929	100%
Living in the Selection Area but Employed Outside	82,615	45.92%
Living and Employed in the Selection Area	97,314	54.08%

Source: U.S. Census Bureau, OnTheMap

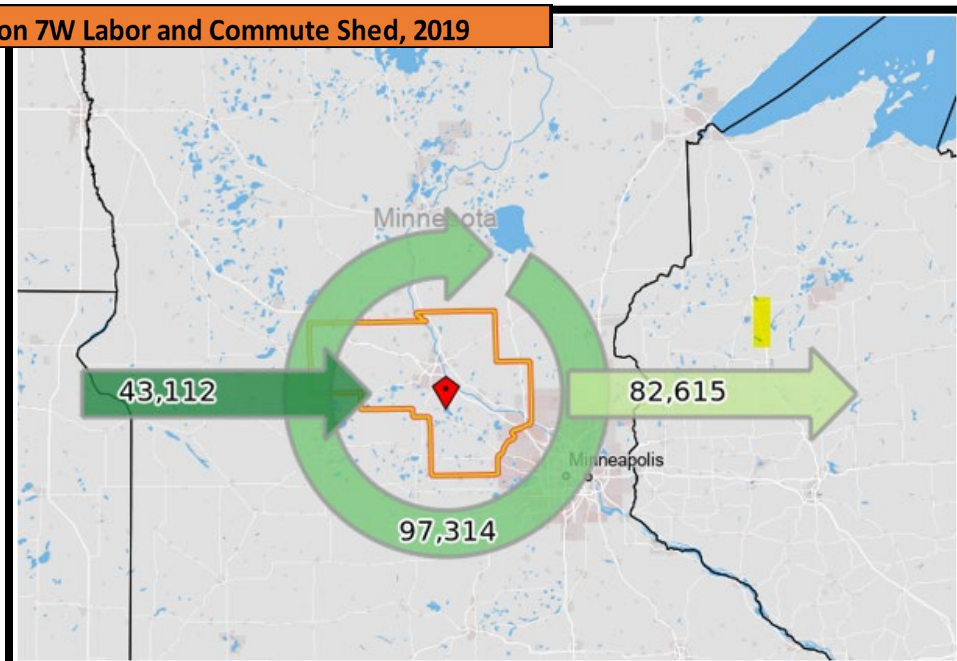
Despite having the lowest growth rate percentage of all 4 counties in Region 7W (see Table 1), Stearns county remains the largest county in the region. St. Cloud remains the largest draw for workers into Stearns County while Benton, Sherburne, and Wright counties have labor outflows primarily to the Twin Cities metro area and St. Cloud (see Table 7 & Figure 8).

Table 7. Region 7W Commuting Patterns

Where our Workers Live Outside 7W			Where Residents of 7W Go to Work	
County	Number/Percent		County	Number/Percent
Hennepin	7,764 (5.5%)		Hennepin	45,348 (25.2%)
Anoka	3,915 (2.8%)		Anoka	8,170 (4.5%)
Morrison	3,617 (2.6%)		Ramsey	6,611 (3.7%)
Mille Lacs	2,957 (2.1%)		Dakota	3,116 (1.7%)

Source: U.S. Census Bureau, OnTheMap

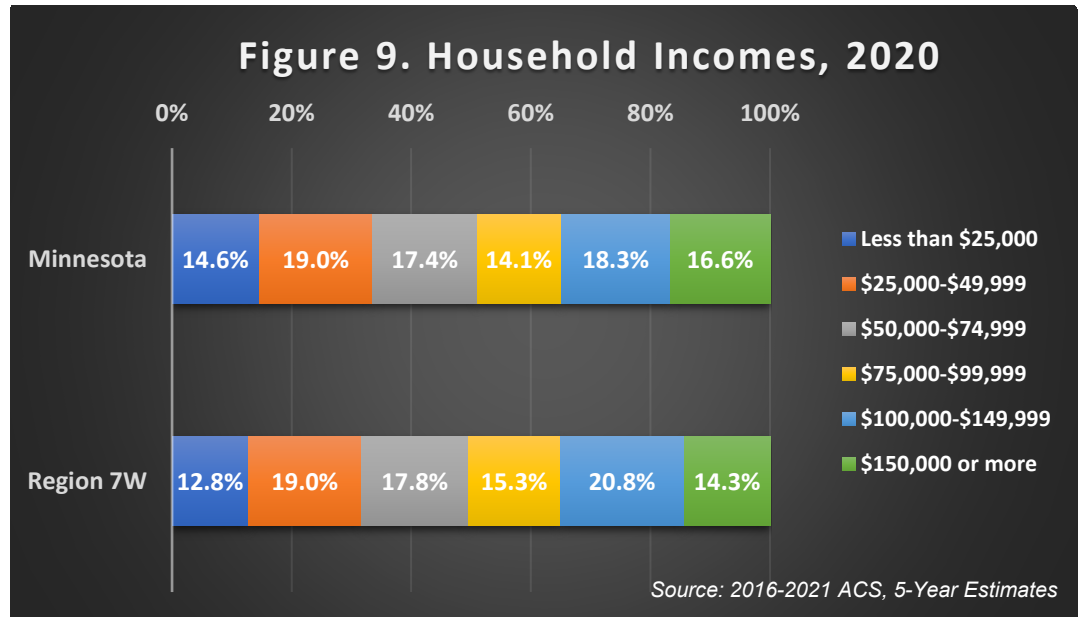
Figure 8. Region 7W Labor and Commute Shed, 2019



INCOMES, WAGES, AND OCCUPATIONS

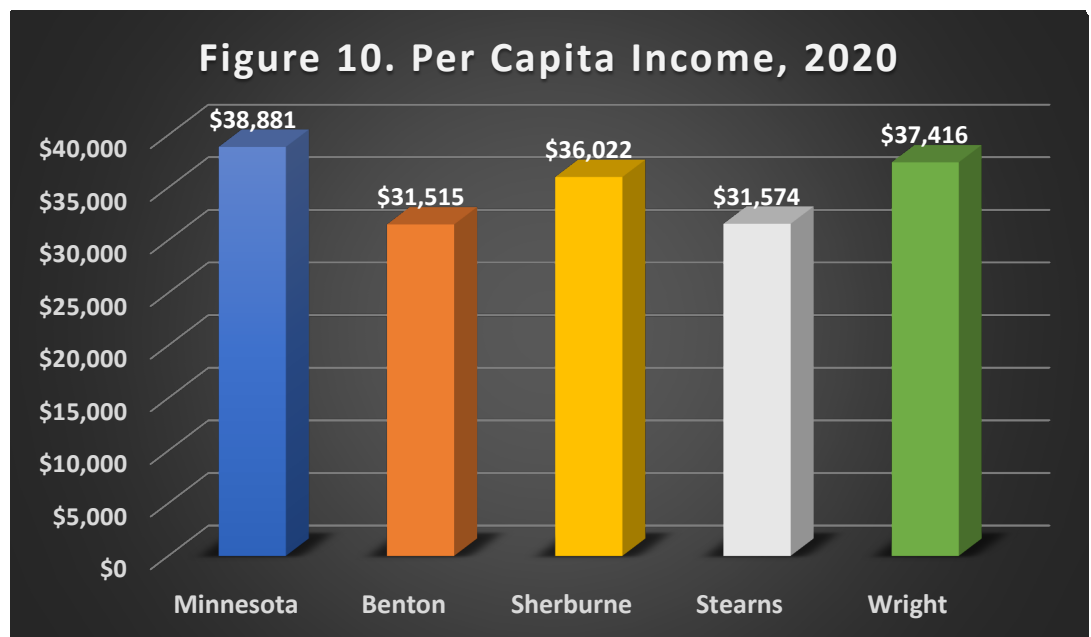
Household Incomes

The median household income for the state of Minnesota was \$73,382 in 2020. Region 7W surpassed the state median income with a regional median income of \$75,563. Sherburne County led the region with a median income of \$88,671, followed closely by Wright County at \$87,882, then Stearns County at \$65,244 and lastly Benton County at a median income level of \$60,564. The difference in income is attributed to Sherburne and Wright Counties closer proximity to the Twin Cities Metro area than Benton and Stearns Counties. Also, both Sherburne and Wright Counties have several major highways improving access and travel times to the Twin Cities Metro for commuters. Region 7W has seen a decrease in the percentage of household incomes that are less than \$50,000 since 2015 dropping from 37.6 percent to 31.8 percent for the region. In contrast, there is an even larger percentage increase to households in the region that have median incomes higher than \$100,000, moving from 25.8 percent in 2015 up to 35.1 percent in 2020.



Per Capita Incomes

The per capita income average for Region 7W is \$34,132. The state of Minnesota's per capita income is \$38,881, that's \$4,749 more than the regional average. Wright County has the highest per capita income at \$37,416, Benton County has the lowest per capita income at \$31,515 only \$59 lower than Stearns County (see Figure 10).



Cost of Living

According to DEED's Cost of Living tool, the basic needs budget for an average Minnesota family (which consists of two adults and one child, with one full-time and one part-time worker) was \$60,540 in 2021. The cost of living for a similar family in Region 7W was \$57,780. Region 7W is still holding at the third highest cost of living of the 13 Economic Development Regions in the state behind Twin Cities Metro and Region 7E- East Central. The highest monthly costs were housing, transportation, and food. Since the 2017 CEDS report, the cost of housing in Region 7W has seen a 22% increase.

Table 8. Family Yearly Cost, Worker Hourly Wage, and Fam. Monthly Costs, 2021: 1 FT & 1PT Worker, 1 child									
Region	Family Yearly Cost of Living	Hourly Wage Required	Monthly Costs						
			Child Care	Food	Health Care	Housing	Transportation	Other	Taxes
Region 7W	\$ 57,780	\$ 18.52	\$ 431	\$799	\$ 558	\$ 1,115	\$ 827	\$524	\$ 561
Minnesota	\$ 60,540	\$ 19.40	\$ 579	\$822	\$ 561	\$ 1,151	\$ 772	\$540	\$ 620

Source: DEED Cost of Living Tool

The yearly cost of living rises significantly when analysis is run for a family of two full-time workers and two children (see Table 9 below). For Region 7W, the yearly increase amounts to \$30,300 more dollars or more than 50 percent as compared to the cost of living for a family with one full-time worker, one part-time worker and one child.

Table 9. Family Yearly Cost, Worker Hourly Wage, and Fam. Monthly Costs, 2021: 2 FT workers, 2 children									
Region	Family Yearly Cost of Living	Hourly Wage Required	Monthly Costs						
			Child Care	Food	Health Care	Housing	Transportation	Other	Taxes
Region 7W	\$ 88,080	\$ 21.17	\$ 1,558	\$1,044	\$ 568	\$ 1,569	\$ 873	\$715	\$1,013
Minnesota	\$ 94,164	\$ 22.64	\$ 1,905	\$1,073	\$ 571	\$ 1,602	\$ 814	\$732	\$1,150

Source: DEED Cost of Living Tool

To meet the base cost of living for the region, the workers in the family would need to earn \$18.52 per hour for a family of three (see Table 8). The hourly wage required to meet the yearly cost of living in Region 7W increases to \$21.17 for a family of four to meet the basic needs standard of living. Both required wage scenarios are below the required hourly wage for same family size average for the state of Minnesota. This is an indicator that the family yearly cost of living is less in Region 7W as compared to the state of Minnesota's family yearly cost of living.

Wages and Occupations

According to DEED's Occupational Employment Statistics program, the median hourly wage for all occupations in Region 7W is \$25.60 in 2021, which was the third highest wage level of the 13 EDR's in the state. The wage gap has widened between Region 7W and the state as a whole. In 2019 the region was \$6.22/hr below the state hourly wage median, current data shows the region is now \$6.68/hr behind the state for 2021.

The 2019 data indicated that Region 7W's median hourly wage was \$9.52/hr below the median hourly wage in the neighboring seven-county Twin Cities metro area, which amounted to just over \$19,800 per year less income for a full-time worker. The region has also increased the gap in wage to \$10.15 per hour or about \$21,112 per year for a full-time worker (see Table 10 below). This also helps to explain the Labor and Commute Shed in Figure 8. Also noteworthy, in comparison to the 2019 Quarterly Census of Employment and Wages (QCEW) data, estimated employment across all regions is decreasing. Likely this is the lasting impact of the Covid-19 pandemic.

Table 10. Occupational Employment Statistics by Region, 2021	Median Hourly Wage 2021	Estimated Regional Employment	Median Hourly Wage 2019	Estimated Regional Employment 2019	Regional Employment Gain (+) Loss (-)
EDR 1 - Northwest	\$ 24.55	34,899	\$ 21.18	36,498	-1,599
EDR 2 - Headwaters	\$ 23.20	29,729	\$ 20.18	32,557	-2,828
EDR 3 - Arrowhead	\$ 25.15	132,143	\$ 22.45	143,683	-11,540
EDR 4 - West Central	\$ 22.73	87,665	\$ 20.28	91,167	-3,502
EDR 5 - North Central	\$ 22.68	61,103	\$ 19.03	63,013	-1,910
EDR 6E - Southwest Central	\$ 23.05	50,219	\$ 20.55	53,346	-3,127
EDR 6W - Upper MN Valley	\$ 21.30	15,893	\$ 18.70	17,248	-1,355
EDR 7E - East Central	\$ 22.08	45,217	\$ 19.48	48,763	-3,546
EDR 7W - Central	\$ 25.60	170,695	\$ 22.43	176,369	-5,674
EDR 8 - Southwest	\$ 22.60	52,199	\$ 20.18	53,233	-1,034
EDR 9 - South Central	\$ 23.70	100,353	\$ 21.23	106,122	-5,769
EDR 10 - Southeast	\$ 28.30	236,684	\$ 25.58	246,808	-10,124
EDR 11 - 7-County Twin Cities	\$ 35.75	1,676,409	\$ 31.95	1,776,439	-100,030
State of Minnesota	\$ 32.28	2,759,918	\$ 28.65	2,901,632	-141,714
<i>Source: DEED EDR QCEW</i>					

Wages and Occupations continued

About 10 percent of jobs in Region 7W were classified as production jobs, according to DEED's Occupational Employment Statistics for Q1, 2022. For Region 7W, this is 2.6 percentage points higher concentration than the state of Minnesota. Region 7W also had a higher concentration of Sales & Related jobs, Transportation & Material Moving, Education, Training & Library, and Food Preparation & Servicing jobs (see Table 11).

The highest paying jobs in the region are in Management at a median hourly wage of \$46.37, Architecture & Engineering at \$38.80, Healthcare Practitioners at \$38.74, and Computer & Mathematical at \$38.06. Jobs in these categories primarily have higher education and training requirements. The lowest paying jobs in the region are in Food Preparation & Serving at \$14.40 per hour, Personal Care & Service at \$15.11, and Sales at \$15.15 per hour.

The state of Minnesota has a higher median hourly wage in every occupation sector when compared to Region 7W, except in Community & Social Service and Protective Service occupations.

Table 11. Region 7W Occupational Employment Statistics, 1st Qtr. 2022					State of Minnesota		
	Median Hourly Wage	Estimated Regional Employment	Share of Total Employment	Location Quotient	Median Hourly Wage	Estimated Regional Employment	Share of Total Employment
Total, All Occupations	\$22.94	165,010	100%	1.0	\$ 23.81	2,695,450	100%
Office & Administrative Support	\$21.55	19,020	11.5%	0.9	\$ 23.12	334,550	12.4%
Production	\$19.76	16,520	10.0%	1.4	\$ 22.22	198,940	7.4%
Sales & Related	\$15.15	16,380	9.9%	1.1	\$ 24.27	245,390	9.1%
Transportation & Material Moving	\$19.20	15,860	9.6%	1.2	\$ 22.49	209,780	7.8%
Education, Training & Library	\$24.68	10,590	6.4%	1.2	\$ 29.37	149,990	5.6%
Healthcare Practitioners & Technical	\$38.74	11,090	6.7%	1.0	\$ 48.71	190,180	7.1%
Food Prep. & Servicing Related	\$14.40	13,790	8.4%	1.1	\$ 15.70	198,800	7.4%
Construction & Extraction	\$30.01	9,760	5.9%	1.5	\$ 31.31	107,180	4.0%
Management	\$46.37	8,750	5.3%	0.8	\$ 50.51	181,090	6.7%
Installation, Maintenance & Repair	\$24.65	6,640	4.0%	1.1	\$ 27.97	96,660	3.6%
Personal Care & Service	\$15.11	3,410	2.1%	1.0	\$ 17.91	56,580	2.1%
Business & Financial Operations	\$31.45	7,260	4.4%	0.6	\$ 41.09	192,700	7.1%
Building, Grounds, Cleaning & Maint.	\$17.68	4,870	3.0%	1.0	\$ 18.59	75,850	2.8%
Healthcare Support	\$15.35	8,960	5.4%	0.9	\$ 17.40	162,530	6.0%
Computer & Mathematical	\$38.06	2,080	1.3%	0.3	\$ 47.96	101,560	3.8%
Community & Social Service	\$29.16	2,510	1.5%	0.8	\$ 27.64	53,670	2.0%
Protective Service	\$29.68	2,400	1.5%	1.0	\$ 28.50	40,580	1.5%
Architecture & Engineering	\$38.80	1,760	1.1%	0.6	\$ 43.48	51,970	1.9%
Arts, Design, Entertainment & Media	\$23.93	1,570	1.0%	0.7	\$ 30.81	36,710	1.4%
Life, Physical & Social Science	\$36.86	930	0.6%	0.6	\$ 40.61	26,140	1.0%
Legal	\$36.59	620	0.4%	0.5	\$ 53.30	19,860	0.7%
Farming, Fishing & Forestry	\$17.25	280	0.2%	1.1	\$ 19.85	4,350	0.2%

Source: DEED Occupational Employment Statistics, Qtr. 1 2022

Job Vacancy Survey

Employers in Region 7W reported 9,483 job vacancies in the fourth quarter of 2019. Job vacancies are at the second highest level in the last 15 years. Most vacancies recorded are for part-time positions, many of which still require some level of post-secondary

education. Industries experiencing the highest job vacancy rate are Building & Grounds Cleaning and Maintenance, and Food Preparation & Serving Related occupations, respectively. Also notable is the wage percent increase in certain occupation sectors. Building & Grounds Cleaning and Maintenance, Business & Financial Operations, and Computer & Mathematical occupation sectors have seen median hourly wages nearly double or more than double in the last three years.

Minnesota's Department of Employment and Economic Development (DEED) discontinued the production of Job Vacancy Survey (JVS) results for Economic Development Regions (EDR) at the end of 2019. The JVS data for EDR's is now part of the Minnesota Planning Regions. For Region 7W that means our JVS data is

Table 12.1 Central MN Job Vacancy Survey Results, Qtr. 4 2021

	Number of Total Vacancies	Job Vacancy Rate	Percent Part-Time	Percent Temporary or Seasonal	Requiring Post-Secondary Education	Requiring 1 Plus Years of Experience	Requiring Certificate or License	Median Hourly Wage Offer
Total, All Occupations	21,410	8.1	27%	14%	25%	38%	38%	\$ 17.26
Management Occupations	442	3.3	20%	14%	54%	85%	29%	\$ 28.11
Business and Financial Operations Occupations	422	4.1	32%	5%	51%	67%	56%	\$ 26.82
Computer and Mathematical Occupations	79	2.7	0%	6%	73%	90%	32%	\$ 29.29
Architecture and Engineering Occupations	258	7.7	0%	0%	45%	46%	41%	\$ 20.98
Life, Physical, and Social Science Occupations	79	5.3	3%	4%	99%	87%	84%	\$ 30.71
Community and Social Service Occupations	494	9.7	21%	6%	62%	56%	95%	\$ 18.61
Legal Occupations	17	1.7	0%	1%	100%	100%	70%	\$ 29.20
Educational Instruction and Library Occupations	894	5.4	18%	30%	71%	61%	80%	\$ 17.28
Arts, Design, Entertainment, Sports, and Media Occu.	160	7.2	14%	4%	12%	89%	39%	\$ 18.57
Healthcare Practitioners and Technical Occupations	2,021	11.8	20%	11%	93%	62%	90%	\$ 25.51
Healthcare Support Occupations	973	5.8	46%	9%	30%	26%	58%	\$ 15.69
Protective Service Occupations	197	4.7	29%	2%	40%	63%	85%	\$ 22.39
Food Preparation and Serving Related Occupations	4,417	20.2	36%	1%	1%	22%	8%	\$ 13.19
Building and Grounds Cleaning and Maintenance Occu.	612	8.3	47%	7%	7%	26%	52%	\$ 14.72
Personal Care and Service Occupations	620	11.4	12%	4%	25%	46%	86%	\$ 11.49
Sales and Related Occupations	2,028	8	64%	6%	1%	21%	6%	\$ 13.02
Office and Administrative Support Occupations	865	2.9	22%	4%	12%	56%	22%	\$ 16.78
Farming, Fishing, and Forestry Occupations	228	33.1	48%	48%	10%	2%	1%	\$ 17.94
Construction and Extraction Occupations	1,653	12	0%	71%	8%	8%	15%	\$ 22.92
Installation, Maintenance, and Repair Occupations	816	7.9	4%	24%	11%	62%	42%	\$ 18.49
Production Occupations	2,175	8.3	5%	9%	20%	43%	14%	\$ 20.13
Transportation and Material Moving Occupations	1,922	8.2	34%	12%	6%	37%	70%	\$ 19.18

Source: DEED Job Vacancy Survey, Qtr. 4 2021

represented in the Central Minnesota Planning Region data, which is current as of Qtr. 4 2021. As a result of the Covid-19 pandemic, the shift in workforce trends such as the uptick in part-time work in Management and Business & Financial Operations are evident in this data set.

Occupations in Demand

Table 13. Central Minnesota Regional Top 30 Occupations in Demand with Education Level, 2022

Job Title	Current Demand Rank	Median Wage	Education Requirements
Retail Salespersons	1	\$30,515/yr	High school diploma or equivalent
Fast Food and Counter Workers	2	\$28,938/yr	High school diploma or equivalent
Home Health and Personal Care Aides	3	\$31,094/yr	High school diploma or equivalent
Nursing Assistants	4	\$38,996/yr	Postsecondary non-degree award
Registered Nurses	5	\$81,426/yr	Associate's degree
Heavy and Tractor-Trailer Truck Drivers	6	\$52,018/yr	High school diploma or equivalent
Cashiers	7	\$29,427/yr	High school diploma or equivalent
First-Line Supervisors of Retail Sales Workers	8	\$43,582/yr	High school diploma or equivalent
Stockers and Order Fillers	9	\$31,789/yr	High school diploma or equivalent
Janitors and Cleaners	10	\$36,185/yr	High school diploma or equivalent
Licensed Practical and Licensed Vocational Nurses	11	\$49,345/yr	Postsecondary non-degree award
Customer Service Representatives	12	\$38,870/yr	High school diploma or equivalent
Teaching Assistant	13	\$37,860/yr	High school diploma or equivalent
First-Line Supervisors of Food Preparation and Serving Workers	14	\$39,945/yr	High school diploma or equivalent
Elementary School Teachers	15	\$63,794/yr	Bachelor's degree
Laborers and Freight, Stock, and Material Movers, Hand	16	\$38,843/yr	High school diploma or equivalent
Construction Laborers	17	\$48,133/yr	High school diploma or equivalent
Office Clerks, General	18	\$39,332/yr	High school diploma or equivalent
Secondary School Teachers	19	\$63,522/yr	Bachelor's degree
Machinists	20	\$51,052/yr	Postsecondary non-degree award
Maids and Housekeeping Cleaners	21	\$31,917/yr	High school diploma or equivalent
Miscellaneous Assemblers and Fabricators	22	\$39,282/yr	High school diploma or equivalent
Light Truck Drivers	23	\$41,535/yr	High school diploma or equivalent
Cooks, Fast Food	24	\$29,736/yr	High school diploma or equivalent
Passenger Vehicle Drivers	25	\$35,713/yr	High school diploma or equivalent
Maintenance and Repair Workers	26	\$48,583/yr	High school diploma or equivalent
Carpenters	27	\$50,504/yr	High school diploma or equivalent
Packers and Packagers, Hand	28	\$24,883/yr	High school diploma or equivalent
Secretaries and Administrative Assistants	29	\$47,382/yr	High school diploma or equivalent
Sales Representatives, Wholesale and Manufacturing	30	\$64,434/yr	High school diploma or equivalent

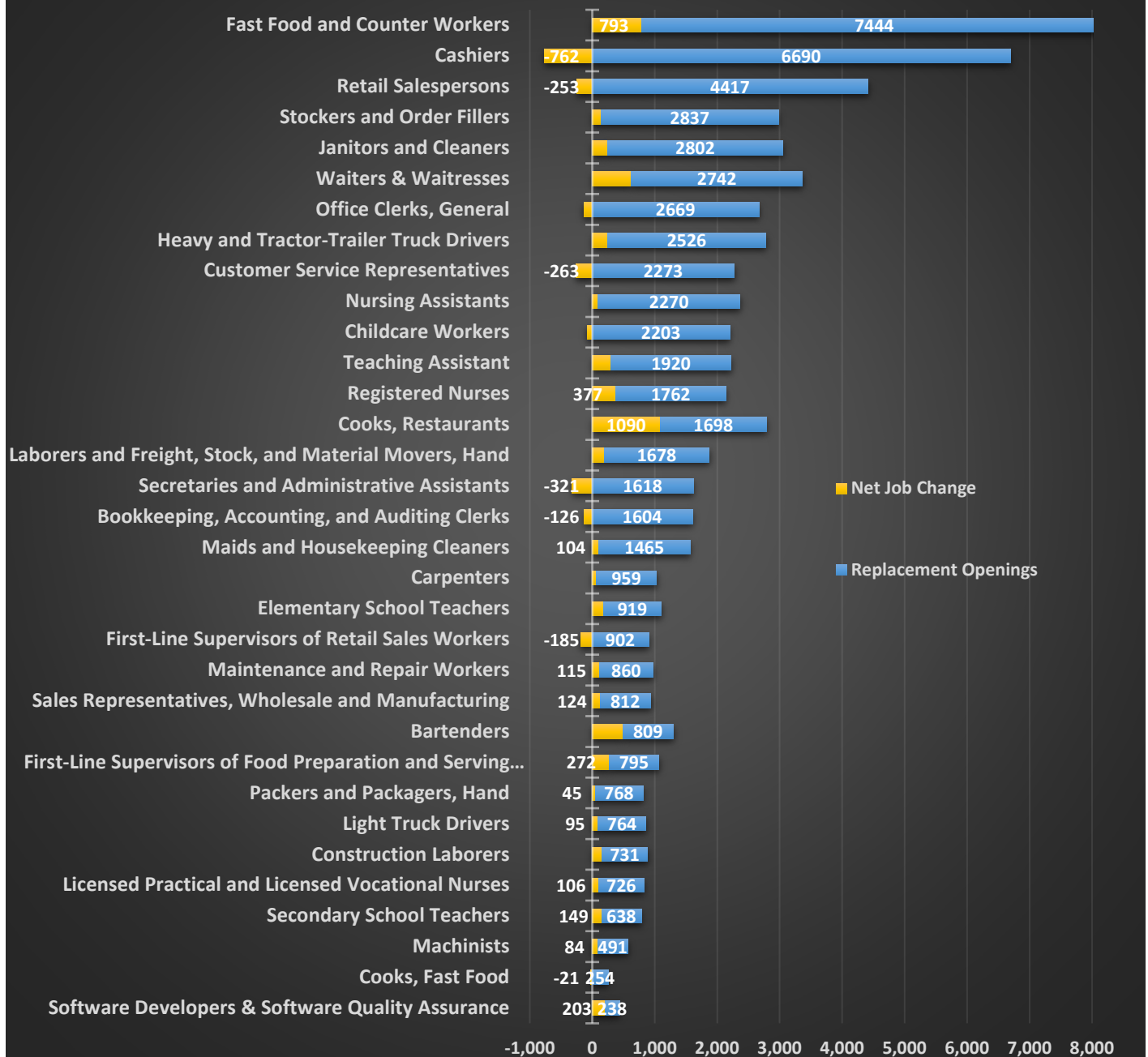
Source: DEED Occupations in Demand

DEED's Occupations in Demand tool shows that there are hundreds of occupations in demand across multiple sectors and with varying educational requirements. Table 13 above depicts the top 30 occupations in demand in the Central Minnesota Region in conjunction with the occupation's median annual wage and education requirements for 2022. Currently the most in demand occupation is in Retail Sales with a median annual wage of \$30,515, this wage has increased from \$21,315 in 2016. Currently the highest paying in demand jobs for the Central Minnesota Region are Registered Nurses at \$81,426 per year, Sales Representatives at \$64,434 per year, and Elementary & Secondary School Teachers at around \$63,500 per year. All these higher paying in demand occupations require either a bachelor's or associate's degree, except for a Sales Representative occupation, which has an educational requirement of a high school diploma or equivalent.

Central Minnesota Employment Projections, 2020-2030

Minnesota Department of Employment and Economic Development (MN DEED) project that the Central Minnesota planning area will experience overall growth through 2030. The Region is projected to have a need to fill 61,284 replacement openings left vacant by retirements and other career changes. In addition to the large number of replacement openings, the region is projecting 117,904 new jobs by 2030. Job sectors projected to see rapid growth are Fast Food, Nursing, Teaching, Carpenters, Truck Drivers, and Laborers (see Figure 11).

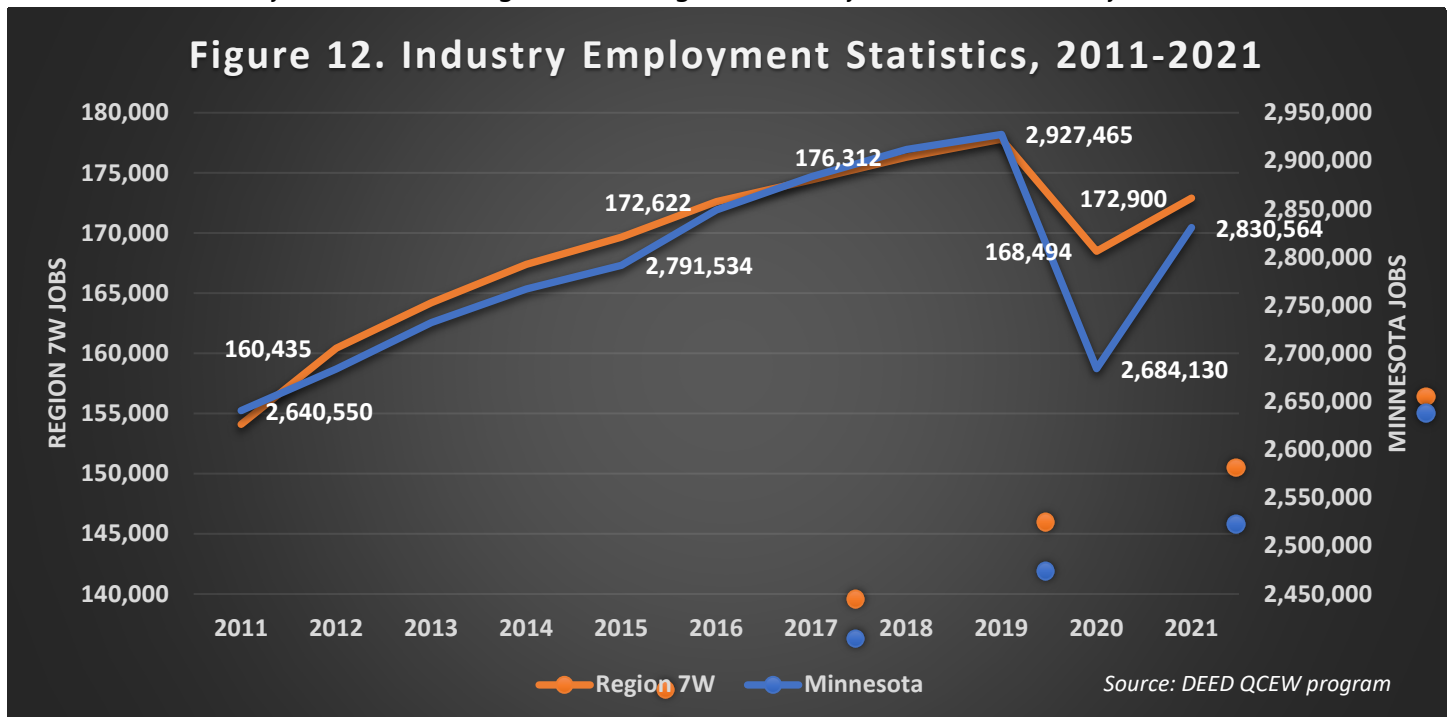
Figure 11. Central Minnesota Regional Employment Projections, 2020-2030



ECONOMY

Industry Employment

For nearly an entire decade prior to 2020, both the State of Minnesota and Region 7W experienced steady job growth: 14.2% and 18.1%, respectively. Unfortunately, because of the COVID-19 pandemic, both the state and the region suffered significant job declines in 2020. This resulted in a loss of over 240,000 jobs for the state, and over 9,300 jobs for Region 7W. In comparison, Minnesota lost roughly 9.1% of jobs in 2020, Region 7W lost about 5.5% of jobs in 2020. Minnesota and Region 7W have made great strides in recovering jobs lost because of the COVID-19 pandemic. Minnesota has gained back more than half the jobs lost, and Region 7W has gained back just under half the jobs lost.



DEED's Quarterly Census of Employment & Wages (QCEW) program shows that Region 7W was home to 11,481 business establishments providing 172,903 jobs through 2021, with a total payroll of over \$9 billion. Region 7W makes up 6.1 percent of the state's total number of jobs, but only 4.9 percent of the state's total payroll. The average annual wage across all industries in Region 7W is \$53,248, which is \$13,780 less than the state of Minnesota's average annual wage of \$67,028. Stearns County remains the largest employment center in Region 7W, providing 83,532 jobs, even though since 2016 this number

Table 14. Region 7W Industry Employment Statistics, 2021					Change in Jobs 2016-2021	Percent Change 2016-2021
Geography	Number of Firms	Number of Jobs	Total Payroll	Average Annual Wage		
Total, All Industries	11,481	172,903	\$ 9,095,692,755.00	\$ 53,248.00	2,743	2%
Benton	1,030	17,366	\$ 851,903,095.00	\$ 49,452.00	197	1%
Sherburne	2,321	26,588	\$ 1,347,634,524.00	\$ 51,740.00	1,027	4%
Stearns	4,499	83,532	\$ 4,595,057,095.00	\$ 55,744.00	(1,668)	-2%
Wright	3,631	45,417	\$ 2,301,098,041.00	\$ 50,960.00	3,188	8%
State of Minnesota	191,052	2,830,564	\$ 185,969,067,414.00	\$ 67,028.00	16,292	1%

Source: DEED Quarterly Census of Employment & Wages (QCEW)

has declined from 85,200. Benton, Sherburne, and Wright Counties collectively added 4,412 jobs in the last 5 years.

Industry Employment continued

Providing 27,973 jobs to the region and nearly \$1.6 billion in total payroll, Health Care & Social Assistance is the largest employing industry in Region 7W, despite experiencing a negative change in jobs since 2016 likely due to the Covid-19 pandemic. Manufacturing is the second strongest industry for employment in Region 7W, with 25,026 jobs at 707 firms providing over \$1.5 billion in total payroll to workers. The Retail Trade industry has 23,469 jobs at 1,282 establishments, and experienced an average annual wage increase of \$7,806 since 2016.

The Accommodation & Food Service industry lost 1,232 jobs, while experiencing growth from 723 firms in 2016 to 758 firms in 2021. Wages in this industry have historically been one of the lowest in Region 7W and remain the second lowest annual wage at \$18,720 despite a 27.31 percent increase in annual wages since 2016.

A trend that is evident in Region 7W is a very steep increase in the average annual wage across all industries. Highlighted in green are average annual wage increases of greater than 25 percent since 2016 (see Table 15). Industries that are seeing the largest wage increases are Finance & Insurance at 44.06 percent increase, Management Companies at 32.84 percent, Other Services at 29.2 percent and Retail Trade at 28.99 percent increase. See above discussion on Figure 6 & 7 regarding the low unemployment rate and incredibly tight labor market. The increase in wages is likely a staff attraction and retainment effort on the employer's part.

Table 15. Region 7W Industry Employment Statistics, 2021

NAICS Industry Title	2021 Annual Data				Avg. Annual Wage	2016-2021		
	Number of Firms	Number of Jobs	Percent of Jobs	Total Payroll		Change in Jobs	Percent Change	Avg. Annual Wage Percent Change
Total, All Industries	11,481	172,904	100%	\$ 9,095,692,755.00	\$ 53,248.00	2,744	1.61%	25.24%
Health Care & Social Assistance	1,479	27,973	16.2%	\$1,585,909,281	\$ 56,004.00	(566)	-1.98%	17.41%
Manufacturing	707	25,026	14.5%	\$1,509,296,798	\$ 61,100.00	34	0.14%	21.67%
Retail Trade	1,282	23,469	13.6%	\$809,464,301	\$ 34,736.00	72	0.31%	28.99%
Educational Services	230	16,246	9.4%	\$789,460,760	\$ 54,808.00	635	4.07%	23.44%
Accommodation & Food Service	758	13,033	7.5%	\$237,030,611	\$ 18,720.00	(1,232)	-8.64%	27.31%
Construction	1,779	14,594	8.4%	\$1,102,362,253	\$ 77,688.00	2,847	24.24%	27.46%
Admin. Support & Waste Mgmt. Svcs.	536	7,094	4.1%	\$274,237,610	\$ 39,572.00	(26)	-0.37%	25.70%
Wholesale Trade	397	6,975	4.0%	\$466,428,518	\$ 68,224.00	165	2.42%	27.02%
Transportation & Warehousing	448	6,799	3.9%	\$364,787,603	\$ 55,796.00	80	1.19%	28.75%
Public Administration	208	6,605	3.8%	\$393,681,835	\$ 60,164.00	254	4.00%	19.83%
Other Services	1,342	5,344	3.1%	\$168,720,877	\$ 32,032.00	158	3.05%	29.20%
Finance & Insurance	527	5,075	2.9%	\$458,888,962	\$ 82,628.00	242	5.01%	44.06%
Professional & Technical Service	747	4,044	2.3%	\$278,441,371	\$ 68,536.00	138	3.53%	20.21%
Information	144	1,890	1.1%	\$122,818,553	\$ 65,260.00	(240)	-11.27%	23.03%
Utilities	26	1,628	0.9%	\$198,759,221	\$ 121,680.00	(285)	-14.90%	18.99%
Arts, Entertainment, & Recreation	223	1,823	1.1%	\$30,166,335	\$ 16,380.00	(66)	-3.49%	18.76%
Agriculture, Forestry, Fish & Hunt	213	2,241	1.3%	\$96,183,443	\$ 41,392.00	406	22.13%	23.63%
Real Estate, Rental, & Leasing	366	1,237	0.7%	\$47,708,212	\$ 37,648.00	(194)	-13.56%	27.19%
Management Companies	57	1,498	0.9%	\$139,814,605	\$ 93,808.00	261	21.10%	32.84%
Mining	12	305	0.2%	\$21,531,606	\$ 69,992.00	61	25.00%	14.45%

Source: DEED Quarterly Census of Employment & Wages (QCEW) & 2017 7WCEDS Report

Distinguishing Industries

Region 7W has a high share of employment in Manufacturing, Construction, and Transportation. Specializing in areas of Furniture & Related Product Manufacturing, Fabricated Metal Product Manufacturing, and Food Manufacturing, this industry makes up 11,602 jobs in the region. Another booming industry in the region is Construction and Heavy & Civil Engineering Construction, providing a combined 18,179 jobs to the region and \$1.5 billion in total payroll (see Table 16).

Table 16. Region 7W Distinguishing Industries, 2021

NAICS Industry Title	NAICS Code	Number of Firms	Number of Jobs	Total Payroll	Avg. Annual Wages	Location Quotient
Total, All Industries	0	11,481	172,904	\$ 9,095,692,755.00	\$ 53,248.00	1
Furniture & Related Product Manufacturing	337	65	2,153	\$122,358,383	\$ 64,012.00	4.0
Heavy & Civil Engineering Construction	237	123	3,585	\$420,465,583	\$ 130,104.00	2.3
Animal Production & Aquaculture	112	102	1,364	\$57,781,728	\$ 48,360.00	2.0
Fabricated Metal Product Manufacturing	332	176	5,108	\$325,522,012	\$ 71,604.00	1.9
Utilities	22	26	1,628	\$198,759,221	\$ 121,680.00	1.9
Motor Vehicle & Parts Dealers	441	210	3,799	\$220,310,731	\$ 61,724.00	1.8
Truck Transportation	484	282	2,868	\$195,498,045	\$ 75,452.00	1.8
Construction	23	1,779	14,594	\$1,102,362,253	\$ 77,688.00	1.7
Agriculture, Forestry, Fishing & Hunting	11	213	2,241	\$96,183,443	\$ 41,392.00	1.6
Food Manufacturing	311	59	4,341	\$249,675,651	\$ 63,856.00	1.5

Source: DEED Quarterly Census of Employment & Wage (QCEW)

Industry Projections

The Central Minnesota planning area is projected to grow 5 percent from 2020 to 2030, a gain of 15,046 new jobs. The largest industry, Health Care & Social Assistance, is expected to grow 11.9 percent or add 5,541 jobs over the next decade. The Accommodation & Food Service industry is expected to increase by 21.6 percent. The Arts, Entertainment, & Recreation industry is projecting an impressive 31.1 percent increase from 2020 to 2030, adding 820 jobs to the region. Trends in development strategies are focused on bringing quality of life amenities to areas as a means to attract residents and employers to the region.

Table 17. Central Minnesota Industry Projections, 2020-2030

Industry	Estimated Employment 2020	Estimated Employment 2030	Percent Change 2020-2030	Numeric Change 2020-2030
Total, All Industries	301,170	316,216	5.0%	15,046
Health Care and Social Assistance	46,672	52,213	11.9%	5,541
Public Administration	19,239	20,198	5.0%	959
Manufacturing	39,543	40,646	2.8%	1,103
Retail Trade	35,588	33,781	-5.1%	(1,807)
Self-Employed and Unpaid Family Workers	27,454	26,917	-2.0%	(537)
Accommodation and Food Services	19,327	23,505	21.6%	4,178
Construction	18,984	19,792	4.3%	808
Other Services	10,108	11,290	11.7%	1,182
Administrative and Waste Services	9,545	10,066	5.5%	521
Wholesale Trade	10,123	10,516	3.9%	393
Transportation and Warehousing	10,098	10,685	5.8%	587
Finance and Insurance	7,796	7,912	1.5%	116
Professional and Technical Services	6,685	7,228	8.1%	543
Arts, Entertainment, and Recreation	2,636	3,456	31.1%	820
Agriculture, Forestry, Fishing & Hunting	5,052	4,493	-11.1%	(559)
Information	2,639	2,842	7.7%	203
Educational Services	23,734	24,976	5.2%	1,242
Utilities	1,952	1,686	-13.6%	(266)
Real Estate and Rental and Leasing	1,754	1,737	-1.0%	(17)
Management of Companies and Enterprises	1,877	1,891	0.7%	14
Mining	364	386	6.0%	22

Source: DEED 2020-2030 Employment Outlook

Employers by Size Class

In Region 7W, 85.2 percent of businesses are small businesses and employ less than 20 people, according to the U.S. Census Bureau County Business Patterns statistics. This is slightly higher than the state of Minnesota, where small business makes up 84.2 percent of all business. Businesses that employ between 20 and 99 staff make up 12.6 percent of firms in the region. Region 7W has seen a decrease in the number of firms that employ 500 or more people since 2015, dropping from 25 firms to just 13 firms in the region.

Table 18. Employers by Size Class, 2020			
Number of Employees	Region 7W		Minnesota
	Number of Firms	Percent of Firms	Percent of Firms
1-4	5,967	54.7%	53.70%
5-9	1,916	17.6%	17.60%
10-19	1,406	12.9%	12.90%
20-49	1,071	9.8%	9.70%
50-99	306	2.8%	3.30%
100-249	171	1.6%	1.90%
250-499	54	0.5%	0.60%
500 or more	13	0.1%	0.20%
Total Firms	10,904	100%	100%

Source: U.S. Census Bureau, County Business Patterns

Nonemployer Establishments

Every small business starts somewhere, usually as a self-employed business with no more than a single business owner employee. These businesses are called nonemployer establishments and are the steppingstones to small businesses. Region 7W was home to 30,587 self-employed or nonemployer businesses. The region had 1,408 new firms from

Table 19. Nonemployer Statistics, 2019				
	2019		2015-2019	
	Number of Firms	Receipts (1,000's)	Change in Firms	Percent Change
Region 7W	30,587	\$ 1,470,191.00	1,408	4.8%
Benton	2,634	\$ 120,022.00	80	3.1%
Sherburne	6,783	\$ 306,667.00	257	3.9%
Stearns	11,125	\$ 590,166.00	769	7.4%
Wright	10,045	\$ 453,336.00	302	3.1%
Minnesota	418,080	\$ 20,377,253.00	20,702	5.2%

Source: U.S. Census, Nonemployer Statistics Program

2015 to 2019, nearly matching the number of new nonemployer establishments from the previous decade of 2005 to 2015 at 1,485 firms. Stearns County led the region with 769 new nonemployer firms, followed by Wright County with 302, Sherburne County with 257, and Benton County with 80.

Census of Agriculture

A key industry to Region 7W is agriculture with 5,606 farms boasting a market value of products sold at over \$1.2 billion according to the U.S. Department of Agriculture. Leading not only the region, but also the state of Minnesota in market value of products sold is Stearns County at \$747,977,000.00.

Table 20. Census of Agriculture, 2017				
	Number of Farms	Market Value of Products Sold	State Rank	Change in Market Value, 2012-2017
Region 7W	5,606	\$ 1,241,259,000		-3.9%
Benton	816	\$ 207,177,000	42	24%
Sherburne	501	\$ 89,597,000	60	1%
Stearns	2,951	\$ 747,977,000	1	-7%
Wright	1,338	\$ 196,508,000	45	-14%
Minnesota	68,822	\$ 18,395,390,000		-14%

Source: 2017 Census of Agriculture

ELECTROLUX, SHERCO, MONTICELLO NUCLEAR GENERATING PLANT, SARTELL PAPER MILL

Electrolux Plant Closure



At the end of 2019, Stockholm-based Electrolux ceased production at its freezer

of employees have worked at the facility for 20 to 49 years.

manufacturing plant in St. Cloud, Minnesota. The 45-acre site was home to a 900,000 square foot plant and as the City's second largest private employer, the Electrolux closure impacted approximately 900 primary jobs. Electrolux invested in its South Carolina plant, moving upright freezer production to that facility. Closure of the freezer production plant resulted in the loss of the state's only remaining appliance manufacturing operation, which existed in the City of St. Cloud since 1947. The loss of 900 jobs at the end of 2019 represented 2.4% of the City's labor force (36,911 workers as of 2017). In addition, an economic impact analysis was recently completed, and it estimated the following additional impacts from the plant closure:

- The loss of 900 jobs at the household refrigeration and home freezer manufacturing plant will affect an estimated 1,800 jobs in Stearns, Sherburne, and Benton counties.
- The loss of 900 jobs is predicted to cause a decline in economic output of an estimated \$670.1 million in the three counties. This includes \$102.6 million of lost labor income in the county.
- Demographic data indicates some Electrolux workers may face difficulties in career transitions. More than half of the company's workforce is age 50 or older. In addition, 45%

In response to the Electrolux Plant closure, the City of St. Cloud applied for and was awarded an Economic Recovery Grant from the Economic Development Administration. During the two-year grant term, the City employed an Economic Recovery Grant Coordinator and the following tasks have recently been completed:

- Promotion of Local Industry & Workforce Assets - Work with the City and strategic partners to identify resources and facilitate completion of a Target Industry, Innovation and Workforce Skills Analysis.
- Business Development - Recognizing that up to 90% of net new job growth comes from existing business in a community, support and encourage the creation and retention of high-quality jobs and new private investment by existing corporations in St. Cloud through an aggressive Business Retention & Expansion (BRE) program.
- Reuse and Redevelopment - Assist in negotiations with the City and Electrolux regarding the future reuse and potential redevelopment of the property vacated by the Electrolux freezer manufacturing plant at the end of 2019.
- Mitigation of Unemployment Impacts - Assist workforce partners, including St. Cloud State University and St. Cloud Technical & Community College, to assess local employment needs and job skill training opportunities through the collaborative development of a sustainable workforce training program.

Sherco Decommissioning: Changing Focus on Electric Power Generation

For the current CEDS planning period (2023-2027), one of the most significant economic transitions or



impacts for the 7W region will be ongoing decommissioning of the Sherburne County Generating Station, known as Sherco. The Sherco plant is one of the largest coal-fired power plants in the nation, located in Becker, Minnesota (Sherburne County). Its three units have a combined capacity of 2,250 megawatts. In 2016, the Minnesota Public Utilities Commission (PUC) approved shutting down the plant's Unit 2 in 2023 and Unit 1 in 2026. In 2022, the PUC approved Unit 3 for decommissioning in 2030. The Sherco facility employs approximately 300 workers, and of equal significance, the plant represents 75 percent of the tax base in Becker, and 15 percent of Sherburne County's tax base. The original plans called for replacing the coal-fired units with a natural gas-fired power plant, along with renewable energy improvements, and would have resulted in a loss of approximately 200 positions. Xcel's most recent Integrated Resources Plan, approved by the PUC in February 2022, eliminated the natural gas fired plant in Becker from the plan and called for several thousand acres of solar array in Becker Township and Clear Lake Township, which border the City of Becker. This change eliminates an estimated 275 positions. Substantial investments have been made into this area, including a \$20.5 million State bonding appropriation that will bring water and wastewater trunk lines into the 1,675 acres of developable land surrounding the power plant. Large industrial sites are certified on 1,460 of

those acres. The City of Becker, Becker Township, Sherburne County, and Xcel Energy have engaged in a master planning effort for the Xcel-owned land in this area to align development efforts and bring these projects to the implementation stage.

Future of MNGP: Successful Transition for Energy Host Communities

As Region 7W considers the current planning period for this CEDS (2023-



2027), the future of two energy host communities is a critical issue. The City of Monticello, like the City of Becker, is planning for a future without a major electric utility as the core of its tax base. Xcel Energy operates the Monticello Nuclear Generating Plant (MNGP) along the shores of the Mississippi River in Monticello (Wright County). MNGP has been operational in Monticello since 1970 and currently represents 56% of the city's entire tax base, 9% of Wright County's tax base and 41% of the local school district's tax base. MNGP is the city's largest employer, and it is estimated by a recent economic impact analysis, that its employees contribute over \$226,000,000 to the region's GDP and \$127,000,000 of disposable income to the local economy. Xcel Energy has submitted its required Integrated Resource Plan to the Public Utilities Commission seeking re-licensure of the Monticello facility through 2040. While Xcel Energy seeks re-licensure of the MNGP facility, Monticello is preparing for a future beyond licensure.

The Sartell Paper Mill



The original paper mill was constructed in 1905. The City's namesake, Joseph B. Sartell, sold

70 acres along the Mississippi River to a group of investors for \$1 to bring the mill business into the Sartell community. This was the ideal paper mill location, which had access to the Mississippi River hydropower, and was adjacent to a BNSF rail line. The mill began making paper in 1907, which was predominantly newspaper and later transitioned to magazine paper. An integral part of the mill operations was the construction of the Sartell Dam, which extends across the Mississippi River. The original dam was constructed of wooden planks, local granite, fieldstone, and concrete. The dam was later rebuilt in 1960, which resulted in the formation of Little Rock Lake.

On-site pollution control and wastewater treatment were installed to protect the mighty Mississippi River. The mill became a large employer for women whose husbands and fathers were leading war efforts. The mill was also crucial for residents and employees who used its steam-operated whistle for fire alarms, shift work signals, and lunch breaks. Sartell residents even gauged the wind direction based on the plant's smokestack. The smell of pulp also gave off a distinguishable scent that was often referred to as "smelling like jobs."

The mill was sold to Verso Paper in 2006. Throughout all the adaptations the mill underwent, the most important role that the mill served was as an employer to generations of

families within the City of Sartell and surrounding communities.

As the world became more digitized, and communication went paperless, it is not surprising that the paper industry dwindled. The paper mill employed nearly 500 people at the height of production. In 2011, two of the three paper machines within the mill were shut down, which led to 175 people being laid off. Although the massive lay off was detrimental to the local economy, it is not even comparable to the explosion that destroyed the mill complex on May 29, 2012. The explosion killed one worker and injured four others. On August 2, 2012, the mill announced that it would not reopen.

The future of the Verso Paper Mill site is unknown at this time and will be dependent on environmental reviews and development interest. This would likely be a multi-year redevelopment of a core property within the City of Sartell that harbors vast amounts of history. In the end, the paper mill site demonstrates how the Sartell community can embody change and adapt to future growth and development for generations to come. The City of Sartell remains open to the potential industrial, commercial, and residential opportunities that this site embodies.

S.W.O.T. ANALYSIS

A regional S.W.O.T. Analysis was conducted on July 27, 2022, at a public meeting that was held at Back Shed Brewing in Waite Park, MN in Benton County. The meeting included a brainstorming session amongst multi-industry professionals across Region 7W (see photo below). The intent of this session was to collect the views and ideas of the regions Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, and Threats by the stakeholders in the region.

Professionals across many sectors participated in the analysis, including the sectors of, education, workforce, arts and tourism, manufacturing, retail, human capital, natural resources, foundations & non-profits, parks & recreation, broadband, housing, transportation, community services, utility companies,



and other entities. Representatives from the four Counties, several local Cities, and Xcel Energy met in June to start planning the event. The Initiative Foundation out of Little Falls was selected to facilitate the session and each representative was tasked with reaching out to the leaders of each of the different industries within their County and City borders. A formal invitation was sent in early July and approximately forty community leaders attended the event.

The Professor of Economics, Dean from St. Cloud State University, kicked-off the event with a demographic recap of the region that set the table for the event discussion. The S.W.O.T. Analysis was then conducted against each of the four recommended industry standard cornerstones for strong regions and communities: Human Capital, Economic Competitiveness, Community Resources, and Foundational Assets. As a region we were able to identify and discuss our strengths and opportunities, enabling us to leverage them against the regions weaknesses and threats to develop a comprehensive economic development strategy that allows us to capitalize on our assets to take advantage of the opportunities, while strengthening our identifiable gaps and minimizing our threats.



MADO and DevelopMN

The [DevelopMN Plan](#) is the result of a collaborative effort of the ten Economic Development Districts that make up the Minnesota Association of Development Organizations (MADO). MADO was developed to align strategic economic development efforts throughout Greater Minnesota, and leverage resources at all levels for a greater overall development impact. DevelopMN identified four cornerstones for strong regions and communities that are a template for the organization of the Minnesota CEDS: human capital, economic competitiveness, community resources, and foundational assets.

Human Capital

Developing, retaining, and attracting talent are critical for Region 7W in order to sustain and grow businesses and communities. Tracking the characteristics of the labor force and the needs of employers, and creating strategies for alignment between the two, are the foundation for this cornerstone.

Labor Force Context

As Region 7W looks to grow its economy, it is confronted with the challenge of meeting the hiring and skills needs of employers. Region 7W has a higher labor force participation rate (72.2%) compared to the state's (69.3%) labor participation rate. Comparatively, the percent of labor force participation is lower since the last CEDS report.

Region 7W's labor force will see a significant shift over time, with a steady gain in the number of workers aged 20 to 54 years, against a huge decline in the number of workers aged 55 to 64 years as the Baby Boomers continue to age into retirement. Additionally, Region 7W is experiencing an 8.5% increase in labor force participation by Black or African American workers and a 7.2% increase in labor force participation for Hispanic or Latino workers since the 2017 CEDS report. It's clear that Region 7W has made significant progress in shrinking the unemployment rate in every minority group.

Labor Force Goals

- Uphold a high labor force participation rate and maintain a low unemployment rate.
- Increased state and federal investment in regional workforce training.
- Increase in family-sustaining jobs.
- Increase workers with labor market barriers.
- Increase in the number of underrepresented entrepreneurs and small business owners using start-up and small business programming.

Labor Force Strategies

- Embrace diverse populations (e.g., aging, youth, minorities, previously incarcerated, people with disabilities) through targeted workforce programs.
- Increase employment access and retention by connecting potential employees to the existing employment and workforce support networks.
- Design industry-led certification training programs, credit-based apprenticeships, internships, and on the job training to train existing and future workers for a more competitive economic environment.
- Conduct collaborative planning activities with regional partners to promote alignment of economic and workforce development goals, including advocacy emphasizing postsecondary education and skills training to support high-growth, high-wage jobs, including skilled trades.

- Pursue funding opportunities with workforce partners to expand the availability of training programs for targeted industries and occupations.
- Make labor market information more accessible to school districts and higher education institutions so students can make informed choices about career options.
- Develop a mentor program for older workers to enhance their skill set.
- Develop a training program for retiring workforce to help develop a “second career.”
- Develop relationships with childcare providers to learn how as a region we can support their success to provide adequate childcare for workers.
- Develop initiatives to attract childcare workers to the region to support the growing workforce demands.

Education and Skills Context

Region 7W has a greater population of young people aged 18 to 24 years old in comparison to the state of Minnesota. The region’s younger population is demonstrating a commitment to higher education with 44.54 percent of people in this age bracket attending some college but not yet having received their degree.

Region 7W also experienced an increased percentage of high school graduates aged 25 to 44 as 22.14 percent of this age group has a high school diploma or equivalent. The region and the state of Minnesota have seen the number of individuals with associate’s degrees, bachelor’s degrees, and advanced degrees increase in the age brackets of 45 to 64 years and 65 years and over.

Education and Skills Goals

- Increase the number of residents (ages 18-64) who have completed post-secondary

education or training with a particular focus on certificates, technical degrees, and apprenticeships relevant to employment in middle-skill, living wage occupations.

- Increase partnerships with area schools highlighting the construction and trades professions.
- Work to eliminate racial/ethnic disparities in educational attainment to give everyone the same opportunities.

Education and Skills Strategies

- Develop and encourage youth (K-12) and Post-Secondary apprenticeships, internships, mentorship programs.
- Support “brain gain” programs to recruit and retain people aged 25-54.
- Increase awareness among students, parents, and educators about the educational requirements for future employment opportunities specific to the region.
- Market career opportunities in the region and share information about in-demand careers with students, parents, and educators.
- Align education and workforce data to meet current and future skill needs of employers.
- Support education programs for employers to consider underserved and diverse populations.
- Establish and expand entrepreneurship education programs in K-12 schools.
- Expand access to post-secondary education opportunities in the region by establishing secondary education satellite facilities available for use by area universities and community colleges.

Economic Competitiveness

Making Central Minnesota an attractive environment for growth is critical to creating jobs, improving living standards and financing necessary public services. Economic

Competitiveness requires communities to develop and link all available assets to support innovation and encourage business growth.

Business Growth Context

Many businesses in Region 7W are small businesses, with 78% of businesses reporting less than 20 employees in 2019, according to County Business Patterns from the U.S. Census Bureau. The number of large businesses in Region 7W has decreased slightly, from 25 to 20 employers reporting more than 500 employees (the Small Business Administration's official cut off for a "small business") in 2019. It remains true that small businesses are vital to the region's economy.

Business Growth Goals

- Increase the number of new businesses.
- Increase the number of jobs.
- Increase the number of industry sectors in the region.

Business Growth Strategies

- Assist business start-ups and existing businesses in finding the services and support they require to create, attract, and retain jobs.
- Coordinate public-private partnerships to facilitate small and medium sized business lending.
- Educate businesses on different grant and funding opportunities available.
- Advocate to fully fund regional Small Business Development Centers at the state level.
- Develop and promote a regional marketing strategy with a clear and concise message to attract workforce and new businesses.
- Support start-up and small businesses with training, market research, financial

assistance, strategic planning, and other assistance.

- Promote business succession planning resources and processes throughout the county and cities.
- Campaign for competitively-priced high-speed broadband infrastructure throughout the region to attract and retain businesses.
- Coordinate public-private partnerships to facilitate ongoing community business retention and expansion programs.
- Create and foster networks of incubator, co-working, proof of concept and maker spaces.
- Encourage and support immigrant business startups and expansions with connections to resources, financing, and technical assistance.
- Strengthen the region's resilience and competitiveness by assessing and leveraging industry clusters.

Entrepreneurship Context

Central Minnesota communities must embrace and encourage innovation, calculated risk-taking and foster entrepreneurship to compete effectively in the global economy. Self-starters, creative thinkers, and service-oriented entrepreneurs are a necessary part of the region's work force.

Entrepreneurship Goals

- Increase cross-sector initiatives to support entrepreneurship and innovation.
- Increase BR&E efforts to learn what is impeding new business opportunities.

Entrepreneurship Strategies

- Identify, create, and promote programs, activities, and policies fostering innovation and for entrepreneurship (e.g., ILT Academy, gBETA, Launch MN, Enterprise Academy).

- Identify and grow angel and venture capital investments.
- Develop a local business mentorship program.
- Work with immigrant entrepreneurs to connect them to existing local resources.
- Educate entrepreneurs on different grant and funding opportunities available.
- Expand K-12 availability to business startup courses to support entrepreneurship (e.g., DECA, Junior Achievement, Central Minnesota Creating Entrepreneurial Opportunities (CEO) program).

Community Resources

Central Minnesota communities seek to maintain rural values, their heritage and the assets that support them. Community Resources include topics that balance the preservation and improvement of local social, cultural, and natural assets that are critical for the future.

Arts and Culture Context

Minnesota's artists and creative workers have a large and growing impact on our state's economy. Both through direct spending and through founding and running creative businesses, they are a core part of the economic vitality of our state. The 2015 Creative Minnesota report illustrates that artistic spending by Minnesota's 104,148 full-time and part time artists and creative workers has a far-reaching impact. Cultural and artistic opportunities attract residents, visitors and increase tourism and tax collection revenue.

Arts and Culture Goals

- Increase cultural amenities for the purpose of attracting economic investment and skilled workers to the region.
- Increase availability to environments in which the arts and arts education thrive and

contribute to more vibrant and creative communities.

- Increase participation in welcoming community's programs.

Arts and Culture Strategies

- Communicate economic development impacts of arts with local leaders.
- Connect artists to SBDC, SCORE and other financing opportunities.
- Connect artists with resources their need to make a living and improve the quality of life.
- Integrate the arts in public infrastructure and space.
- Improve education in the school system on career opportunities in the arts.
- Engage an artist's voice in community planning; get them involved at the ground level.
- Create economic or job clusters based on creative businesses, including linking those businesses with non-cultural businesses.
- Use celebrations or festivals to highlight a community's cultural amenities.
- Utilize arts-based placemaking to improve downtowns and public spaces and to enhance the vibrancy of our communities.

Tourism Context

Tourism is a source of economic vitality to the state of Minnesota. Tourism can represent an economic development alternative for communities in addition to other industries. Increasing the economic benefits from tourism can represent an important part of a community's economic development strategy.

Tourism Goals

- Increase the local tax base by attracting and serving visitors as a means of bringing money into the community, generating personal income, jobs, and tax revenue by

marketing, and ensuring Central Minnesota as a destination.

- Increase the proportion of overnight visitors and the number of same day visitors.
- Attract people from outside the region to increase visitor spending and increase consumer awareness of the area.
- Increased information-sharing across regional marketing efforts documented in partner processes.

Tourism Strategies

- Promote local community events, amenities, and assets outside of geographic region to import dollars into the region.
- Develop and ensure consistent regional branding efforts that promote local businesses and locally made products.
- Capitalize on the region's strong collaborative relationships with multi-jurisdictions, non-profit sectors, and philanthropists to strengthen outdoor attractions such as parks, trail connectivity, park programming, tourist attractions and marketing the region.
- Develop new and support existing visitor infrastructure.
- Strategically invest in tourism infrastructure and projects that support economic competitiveness and quality of life of the region's communities.
- Collaborate with municipal, economic development professionals and community leaders to focus on tourism growth.
- Develop the tourism workforce by facilitating access to existing training and development opportunities.
- Develop career paths in the tourism industry to attract and keep employees of all ages while staying competitive in pay and benefits to attract and retain employees.

Natural Resources Context

Central Minnesota has an abundance of natural resources, including numerous lakes, streams, wetlands and rivers and diverse landscapes and habitats ranging from gardens and urban parks to prairies and forests. Natural resources provide critical habitat for wildlife, protect water quality, offer recreational opportunities, and serve as the foundation for the region's environmental well-being, economic prosperity, and quality of life. Protecting these important recreational, aesthetic, and ecological resources is a priority for the region and its residents and partners. However, the county's natural resources are under increasing pressure from population growth, development, and climate change.

Natural Resources Goals

- Increase access resources that focus on responsible management of natural resources, development of effective partnerships and promotion of environmental stewardship.
- Increase investment in redevelopment projects (brownfields, etc.).
- Increase composting, recycling, reduction, and reuse of solid waste as an alternative to land filling.
- Increase the use of solar energy and other renewable energy resources in existing and new developments in the region.

Natural Resources Strategies

- Encourage community and regional planning that address all aspects of natural resource protection, preservation, and restoration.
- Develop and manage funding programs that provide financial and technical assistance to partners to implement best management

practices and programs that preserve, enhance, and restore natural resources.

- Protect the region's natural resources through public outreach and education.
- Preserve and protect natural areas and open spaces to maintain and attract desired wildlife species and provide "non-developed green space" for community residents.
- Encourage development to conserve natural amenities such as streams, wooded areas, open space, greenbelts, aquifers, and incorporate these natural features into the development plan as open spaces, buffer areas or other common areas.
- Support policies and procedures to mitigate invasive species threats and focus efforts on their reduction or elimination.
- Maintain existing park facilities, while seeking opportunities to expand and enhance future facilities.
- Protect wetlands from direct and indirect impacts of new and existing development and infrastructure.
- Seek sources of public and private funding for brownfield site assessment, cleanup, and redevelopment.
- Promote educational programs on energy conservation and use of renewable energy resources.
- Support the development of diverse, reliable, and cost-effective energy sources and systems to meet the region's economic and environmental goals.
- Work with stakeholders to reduce impacts associated with air quality and continue to participate in regional planning efforts that improve air quality to protect human and environmental health.

Foundational Assets

Central Minnesota communities require proactive and collaborative approaches/strategies to address infrastructure needs in a cost-effective manner. Managing the access to, maintenance, replacement, and growth of these assets is key to preserving and maintaining communities and providing for growth opportunities.

Broadband Context

Affordable high-speed internet is necessary to remain competitive in today's global economy. Many businesses and residents experience lack of access to reliable broadband at acceptable speeds and costs.

Broadband Goals

- Increase the number of households served by affordable internet.
- Increase digital accessibility to electronic resources.
- Expand broadband to unserved and underserved parts of the region.
- Ensure equity of access for all students outside of school.

Broadband Strategies

- Advocate for broadband funding at both state and federal levels.
- Utilize state resources and programs to increase broadband access.
- Utilize ARPA and other federal funds to encourage internet providers to expand service areas within the region.
- Promote an understanding of the importance of broadband to a community's infrastructure.
- Develop "Dig Once" programs in communities.
- Partner with broadband providers to explore ways to assist with broadband infrastructure.

- Identify industries in need of high-speed internet connectivity in the next five years to plan infrastructure development.
- Work with the private sector to promote the availability of high-speed broadband (employers, realtors, chambers).

Transportation Context

A robust and efficient transportation system and reliable transit service throughout the entire region will be increasingly important for access to goods, services, and employment.

Transportation Goals

- Decrease in the number of severe injuries and fatalities on roadways.
- Increase in mileage in the number of designated infrastructures for walking and biking.
- Increase the utilization of the regional airport.
- Increase in the utilization of the Northstar Rail.

Transportation Strategies

- Support regional transportation infrastructure to promote multi-modal systems, improvements to outdated components and enhanced connectivity among the growth centers in the region.
- Encourage state and local units of government to support and pursue options that increase the availability of transportation funding.
- Work to ensure that long-range public transit policy decisions in Central Minnesota address future demographic shifts and needs.
- Prioritize transportation projects that connect regional economic hubs.
- Design streets and highways that are safe and efficient to move vehicular traffic, and accommodate transit, pedestrians and

bicyclists while minimizing environmental impact.

- Promote a mobility management public transportation system where all providers of public transportation work together to maximize efficiency and resources.
- Maintain the region's transportation infrastructure and preserve transportation corridors.
- Maintain and reconstruct existing roadways and bridges in a manner that promotes safety, increases efficiency, and minimizes lifetime costs.
- Ensure safe and efficient bridges.
- Develop and expand transportation facilities to accommodate freight movement and meet the changing needs of the regional economy.
- Retain and preserve facilities for air transportation.
- Preserve rail corridors and provide safe and convenient rail facilities and service to meet rail passenger and freight transportation needs for the region.
- Support Northstar Commuter Rail Corridor operations by identifying the needs for the region.
- Work with state and local partners to coordinate efforts to develop and enhance regional bicycle and pedestrian systems.

Housing Context

Housing needs and issues in Central Minnesota vary from community to community. The need to provide a variety of housing types varies significantly per community. Identifying where and how to prioritize limited resources to address housing is important to meet the needs of all residents.

Housing Goals

- Increase housing options that give people in all life stages and of all economic means viable choices for safe, stable, and affordable homes.
- Increase housing affordability.
- Conduct a regional housing study to provide data to local developers.

Housing Strategies

- Advocate for funding programs for demolition of vacant, unsafe, and dilapidated housing units.
- Rehabilitate and preserve the existing housing stock while prioritizing poverty-stricken neighborhoods and disinvested areas.
- Establish partnerships with private sector, nonprofit, other government agencies and neighborhood groups to access available public funding and attract private capital for affordable housing development.
- Work with local organizations to provide financial planning for homeownership.
- Advocate for housing study funds.
- Encourage development of special housing for the elderly, persons with disabilities, and workforce.
- Facilitate regional conversation and support to address housing needs.
- Integrate economic development and job creation with workforce housing development, including housing within walking distance of job growth locations.
- Establish a Local Housing Trust Fund to help support critical housing needs in the region.
- Improve housing diversity and access across the region and direct development to areas with existing infrastructure.

Water Quality Water-related Infrastructure

Context

The region's water resources are under pressure from a host of issues, such as growing populations, agricultural and commercial production, recreational demands, and climatic shifts. These issues stress water resource quality, calling into question the resiliency of these resources.

In addition, the financial cost of addressing aging water-related infrastructure is overwhelming cities and residents. Needed upgrades for replacing water, wastewater and storm sewer facilities can be a significant burden. Local units of government need to be innovative in paying for and addressing on-going infrastructure maintenance.

Water Quality and Water-related Infrastructure

Goals

- Reduce the number of impaired waters and endangered ecosystems.
- Increase availability of technical assistance and educational resources to residents, municipalities, watershed management groups, and other county departments to protect and restore our water resources.

Water Quality/Wastewater Infrastructure

Strategies

- Utilize strategies and implementation actions called for in completed comprehensive watershed management plans.
- Work with partners to implement water quality projects to protect and/or restore water resources.
- Provide communities with a sufficient supply of safe drinking water, meeting all regulatory requirements, in a cost-efficient manner.
- Encourage local governments to obtain technical assistance in early stages of development for infrastructure.

- Encourage local governments to develop capital improvement plans that are aligned with comprehensive plans and zoning/land use ordinances.
- Support the designing and building sustainable infrastructure to collect and manage stormwater runoff from streets, sidewalks, parking lots and rooftops to prevent stormwater runoff from entering sewer systems.
- Promote stormwater management techniques that minimize surface water runoff in public and private developments.
- Advocate for the cleanup of contaminated sites with the potential to significantly impact water resources.
- Develop funding sources for major improvements to residential and industrial wastewater facilities.
- Support efforts to obtain federal, state, and regional funding to upgrade and maintain aging infrastructure (water, sewer, stormwater, drainage facilities) while supporting the expansion of infrastructure to underserved areas.
- Encourage regionalization to reduce operation and maintenance costs.
- Work with communities to apply for grants that support water quality.
- Assist communities to review rate structures for water and sewer services.
- Support inter-governmental studies and/or demonstration projects to identify areas for improved water and sewer system efficiency and performance.

ECONOMIC RESILIENCE

Economic resilience is a key element of a regional economic development strategy to bolster the long-term economic durability of the region. Economic resilience is a cornerstone pillar on its own and has also been identified by the Federal E.D.A. as an important enough element that economic resilience strategies should be incorporated into the process for carrying out the work identified in all four cornerstones.

Human Capital

Counties within the region are continually tracking statewide broadband access records. Some counties annually employ a demographer to track recent demographic, business, and income trends, and utilize IMPLAN to ensure county sponsored projects are bringing a positive economic impact to the region. As we see workforce and education patterns diversify into hybrid and remote options, it is imperative the region remains focused on providing adequate and equitable broadband access throughout the region to support the region's workforce, and education attainment.

Region 7W intends to work on a more cohesively planned effort to develop a disaster recovery plan, including a communication chain that would streamline regional efforts in the event of an emergency. This plan should include the identification of each county's key resources, the establishment of a communication process not only across the region, but with businesses to ensure their needs are met in the event of a disaster, and the development of a coordinated impact assessment plan.

Economic Competitiveness

Sherburne County is in the process of developing a countywide Comprehensive Land Use Plan (CLUP) that will guide the County's future direction and priorities for growth and land use regulations. The CLUP will encourage development in appropriate areas, while preserving agricultural and urban interests, protect and preserve the County's natural resources for the benefit of County residents and the natural ecology, and support Sherburne County's efforts to retain, expand, and attract new business to the County, increasing economic competitiveness. In a similar way, Stearns County has adopted a Comprehensive Plan that covers land use, parks, and future growth. Stearns County, in conjunction with Stearns County HRA, have been working on increasing their economic development strategies, including a housing trust for low-income residents. The Wright County Economic Development Partnership, in collaboration with the Wright County and City EDAs are also working to encourage economic development by executing a robust business development, retention, and expansion program, workforce development and county wide marketing initiatives, and economic development capacity building.

In addition to land use planning, there are several opportunity zones identified by the federal government across the region which presents an incentive for investors to invest their capital gains in development/redevelopment in these identified zones to spur economic growth. Additional opportunities in the region for growing and diversifying tax bases include the planning and development of a new 39-acre industrial park in the City of Foley, the redevelopment of the former papermill site in Sartell as potential industrial, commercial, and/or residential opportunities, and the collaborative work between Sherburne County, the City of Becker, and Xcel Energy with the energy transition presented by the

decommissioning of the Sherco Coal Plant in Becker which remains Sherburne's primary focus. The energy transition taking place in Becker presents an opportunity to diversify energy sources to ensure continuity in energy reliability and stability, while serving as a resiliency strategy to minimize any economic shock from energy supply insufficiency.

County land use plans and other strategic initiatives will include the consideration of completed housing studies to ensure adequate supply of land available to meet future housing needs in appropriate and desired areas, in addition to consideration of solar density throughout the region as we experience energy transitions.

Community Resources

Region 7W is emphasizing the opportunity to grow electric vehicle charging infrastructure by facilitating the usage of grant dollars to install electric vehicle charging stations for public use along major transportation corridors throughout the region. In addition to expanding access to green energy and supporting tourism infrastructure, the region is focusing on connectivity in trails and parks to enhance quality of life for all residents and tourists.

Foundational Assets

Improved utilization of the St. Cloud Regional Airport was identified as a transportation strategy in the action plan along with a desire to better utilize this airport by increasing cargo and passenger transportation to the region. There is a partnership that formed and will remain ongoing between Benton, Stearns, and Sherburne Counties working with the City of St. Cloud to optimize the usage of the St. Cloud Regional Airport. This airport has the unique capability to serve commercial airlines, along with private aircrafts.

In addition, within the region there are several partners that are working towards transportation solutions to alleviate traffic congestion that is occurring between Monticello and Big Lake. Not only is this planning project intended to support economic development, once completed it will also serve to execute emergency and disaster recovery in the most efficient way possible.

Lastly, Wright County has allocated 4 million dollars of American Rescue Plan funds to support city water/sewer infrastructure projects from full replacement of watermain and sanitary sewer to wastewater facility and stormwater improvements. All these projects, both completed and future planned initiatives, are a testament to the commitment and vision of community leaders with their foresight to study, plan for, and provide a healthy environment for economic prosperity across the region.

When looking to the future of Region 7W, economic development leaders across the region plan to pay focus to the continuation of expanding broadband access across the region and the improvements of other infrastructure. Garnering support from Counties, Cities, and Townships and leveraging state and federal broadband grants and provider funds have been vital to the expansion of this infrastructure to support economic growth, stability, and future viability of the region. Continuing these partnerships to

ensure our businesses, residents, unserved, and underserved populations gain access to fiber is essential to economic growth. Furthermore, leaders plan to work together to continually address transportation solutions to support the growing region, and to solve issues such as providing adequate affordable housing stock, mental health services, and community policing. Goals such as active redevelopment of distressed properties, creating workforce pipelines, establishing a quality workforce through specialized skills training, preserving our natural resources, and continuing to diversify our energy sources and grow and diversify our tax bases remain regional priorities.

IMPLEMENTATION & EVALUATION

To evaluate the progress of the CEDS, stakeholders in the region will need to regularly meet to assess the goals and objectives that have been developed. As the Economic Development Administration CEDS guidelines indicate, performance measures are an important tool that will allow the region to measure progress in implementing the CEDS and the impact on the regional economy over time. The primary purpose of our CEDS is to align public and private entities around a common vision for Region 7W.

Implementation Strategies and Communication Plan

As the framework that guides collective strategic efforts and initiatives to foster continued economic development in the region, it is paramount to pursue the goals and strategies of the plan in the months and years following adoption. Consistent and frequent communication and distribution of the strategy plan is necessary to ensure that all jurisdictions within 7W continue work towards the goals of the plan. The Steering Committee will ensure the plan is distributed to all entities as well as ensuring the plan is published on each county's website. Communication should also entail elected officials and leaders from the impacted sectors throughout the 7W region.

As implementation of specific strategies are multi-faceted and in nearly all cases involve interagency participation, relationships with district, state, and national entities are a must. This includes MN DEED, MN DOT, public and private secondary institutions, local governments, transportation providers, impactful nonprofit organizations, utility providers, and law enforcement entities.

The first step will be looking at developing working groups and/or committees to focus specifically on goals and strategies outlined in the CEDS. Additionally, two immediate committees that would be formed include a marketing committee to focus on regional marketing efforts as well as a committee to continue focus on the creation of an Economic Development District. Such a district would help galvanize stakeholders in the region amongst common interests and the goals and strategies in the plan. It would increase access and opportunities to funding resources, particularly at the federal level, that would further advance the goals of the plan. Furthermore, consistent meetings with local elected officials are necessary to ensure the goals of the plan remain a priority for stakeholders throughout Region 7W.

As much of the implementation can be achieved through financial resources, it is important to continue to fund efforts that are aimed at achieving these goals. This includes local funding of programs that continue to promote the economic growth of the region. Locally and regionally, jurisdictions should continue to pursue external sources of funding that align with the goals.

Evaluation Framework and Performance Measures

Region 7W will conduct an annual review to compare outcomes to the various goals set throughout this document. We will use this review process to celebrate successes and look for solutions to additional challenges that have been presented. This process will not only hold Region 7W accountable for the goals set forth but guide us as we prepare for the next CEDS in 2027.

The following criteria may be used to measure performance and effectiveness of the CEDS:

- Monitor the number of projects, activities, and initiatives identified that are implemented.
- Monitor the number of funding applications developed and/or approved and total public and private funds invested.
- Increase in number of roadway projects to "right-size" overbuilt highway infrastructure.
- Increase in the housing affordability and housing supply to meet regional demands.
- Increase in the number of in communities meeting water quality standards and capacity needs.
- Increase in efficiency of regional freight transportation due to enhancement and continual maintenance of the regional highway system.
- Increase in communities/people/organizations served by affordable high-speed internet.
- Reduction in the childcare availability gap.
- Increase in mileage number of designated infrastructures for walking and biking (i.e., on-street bike lanes, safety shoulders, sidewalks/side paths, trails), especially in socioeconomically distressed communities.

The required public comment period occurred from November 1, 2022, to November 30, 2022. Documentation of public comments are on file and available upon request.

Benton, Sherburne, Stearns, and Wright County provided a link to the Region 7W Comprehensive Economic Development Strategy (CEDS) plan on their websites at:

Benton County: <https://www.co.benton.mn.us>

Sherburne County: <https://www.co.sherburne.mn.us>

Stearns County: <https://www.stearnscountymn.gov>

Wright County: <https://www.co.wright.mn.us>

The CEDS remained visible for the duration of the 30-day public comment period. Notification of the public comment was given on all county websites and social media outlets. Paper copies and electronic copies of the EDR 7W CEDS plan were also available at all Benton, Sherburne, Stearns, and Wright County's office and by mail, when requested.