

Rockford: Cooperation Yields Results

Lola Schoenrich, The Minnesota Project

July 2003



Citizen groups and cities each have unique roles to play in community revitalization. By working together when appropriate and acting independently at other times, they magnify their effectiveness. In addition, some efforts can only succeed if a number of local governments, nonprofits and community groups collaborate. All these are evident in Rockford and the surrounding area, as Crow River Pride, a citizen group, and the City work to implement recommendations of the Minnesota Design Team and as they work with other communities along the Lower Crow River to address regional issues.

Rockford and the Surrounding Area

Rockford is a small city of close to 3,000 people on highway 55 about 30 miles west of the Twin Cities. For more than a century, the community was small, with only 500 residents. Then, between 1970 and 1989, the population grew to 2408, in part because of the construction of the mobile home community, Rockford Riverview Estates. The City has continued to grow, and because it is on the fast growing Twin Cities urban fringe, expectations are that it will double in size by about 2030.

Those that venture off highway 55 into downtown Rockford find what the City's Design Team application called "a small area of older substandard and dilapidated buildings." The several block downtown has a bank, city hall, a biker bar, a small café, and several other small businesses. There are large vacant areas where building haves burned dow that the City is working to redevelop. The Crow River runs through downtown, but a dike separates the community from the river, and the fact that downtown is in the floodplain makes development more difficult.

There are no big employers in town, although the industrial park on the highway is providing new jobs. Many residents commute to Minneapolis and its outskirts. Along the way, they pass many suburban shopping centers with huge discount grocery stores. Few people depend on stores in Rockford for anything but convenience items, and these stores are out on the highway.

People like living in Rockford and the surrounding area, and there is tremendous interest in the future of the community. The 400 plus people who came to share their views at the Minnesota Design Team community meeting said that they love the small town feel, being close to friends and family, the good schools, and the natural amenities like the Crow River, Lake Rebecca and the surrounding Hennepin County park, Lake Sarah, and the open countryside. They also like the affordable housing and low property taxes.



Downtown Rockford

Rockford is bordered to the west by Rockford Township, a rural area with scattered homes and farms. The city of Greenfield, with about 1700, people is on the east. Greenfield, once mostly farms, is now mostly single-family homes on 10-acre lots. Since 1996, there have been 21 new developments in Greenfield, adding 175 new homes (of the total of 700). Many of the developments are high end homes. These include the homes along the riverfront and a new golf course development. The community has no downtown, but has some retail development on the highway, a gas station, convenience store, and a small strip mall .

The number of local governments involved and the fact that Rockford straddles Hennepin and Wright Counties complicates the area's develop-

ment issues. Greenfield is in Hennepin County with development policy set by the Metropolitan Council. Rockford and Rockford Township conform to Wright County's land use plan. These communities, at the outer edge of the metro area and at the outer edge of the rural area, constantly seem to find themselves at the bottom of the list for state or regional funding.

The Lower Crow River runs through all three communities and is one of the most polluted tributaries to the Mississippi. Little has been done to open the river to recreation, but community interest in the river is growing. The Crow River Organization of Water (CROW), the watershed organization, is raising awareness of water quality issues and working to assist the growing communities to mitigate negative impacts to the river from storm water and other runoff.



Crow River

Life is good in Rockford, but people wanted more. They worried about the future of the community as development pressures get stronger, they wished there was better access to the lakes, river, and surrounding countryside, and knew that downtown could be much more than it is today. They looked to the Minnesota Design Team to help develop a collective vision of the future and identify concrete steps to making it happen.

The Minnesota Design Team Visit

There have always been multiple levels of involvement and interest in Rockford. The Mayor, City Council, and staff were concerned about downtown development. Early in 2000, they called University Extension for help and were connected with Doug Malchow, a county Extension agent, then working out of St. Cloud. Malchow suggested the Minnesota Design Team, and a match was made.

Meanwhile, Crow River Pride, a citizen group of residents from Rockford, Rockford Township, and Greenfield, was participating in the Initiative Foundation's Healthy Community Partnership Program. HCP is described on the Initiative Foundation web page as a yearlong program that "provides integrated community development training, grant support and technical assistance to strengthen the leadership capacity of community to plan effectively for the future." The 22 Crow River Pride volunteers participating found that they would be able to use the Minnesota Design Team visit as the community visioning process required as a part of the HCP program.

The application to the Design Team was submitted by the City of Rockford, but with Crow River Pride involved, the area covered quickly grew to include Rockford Township and Greenfield. All three local governments literally bought in to the Design Team visit, making contributions to help cover the fee. Crow River Pride organized the visit, coordinated volunteers, reached out to the other communities, and hosted the community dinner. The Design Team visit was in October 2000.

There was tremendous interest in the Design Team visit from people in all three communities. The more than 400 people at the community dinner were a record turnout in the Design Team's experience. Naturally, there were people with many different and sometimes-conflicting interests, but there were many commonalities in what people said. They valued the rural setting, the small town, friendly community and neighbors, schools, and low taxes. They agreed that they wanted slow and planned growth.

Design Team Recommendations:

1. Crow River-improve the link between communities, health of river, aesthetics, and recreation opportunities
2. Highway 55-retain small town character and livability
3. Rockford Downtown Development-foster a vibrant, viable small town community
4. Rural Development-retain small town character and rural feel

Community Involvement

With three different local governments, two counties, and Crow River Pride all involved, it took time to see which had the interest and capacity to implement the Design Team recommendations and how the different groups could best work together.

The staff and elected officials from City of Rockford had initiated the application to the Design Team because of their interest in revitalizing the downtown area. City staff and Council found many of the recommendations helpful and moved to implement them. The City was working with the Minnesota Department of Transportation on the future of highway 55 and continued to address highway design and redevelopment issues. Comprehensive planning is also a City responsibility, and the City has begun to update their plan.



Crow River Pride volunteers in a community parade

Crow River Pride, a relatively new organization, took time to develop an organizational structure. With the help of a student intern, the group developed a mission statement, bylaws, and made decisions about how they would operate. This time of reflection was important in clarifying and focusing the group's work. The mission statement says "Crow River Pride strives to develop and communicate a shared community identity and increase individual and collective community pride by facilitating positive change, fostering participation in decision-making, and assisting with ongoing collaborative planning in the community."

The group has put its efforts into community building activities. Les Putikka, one of the two co-chairs points out that they have a major project for every season: community festivals, flower planting

in downtown, river clean-up, and a business expo. About ten dedicated volunteers make up the core and lots of other people are involved in specific projects. The group has involved local youth whenever possible through school community service programs and the local Youth as Resources organization. Through their involvement and visibility of their projects, Crow River Pride members believe that they are able to bring new ideas forward and advocate for improvements. Kim Knutson, the other co-chair says, "We keep the City on their toes."

While the roles of City and Crow River Pride are relatively distinct, there is much overlap between the people. The City Administrator and other City staff are members of Crow River Pride. Les Putikka, has joined the Rockford Planning Commission.

Citizens from both Greenfield and Rockford Township have continued their involvement in Crow River Pride and in community activities, but neither local government has done much to implement Design Team recommendations. The City of Greenfield local elected officials were not interested in most of the Design Team recommendations for their community. The Design Team stressed cluster development and preservation of open space. The Mayor and at least one other Council member were developers, and the large lot, large home developments were the preference of the majority of the City Council. Rockford Township had little sense of urgency about development issues and, as a township, little capacity to address them.



Greenfield open field for development

Crow River Communities

Initiative

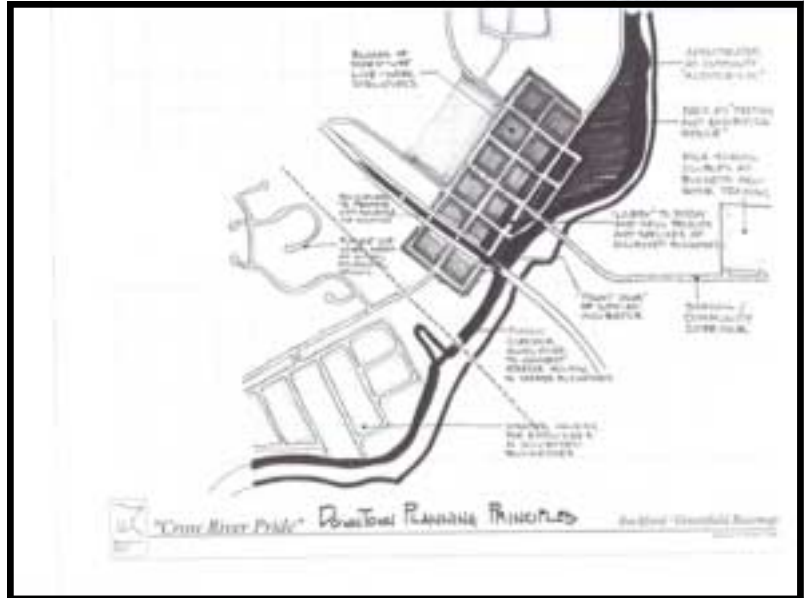
Finally, the Crow River Communities Initiative (CRCI) is addressing several regional issues. CRCI is described on their web page as “a coalition of citizens and leaders of communities along the lower Crow River dedicated to developing and enhancing environmentally friendly, safe, publicly accessible trails, parks and greenways connected with our economic, cultural, historical and natural assets.” CRCI is made up of members of Crow River Pride, and citizen groups from Delano and Hanover.

The group came together at a “pork chop dinner” as it came to be known, in fall 2001. That evening, elected officials and community groups from Rockford, Hanover, Delano and several other communities identified common goals. Along with pork chops, the evening featured speakers about the region and the challenges of water protection and development issues. Small groups discussed assets, obstacles, and possible solutions.

The group was formed through the joint effort of a number of the technical assistance providers working with Crow River Pride and the other communities. Doug Malchow, with University Extension, helped the three community groups to host the first dinner. Tim Nolan, Minnesota Office of Environmental Assistance, took a leading role in pulling technical assistance providers together and coordinating state agency involvement. Many other groups participated in the pork chop

dinner. Bruce Johnson, with the Rivers Council of Minnesota, has facilitated the CRCI committees, addressing greenspace and trails, along with river water quality and accessibility for recreation.

In addition, the following organizations supported the effort in various ways. Initiative Foundation, Wright County Solid and Water Conservation District, Crow River Organization of Water, Minnesota Project, Tree Trust, Minnesota Department of Natural Resources, Minnesota Planning, and the Metropolitan Council.



All involved realized that the issues identified by the Design Team and others related to trails, greenspace and the river could only be effectively addressed by a regional effort. The group has been meeting for over a year and held a second annual community dinner in December 2002.



Rockford Park

Technical Assistance

Crow River Pride, the cities, and township sought out follow-up assistance from a number of organizations.

- *University Extension* continued to work with Rockford and helped to organize Crow River Communities Initiative (CRCI), the multi-community effort.
- *Initiative Foundation* provided funding to Crow River Pride, including funding for a student intern from St. Cloud State University.
- *The Minnesota Project* facilitated the Design

Team follow-up visit and worked with Crow River Pride to prioritize the Design Team recommendations, establish task forces, and develop goals and workplans for each. Minnesota Project and Extension collaborated on two workshops for the Rockford City Council and Planning Commission on downtown development issues.

- *Tree Trust* provided education on natural resource protection and helped Rockford to become a Tree City USA. They helped Crow River Pride and students from the Minnesota Graduates program at the Rockford Senior High to design and install Freedom Park, a new pocket park.
- *Rivers Council of Minnesota* facilitated the work of the River and Trails subgroups of the Crow River Communities Initiative.
- *NEMO* (Nonpoint Source Pollution Education for Municipal Officials) offered a workshop for the CRCI communities sponsored by the Crow River Organization of Water (CROW) and Wright County Water Management Task Force.

Community Accomplishments

Much has been done on all levels in the two years since the Minnesota Design Team visit to the Crow River Valley. The biggest success is the collaborations that have been built both within and be-

Community Goals

1. Highway 55 development including backage roads, highway corridor enhancement, pedestrian safety and connection with the downtown.
2. Urban development including becoming a business “incubator,” “live and work” structures, and city park improvement.
3. River development including river clean-up, river monitoring, green corridors and trails, canoe landings, and coordination with other river communities
4. Addressing rural development issues including education the public and local officials about rural preservation options and open space preservation.

tween communities. The theme of the CRCI community meeting in December 2002 was the value of cooperation. People from all of the communities and organizations applauded their work together and looked forward to future collaborative successes.

Crow River Pride is well established and known by people in all three communities. They have completed several visible community projects, and are looked to in the community for ideas, input and action. The City of Rockford has made changes to their plans and ordinances and is clearer about what they are looking for in working with downtown developers. CRCI has built capacity, made plans, hosted successful river clean ups and community events. There is every reason to believe that over time, things will begin to look different in Rockford and other communities along the Crow River.



Crow River Pride

- The annual Business Expo has been a big success. In 2002 there were 50 booths, and 800 people attending. The event was linked to the opening of the new community center attached to the high school. The March 2003 Expo was tied into the one-year anniversary of the community center.
- Fall River Clean was held in 2001 and 2002. Also held a river dike clean up to remove small

trees on the dike in downtown Rockford. De-lano and Hanover participated in 2002.

- Adopted a park in Rockford township
- Flower boxes in downtown, purchased by the City and planted by CRP and the Rockford garden club.
- “Sprucing up the Streets” Spruce tips in the planters in town, Greenfield City Hall and Rockford Township Hall

Freedom Park-A Joint Effort

Students from the Jobs for Minnesota Graduates at the Rockford High School worked with Les Putikka, co-chair of Crow River Pride, and Janette Moneau, Tree Trust, to design and plant a 150’ by 60’ park in Rockford. The park is at the corner of Bridge Street and Mechanic Street and abuts the Crow River. The project provided the students with the opportunity to learn about the elements of landscape design and provided an opportunity to go through the process of designing, organizing, and implementing a planting project. The students learned about the elements of design through classroom education and designed a park that is environmentally sound and aesthetically pleasing. The design includes a windbreak/privacy planting, three rain gardens, and tree and shrub plantings. The amenities in the design include a kiosk, picnic tables, flagpole, and rock benches. The students presented the plan to the Rockford Parks Department for their approval. They presented to the City Council in March, and plan to have the garden planted by the end of May 2003.



Planting day at Freedom Park

- Rockford River Days. CRP coordinates the Bingo and Can Smash activities and had a “Lawn Chair Brigade” entry in the parade.
- Helped to host the two annual meetings of CRCI
- Helped to cosponsor concerts in the park in the summer, cosponsored with local business owners and the Metropolitan Regional Arts funding
- Freedom Park project completed.



Vacant lot in downtown Rockford

City of Rockford

- The City Council clarified their vision for the revitalization of the downtown business area. A Downtown Design Task Force was established and design standards based on the Design Team recommendations were adopted. The Downtown Design Task Force will review future plans for the renovation of downtown buildings .
- City bought and demolished a dilapidated corner building. A developer has been found and has agreed to complete the construction of two three-story brick buildings totaling 13,332 square feet, with retail/commercial on the first floors and six apartment units on the second and third floors by June 1, 2004. He further has committed to create at least 4 jobs within 2 years of completion of the project that pay at least \$10.00 per hour including benefits. The downtown has been designated a Tax Increment Financing district, which is helping to facilitate the development.
- The city completed a Re-evaluation of allowable uses in downtown and on the highway in 2002.
- The Planning Commission is working on revising the city’s comprehensive plan. Informational

meetings are being held in 2003 to gather input from local residents.

- The Downtown Task Force has a matching grant program available for existing businesses. The grants can be used to rehabilitate the façade or interior of businesses in Rockford. The city will match up to \$2,500 on each grant until the money is gone. So far, six businesses have applied for the maximum funding for a parking lot, remodeling, and front facade improvements.
- A new community center opened in 2002
- The city installed a new skateboard park
- The city is exploring options and funding possibilities for new street lighting on main street and highway 55 coming into town
- The integrity of the dike is an issue that needs to be addressed, and the City is taking steps to acquire the portions that are privately owned and to make improvements.

Crow River Communities Initiative (CRCI)

Two subgroups, Green Corridor and River, have continued to meet since the original pork chop dinner in 2001. The two groups meet on the same evening and work closely together.

- The Green Corridor group is working on designing a regional trail system. They are identifying existing trails including bike, horseback, snowmobile, cross-country skiing and hiking. They have had a summit for all elected officials to review the maps. The Crow River Pride goal is to connect Rockford with Lake Rebecca and connect the parks and trails within the City of Rockford.
- The River group worked with Crow River Pride and groups in Hanover and Delano in 2002 to expand the river clean up to include all three communities. Each took responsibility for a stretch of river and the clean-ups were all held on the same day. The group has completed an inventory of river access points and mapping of snags, bank erosion and other river problems in 2002. They are looking at the idea of putting in canoe launches in several communities. In addition, Minnesota Public Radio did an in-depth story on the Crow River, featuring many of the community members.
- The group completed a natural resource inventory in Hanover in 2002 and a comprehensive wetlands management plan using the Minnesota

land cover classification system. This included aerial photos of forests and wetlands and a functions and values analysis for each wetland. The group hopes to do the same in Rockford Township and Greenfield in 2003.

- Downtown issues were addressed with a Biko Associates Downtown Renovation workshop in February 2002, and with an Initiative Foundation Downtown Revitalization conference in July 2002.
- The second annual dinner was held in December 2002 and the group invited all elected local officials from Greenfield, Delano, Hanover, Rockford and Rockford Township, along with Wright and Hennepin County officials and all of the community groups. The evening celebrated the CRCI successes with a video of achievements of the last year and three breakout discussion groups.

Elements of Success

Everyone in the Crow River Valley is doing what they do best. Crow River Pride is enthusiastically engaged in community building and beautification projects. Les Puttikka says that they are “getting things done with citizens that care about the community. There’s a lot that the common Joe Citizen can do that really have an effect on the appearance of our community.” Both Knutson and Puttikka say that their high visibility contributes to the success of the work. They send a newsletter to everyone in Rockford and Greenfield and get good regular coverage in the local paper. Lots of people know who they are because they marched in the parade at the 4th of July and have prominent roles in other community events. People in town know that Crow River Pride exists and are happy to chip in to help. That, along with the hands-on nature of their



Crow River Pride in the parade

projects, leads to lots of people involved in the clean ups and other events.

It made sense to collaborate with other communities to address the regional issues. Wayne Jacobson, a citizen leader in Hanover and active participant in CRCI, says that the value of their regional cooperation is that “everyone is willing to pitch in and find solutions to the natural resource problems we’ve all been working on.” Together, they can address the river issues and other natural resource issues that no one community can effectively address alone. Marsha White, a Crow River Pride member, points out that their ability to cover a region, rather than just a local area, will be to their benefit when working with county and state organizations.

Lessons Learned

- Visibility is important. Make sure that everyone in the community knows what’s going on.
- Projects that people can see help to build support for future efforts. Even small things like new flower pots in the downtown give people the sense that things are moving and getting better and make people want to be a part of it.
- Have lots of opportunities for people to volunteer and to do different things. Keep track of their names and call them again.
- Above all, have fun!

All agreed that it was helpful that citizen groups in both Hanover and Delano had participated in the Healthy Communities Partnership program. People already knew each other and everyone had a common understanding of the community development process.

The CRCI group found it helpful to have a well-informed outside facilitator, especially for issues of trails and greenspaces. It had been taking the citizens a long time just to figure out which state, county, city, or regional entity had authority on different pieces of the puzzle.

It’s been nice, Putikka and Knutson say, to be connected to other communities. It’s also been nice to be connected to the many outside technical assistance groups. They bring help on specific issues and they bring a larger vision and perspective on all of the community, environmental and development issues.



Crow River

Moving Forward

Citizens in Rockford and the surrounding communities are well on their way to being able to guide the growth coming to the region. By cooperating in many different ways, they hope to protect the best the communities and surrounding area have to offer and make improvements to the City, the river quality, and recreational opportunities. They have two new, strong citizen groups and City elected officials and staff who are better informed and moving ahead. Most important, they have built lasting collaborations between the City and Crow River Pride and between citizens in Rockford, Hanover and Delano. The next decade will bring a wide range of environmental and community issues, and citizens and communities in the Crow River area are poised to address them together.

For More Information

- City of Rockford, Nancy Evers, City Administrator, 763-477-6565, www.cityofrockford.org
- Crow River Pride, www.crowrivervalley.org/CRP_Home.htm, Les Putikka, Co-chair, les.putikka@mpls.frb.org
- Crow River Communities Initiative, www.crowrivervalley.org
- Rivers Council of Minnesota, Bruce Johnson, Executive Director, www.riversmn.org
- Minnesota Project, Lola Schoenrich, lschoenrich@mnproject.org, www.mnproject.org
- Crow River Organization of Water, CROW, Jennifer Gieske, 763-682-1933 ext. 3, jenny.gieske@mn.usda.gov
- Tree Trust, Janette Monear, www.treetrust.org, janettem@treetrust.com