

## **Empowering Minnesota Small Communities A State of Minnesota-University Partnership**

**Opportunity:** The historic investments of the Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act (IIJA) and the Inflation Reduction Act (IRA) make now an opportune time for Minnesota communities to develop projects around needed infrastructure improvements. Further, these federal level investments overlap with the opportunities created by the commitments of the State of Minnesota via its Climate Action Framework commitments and the establishment of the Sustainable Infrastructure Policy committee in the Minnesota House. Working with multiple committees at the Minnesota Legislature, as well as local partners and communities, the University of Minnesota sees a chance to break down boundaries that sometimes occur between transportation, economic development, and resilience projects to provide significant impacts across multiple policy goals and to help develop impactful projects for communities across the state.

### **Effort Hallmarks:**

Practical community-led project development that serves community needs and addressed localized challenges by:

- Empowering small Minnesota communities;
- Being community-driven;
- Building upon existing community assets;
- Identifying and leveraging existing regional, state, and federal funding resources;
- Developing scenarios that deliver more impact and value across multiple areas for program investments (co-benefits); and
- Leveling the playing field for smaller communities to win competitive grants from both federal and state sources.

**Goal:** Support smaller Minnesota communities in the pursuit of federal transportation and infrastructure project funding by assisting them in developing competitive projects that address their most pressing needs. In the short term, this will focus on preparing them to compete for discretionary funding via the IIJA and IRA. Longer term, this could help support the development of bonding projects or other efforts. Such a program would allow university stakeholders to engage communities and learn about their needs/challenges. University support and advice to communities will identify range of possible approaches, ultimately empowering them to select efforts that best fit their needs.

**Why:** Small communities have significant infrastructure needs; support for project development strategies is needed in order to enable these communities to field competitive proposals and address cross-cutting community needs in a way that reflects community priorities and aspirations. The University of Minnesota can be a trusted partner in helping communities develop these strategies based on community-led priorities.

**How:** Small communities often face challenges when competing for funding because they may lack the capacity to develop successful project proposals. We see an opportunity for small communities to work via a community/state/university partnership that identifies community-based and community-driven projects, develops the projects for community value and impact, and prepares the project proposals required for funding.

**What:** Structure a relationship between the University of Minnesota, the Minnesota Legislature, state agencies such as MnDOT and DEED, and Minnesota communities that will allow the University to serve a major plank of its land-grant mission by bringing its resources and capacity to bear via support of Minnesota communities. Projects in the effort should contribute to a community-engaged, community-driven infrastructure investment strategy for small Minnesota communities. The Minnesota Design Center has a successful track record of developing and executing on this type of project. This larger effort can build from this model.

In this program, the University of Minnesota would work with the Legislature to structure a program where interested communities would engage their residents and businesses in a human-centered design process to leverage their existing assets and to increase the impact and value of infrastructure investment to achieve multiple goals in areas that include, but are not limited to, transportation, economic development, resilience and sustainability. The University would bring relevant content experts into these projects as advisers and also measure the outcomes of the pilot and assess the value and impact of the community-based infrastructure process.

The structure and governance of this relationship would be developed jointly between the university, legislature, and community partners. A central tenet of the effort, no matter the governance structure, should be community-led project development.

### **Key University of Minnesota System Entities**

Humphrey School of Public Affairs. Home to both UMN's urban and regional planning and public policy programs. Humphrey has multiple units focused on transportation, energy, and public policy.

Center for Transportation Studies. System-wide entity that works working with researchers in more than 30 fields and with transportation professionals across the state. Close working relationship with MnDOT, Local Road Research Board, and cities/counties. Significant program administration experience.

Minnesota Design Center. Long experience supporting community-driven transportation, economic development and other projects. Experience working with communities of all sizes and state agencies like DEED and MnDOT. Its community-based process is what the Empowering Communities Cohort program would look like with communities around Minnesota.

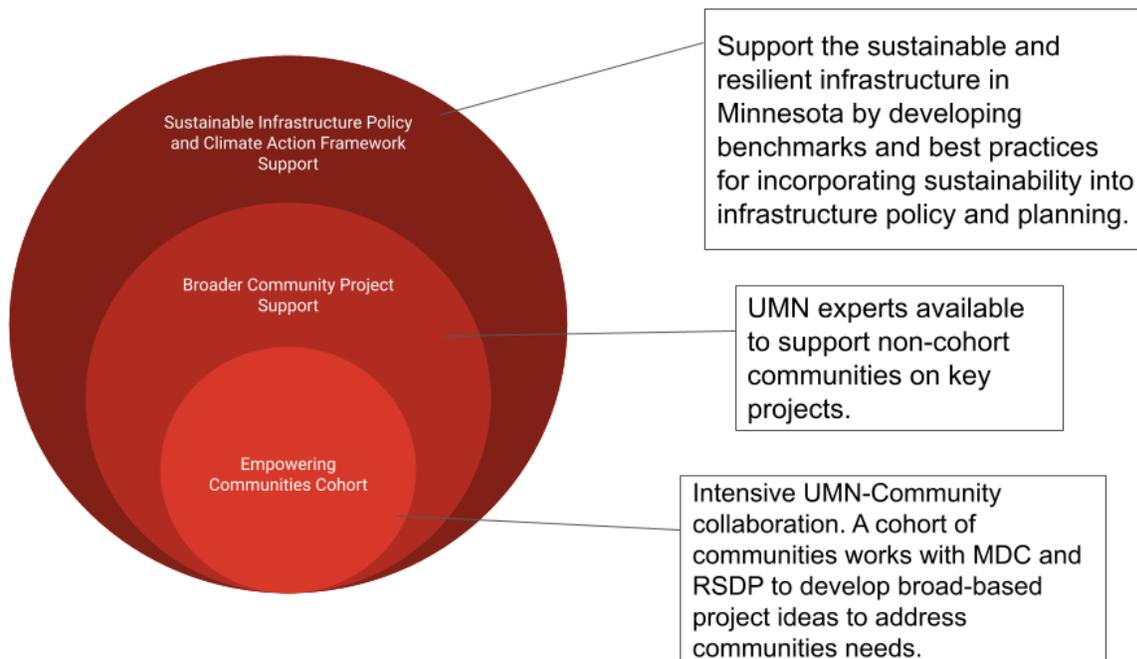
Regional Sustainable Development Partnerships, UMN Extension. Program with multiple existing channels/relationships into partners at the community level across the state.

**Examples of UMN units that could provide support per project needs.** The Center for Urban and Regional Affairs (CURA), Natural Resource Research Institute, Institute on the Environment, College of Science and Engineering, College of Food, Agriculture, and Natural Sciences, UMN Extension Center for Small Towns, UMN Extension Center for Tourism.

## Broader UMN support for the Sustainable Infrastructure Policy Committee and Infrastructure Resilience/Sustainability across Minnesota

The Empowering Minnesota Small Communities program could be a central part of a broader effort from UMN to support not just the work of the Sustainable Infrastructure Policy committee, but also broader state goals around sustainability and resilience as laid out in the state’s climate action framework. The most basic support that UMN could provide would be to lead an effort, in partnership with the committee, to define and share a framework for ensuring sustainable practices are built into policy and result in more resilient, effective infrastructure projects. This work could also expand to support the improvement, planning, and development of future infrastructure in the state. This element of the initiative would entail collaboration between leading sustainability and policy researchers and the legislature. A major outcome of this work could be a toolkit or other accessible information for communities, agencies, and policymakers to use as they identify projects and prioritize funding choices.

The image below shows a conceptual diagram of how this wider effort could work. The two interior circles represent direct work from UMN with communities. The most intense work would be the Empowering Communities program cohort effort led by MDC and RSDP and described in depth above. As initially scoped, this effort would bring between 15-20 communities per year into a longer term design thinking process to identify issues and develop potential solutions for durable, co-beneficial projects. The second circle represents additional support that could be provided to communities beyond the intensive Empowering Communities program cohort. This could include a project that had passed through the Empowering Communities cohort that requires additional support from UMN experts or it could be more direct support to communities not a part of the intensive process but that require additional support utilizing the University of Minnesota’s “deep bench” of experts to help to finalize projects and pursue funding.



### Potential program funding.

Full support would be \$2.5 to \$3 million/year depending upon final scope.

#### Empowering Communities Program Cohort Support

- \$1 million/year to support the efforts of Minnesota Design Center and Regional Sustainable Development Partnership to work in deep partnership with cohort communities. This funding would support between 15-20 sites per year depending upon size and scope of projects.

#### Broader UMN Project Support

- \$1 million/year to support later stage Empowering Community program cohort efforts or to support a separate portfolio of projects that are not going through the intensive engagement model.

#### Sustainable Infrastructure Policy Framework and Asset Mapping

- \$200k-500k depending upon scope of support for the development of sustainable infrastructure policies and project framework. Could expand to include work to document infrastructure assets and lifecycles. Could be recurring depending on committee needs and ongoing maintenance or updating of any asset tracking/analysis tools.

#### Administration and Support

- \$300k-500k/year to support program and project management, including contracting and project selection. Communications about and around project outcomes. Coordination and convening among researchers, legislature, agencies and communities to share lessons and improve programming. Higher end of this spectrum would provide support for new grant writing capacity at UMN to be deployed on behalf of communities for pursuit of discretionary infrastructure funding.