



Walker Area Partners

Issue #1

Quarterly Newsletter

December, 2005

"Unlocking the potential of the Leech Lake Area through progressive partnerships"

Who are the Walker Area Partners?

Volunteers from all over the area who are interested in planning for a healthy, prosperous and united community with a common vision. It is recognized that solutions and opportunities transcend individual community boundaries. If we are to be successful we must all work together

Do you...

- Live in the Walker Area or one of the Surrounding Townships?
- Want a more unified and healthy community for all of our citizens?

If you answered yes, then **YOU ARE INVITED!**
Please Consider Joining Us!

For more information:

Contact a Board Member

Email: info@walkerareapartners.com

Website: www.walkerareapartners.com

Board Members

John Fjelstul	Char Moore
Bill Bieloh	Scott Bruns
Wally Brunswold	Crystal Freeman
Mary Nordeen	Duane Ommen
Nancy Ramp	



How It Began by Duane Ommen

The Walker Area Partners was formed after the City of Walker applied for and received a \$10,000 planning grant from the Minnesota Initiative Foundation. The focus of the grant was to be on community improvement and economic development. The grant was subsequently expanded to include the four adjacent townships because they faced common economic challenges and growth and expansion opportunities. The adjacent townships are: Shingobee Township, Leech Lake Township, Turtle Lake Township and Pine Lake Township.

Initial planning efforts focused on obtaining inputs from two principal groups - the residents of the community of Walker at large and outside inputs from a group of professionals called the Minnesota Design Team. Input from the community and the professional group exceeded expectations. The input showed that people were vitally interested in the future of their community and wanted action plans to carry out their community visions. **They wanted action!!!**

Community Issues Currently Identified:

- reuse of Ah-Gwah-Ching nursing home facility slated for closure in 2006.
- development of a critical care medical facility to serve the area.
- integration of bicycle trails into the Community.
- proposed redevelopment of the former Chase Hotel Complex on the lake.
- development of a new visitor center.
- providing input on plans for a potential Highway 371 alternate route.
- identifying the changing nature of tourism from resorts to seasonal homes
- facilitating joint efforts between the City of Walker, surrounding townships and Leech Lake Reservation.
- others to be identified

Minnesota Design Team
(from their website, www.minnesotadesignteam.org)

The Minnesota Design Team is a group of volunteer Architects, Landscapers, Urban Designers and Planners who are periodically available to use design and community development principles to help rural communities develop and act upon a shared vision of their future. They visited our community this past June and left us with several productive possibilities for improvements.

A group of 18 Design Team members visited the Walker Area June 9 - 11, 2005. It was noted that the City of Walker and four surrounding townships have about 4,200 permanent residents and are experiencing steady growth. The region, however, is facing an economic challenge as the nature of its long standing, seasonal residential character changes. With plentiful natural resources and area attractions, the area provides year-round recreational opportunities and is host to numerous festivals. In addition to helping the community craft a vision for the region, MDT addressed the following community issues:

- the changing nature of tourism from resorts to seasonal residential homes
- downtown revitalization
- construction of a potential bypass for Highway 371 through Downtown
- proposed redevelopment of a historic hotel on the lake
- reuse of a state nursing home facility slated for closure in 2006
- integration of four bicycle/snowmobile trails into the community
- strategies for diversifying the community's economic base
- facilitating cooperation between the City of Walker, surrounding townships and Leech Lake Reservation

The Initiative Foundation
(website, www.ifound.org)

The Initiative Foundation is a non-profit organization located in Little Falls, Minnesota. It serves 14 counties in central Minnesota. Their mission is to “unlock the potential of the people of Central Minnesota to build and sustain healthy communities.”

In October, 2004, the City of Walker applied for and received a \$10,000 Planning Grant from the Initiative Foundation. The grant, identified as a “Healthy Communities Partnership,” has a mission: to develop the capacity of citizens to create a locally shared vision and plan, and to mobilize local and regional assets to implement that plan.

The Initiative Foundation’s Healthy Communities Partnership (HCP) program works with central Minnesota communities to engage local citizens in planning for the future. They begin by providing one year of innovative training to diverse leadership teams. The members must be dedicated to involving everyone in building a brighter future for their community. Each team is responsible for leading their community through a time-tested process that results in the development of a locally shared vision and integrated plan. From that plan comes a number of goals and projects that require local volunteers and resources to be successful.

Selection to HCP is a competitive process: only eight communities are offered the training each year. The Initiative Foundation provides each community with training, technical assistance, resource referral and an initial grant of \$10,000. Because citizens of HCP communities work in concert to achieve goals identified at the grassroots level, the Initiative Foundation gives priority-funding consideration to projects identified in their plans.

Note: Our community (the City of Walker, and the Shingobee, Leech Lake, Turtle Lake and Pine Lake Townships) is in the progress of completing the last year of the two year planning grant.

Visitor Information Center
By John Fjelstul

A task force has been organized and is beginning discussions and initial planning for an area Visitor Information Center. Due to the scope of the project and the funding required, realization of this project will not likely be immediate.

The vision is to have a facility which can accommodate the Area Chamber of Commerce, and to provide public restrooms and meeting space.

Persons interested in becoming involved in this project can contact the Chamber of Commerce or Walker Area Partners.



All Dressed Up! By Beth Plattner

The Walker Area Partners' Beautification committee has just taken down the cornstalks from the lamp posts and are preparing for holiday decorating. We will be decorating similar to last year; pine swags with red bows on every lamp post through out the downtown area.

We have observed the downtown businesses getting their store fronts ready for the holidays, stringing lights, hanging garland and decorating trees.

If you have any suggestions for February/Valentines Day or March/St. Patrick's Day, please contact us.

We are looking forward to 2006!

Bike Trails by Steve Bilben

Our initial meeting had 15 interested people in attendance including a representative from the Walker City Council, a Cass County Commissioner, Walker Area Chamber, Cass County Land Department, DNR Trails and Waterways for both Bemidji and Brainerd, the Paul Bunyan Trail Coordinator, WHA Community Education and a Design Team member.

The concept of extending the bike trail south from Walker to connect with the Paul Bunyan Trail where it heads west from the old railroad grade to join the heartland Trail was discussed. Also the need for better signage from the present Lake May Trailhead into Walker and the Chamber's Trail map was addressed.

Terry McLaughy, the Paul Bunyan Trail Coordinator, gave a very positive presentation on trail development and usage, and economic impacts of having a user friendly bicycle trail system. He also answered many questions from the volunteer audience.

At our second meeting on October 3, areas of interest were discussed and sub-committees were formed; a signage group, trails promotion, a bike trail planning group and a Chase Hotel project coordinator group. Plans to investigate another trailhead-parking area closer to downtown along the trail behind the Holiday Station were also discussed.

Our Nov 14th meeting dealt primarily with the results of other meetings with the Department of Transportation Bemidji Office. Also, the plans of the Chase project were reviewed to try to develop a route to connect with the Chase and extend to the park area.

Volunteers attending and involved in this task force include Curt Vining, Skip Duchesneau, John Fjelstul, Lisa Katzemyer, Rollie Haugen, Jim Clark, Greg Proper, Jim Dowson, Paul Nye, Steve Bilben, Linda & George Arts, Pam Worth, Erica Frizzell, Murriel Hinrichs & Phil Tietz.

Our next meeting is scheduled for Monday, Dec 12, at 4:30pm at WHA School.

Saving Our Museums by John Grimley

A number of people have been meeting since June, 2005, for the purpose of "Saving Our Museums." The goal is to have the County Museum, City Museum, and the Ah-Gwah-Ching Museum at the same location.

The group was made a sub-committee of the Cass County Historical Society on November 9, 2005. Karen Keener, Laporte, and Cecilia McKeig, Federal Dam, are the co-chairs of the committee.

There is some urgency because of the uncertainty of the use of the Ah-Gwah-Ching Center and probable closure in the near future. There is concern that the history Ah-Gwah-Ching must remain in the Walker area. Our committee is working with the Department of Human Services to keep it here.



Welcome to the Walker Area! By Amy Jones

We held our last signage meeting on November 7th when we discussed the possible locations for signage. We would like a sign at each Walker entrance; Hwy. 371 North, Hwy. 371 South, and Hwy. 34 will hopefully have a scenic by-way sign.

Lynn Mineer has designed a couple of signs. One is in keeping with the City signage and the other portrays the 1920's era to tie in with the Chase project. We plan to make the shape of the lake the major focus. We are moving right along on this project and have a great deal of enthusiasm!

We hope to have the signs up by spring if not before!



Park Improvements Committee by Erica Frizzell

The goal of the park committee is to help enhance the amenities already at the park and to add more amenities that the people of the Leech Lake Area can enjoy. I have been attending several different committee meetings that are all inter-related with the park. I have currently attended one City Park Board meeting, three Trails meetings, and one Visitor Center meeting.

Anyone who is interested may become a member of the park committee and attend any of the park related committee meetings. If you would like to help make a difference in our public park, please contact, Erica Frizzell, Park Committee Chair, at 218-224-3644. I hope to see you at the next meeting!

Walker Area Community Center (WACC) by Mitch Loomis

On October 27th the Walker Area Community Center (WACC) Building Committee, along with WACC Architect Jim Lucachick, held a contractor's forum. The purpose of the forum was to inform local contractors about WACC construction and to ask them to participate. More than 30 local contractors attended, many offering to donate labor and discounted materials.

Within the last two weeks the project has received three grants: The MDU Foundation and the Beverly Foundation each donated \$10,000 and the Initiative Foundation donated \$5,000. The Initiative Foundation grant was the direct result of the efforts of the Walker Area Partners.

The community center project is progressing on several fronts:

1. Work is being done by the City of Walker to get the Community Center building site appropriately zoned.
2. The road and utilities to serve the Center have been engineered. Assessment hearings should be announced any day.
3. Through in-kind construction donations, grants and fundraising, the project continues to make progress toward its goal of securing capital costs and the cost of first year operations. Although, the WACC Board is working toward obtaining financing, a big final fundraising push is in progress to keep debt as minimal as possible. To be completely debt free, the project needs to secure an additional \$400,000 in gifts or pledges, though the value of in-kind construction donations has yet to be determined and will reduce this number. An accurate assessment of in-kind construction donations will not be possible until the bidding process is complete. That will occur this winter or early spring.
4. A thorough operations manual and operating budget is nearly complete and should be available for public review at about Thanksgiving.
5. Though legal issues with the site and zoning have made excavating the site this fall impossible, the project is still on track to go out to bid this winter, with construction beginning in the spring.



Other Area Highlights



Hospital Task Force Pursues Three-Phase Medical Campus for Ah-Gwah-Ching Submitted by John Warren

The hospital task force working with the Benedictine Health System (BHS) to improve health care delivery for central Cass County is pursuing development of a comprehensive medical campus at Ah-Gwah-Ching (AGC) near Walker. The State of Minnesota plans to close AGC on January 1, 2007 and is offering Cass County \$4 million to redevelop the property if the county purchases the site for one dollar. "AGC is the perfect site for a medical campus and the incentives offered by the state provide a tremendous opportunity to move quickly compared to any other location. The task force feels strongly that we must not let this opportunity slip away considering our health care needs and over 100 jobs at AGC that must be replaced as soon as possible," said John Warren, task force chair and Walker Area Foundation board member.

BHS, which the task force selected as the lead health care provider for the project in September, is in the process of doing a financial feasibility study of a three-phase development for the AGC site. The first phase would be a 24-hour ambulatory care clinic offering urgent care and diagnostic services. The second phase would be senior housing, including state-of-art long term care facilities. The third phase would be a hospital licensed for up to 25 beds.

"Building a hospital is a complicated process and takes time, which is provided for in the three-phase plan. Studies of health care needs in central Cass County have shown that 24-hour urgent care is the top priority for our area and that is exactly what the first phase of the project would deliver," said Warren, who noted this is especially true during the summer months when the area's population triples. "We also have a much older population than the rest of the state, and we need to provide the latest and best in long term care for our elderly. BHS has an excellent track record in this area, as well as in hospital and clinic systems," he added. The BHS feasibility study is expected to be completed in early January, 2006. Warren said that gives the task force, county and BHS just under 12 months to make critical decisions that will impact the quality of health care and jobs for years to come.