

Starbuck: Moving Toward a Sustainable Future

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July 2003



to visit family and friends for the annual golf dinner and for community festivals. Fully one third of the local newspapers are mailed to former residents who just want to keep in touch.

People driving through town might mistake Starbuck for just another sleepy small Minnesota town, but they would be wrong. The town is full of life. People in Starbuck are active and involved in the community. They are deeply committed to the community school and the other community institutions. There are flowerpots and benches all over town built and paid for by local groups. The activity has not always been well coordinated, how-

ever. People were surprised to discover, for instance, that there were actually several different community groups placing benches of different designs around town.

People in Starbuck are proud of their Norwegian heritage and put time and energy into maintaining the symbols of the past. Holly Skogen Park is a well-maintained private park with trails guarded by carved Norwegian trolls. The old depot was renovated entirely by volunteers, and the same volunteer group staffs the museum and organizes programming. And, Starbuck is the home of the world's largest lefsa, a major community undertaking.

In Starbuck, committed citizens are working together in partnership with the mayor, members of the City Council, and other local voluntary organizations to make this vibrant small town an even better place to live. They are proving that with vision, creativity, tenacity, and lots of collaboration they can achieve lasting improvements.

Project Starbuck is a group of people dedicated to implementing the many parts of the vision articulated through their Minnesota Design Team visit. They keep things moving in town by initiating projects, by keeping the many different Starbuck volunteer groups in touch and working together, and by raising funds for major projects. In just two years, they have several major projects and many smaller ones completed, and a number of other projects in the works.

Starbuck and the Surrounding Area

People like living in Starbuck. While many rural areas in Minnesota are losing population, Starbuck's population has been stable for the past 20 years. Starbuck is a city of 1314 located in Pope County in Central Minnesota. When the Design Team asked people what they liked about Starbuck, they responded that they loved the people and the lake. People who have moved away are drawn home



Holly Skogen Park

Starbuck is on the shores of Lake Minnewaska, one of the largest lakes in the state, and Glacial Lakes State Park is close by. There are stable, loyal summer people filling the small campground and marina with their campers and boats. Private summer lake cabins fill up as well. The health of the Starbuck economy is quite clearly tied to the health of the lake and surrounding natural resources. Tourism is just one part of the local economy, however, and many people thought that it could be more. The beach, marina, and campground are down the highway from downtown, and people were wishing that there were better ways to draw tourists into town.

Some Starbuck residents commute to jobs in other communities. Starbuck is within a half hour of the larger cities of Alexandria, Morris, Benson, and Glenwood. Starbuck has jobs in town as well. The locally owned phone company has turned out to be a major community asset and supplies the high-speed internet service needed by several prominent businesses, started and run by local entrepreneurs. Starbuck's downtown features grocery, liquor, and hardware stores, restaurants, pharmacy and more. The hospital is another anchor of the community.



Design Team visit

possible for the first time in many years because of the confluence of good economic times and new community leadership. Leadership in many community organizations was rolling over to a younger generation who were energized and excited by their new roles. Resources were at hand for the first time in years as well. In 1999, the economy was good and the City was in the black for the first time in eight years. The bequest of a local resident had created the Gladys Ness Brang Foundation, with giving focused in Starbuck. Community alumni were a known community asset that could be counted on as well. The energy and resources were there for improvements, and leaders wanted to make the most of the moment.

They began visioning with several town meetings. As a result, people began working on plans for a new community center. Many also wanted to make better connections between the lake and downtown, and wished that there were a way to slow highway traffic through town. People were frustrated by the lack of a common vision, however, and hoped that a Design Team visit would give focus to community ideas and energy. The Minnesota Design Team visited Starbuck in April 2001.

The weekend of the Design Team visit, a team of 20 volunteer professional architects, landscape designers, and planners toured the community, heard presentations on community strengths and weaknesses and heard the vision of the more than 150 people attending the community meeting. The Design Team drawings were presented to more than 200 people at a Saturday evening meeting. "We are holding up a mirror to what you told us," professor Arthur Mehrhoff told the group that night.

The Design Team Visit

Starbuck submitted an application to the Minnesota Design Team in 2000. Positive change seemed



Design Team Visit

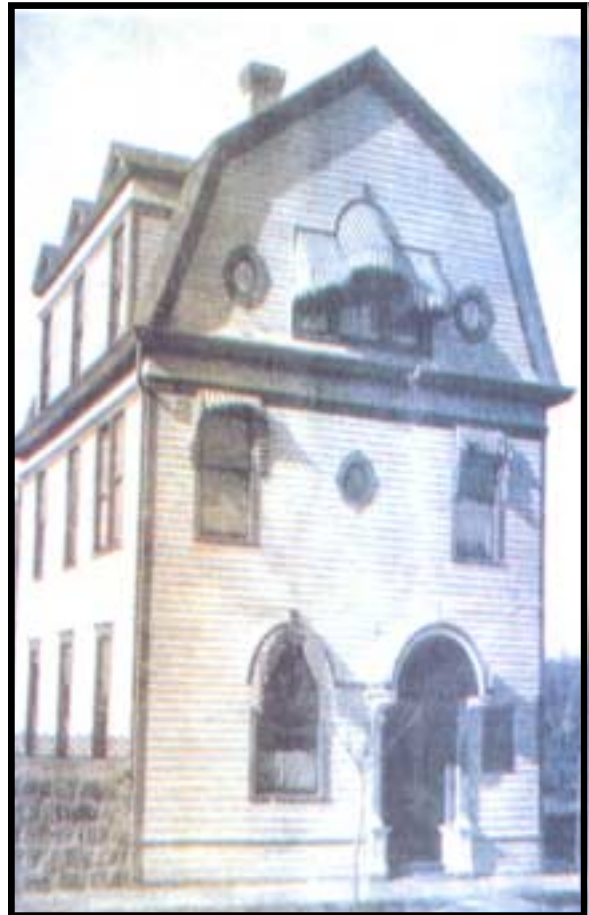
Looking back, Project Starbuck leaders say that the Minnesota Design Team visit and recommendations energized the community. By reflecting what people said that they liked about Starbuck and their hopes for the future, the visit gave people the confidence to act. People had a new feeling that by working together, they could make a difference.



Project Starbuck

The Design Team recommended that the community create a central committee to coordinate activities of the many different community organizations. Project Starbuck was organized at the Design Team Action Planning meeting, six weeks later. People at the meeting decided on a basic operating procedure, committees and committee chairs, and Project Starbuck co-chairs.

The group was off and running. They quickly prioritized projects within each of the areas addressed by the Design Team. They hoped to take action on downtown revitalization, eventually nar-



Historic hospital in early 1900's

rowing highway 29 through town if possible. They hoped to clean up and improve the beach and surrounding park, and wanted to explore options for new gateways at each of the entrances to town. There are a number of different symbols being used to identify Starbuck on different signs in town and many people wanted one identifying community theme.

Another priority was saving the historic Minnewaska Hospital building, the first hospital between St. Cloud and Fargo when it was built in 1899. The City owns the building, listed as one of most threatened historic properties in the state in 2001, and there was talk of tearing it down. It had fallen into disrepair after years of use as the Jaycees Halloween haunted house. Members of Project Starbuck knew that they would have to move fast to have a chance to save the building.

Reaching Out to the Community

With that much on their plate, Project Starbuck members knew that no one person or group could do it alone. The vision put forward by the Design Team was the result of input from many community members, and Project Starbuck members wanted to make sure that they reached out to everyone at each step of the way. “The important thing is that people have a chance to have their opinions and ideas included and that the community makes decisions as a result of good process and widespread participation,” Beth Hendrickson, one of the Project Starbuck co-chairs said in a editorial in the Starbuck Times shortly after the Design Team visit.



Starbuck Main Street

Project Starbuck members have reached out to the community in many ways. The existing community organizations are all represented in Project Starbuck including the Jaycees, the Beautification Committee, Depot Society (runs the historic depot), Youth as Community group, Chamber of Commerce, Starbuck Study Club, the mayor and City Council.

The Design Team visit and the work after the visit have always been prominently featured in the paper, easy to do because one of the co-chairs was the newspaper editor for a time. Meeting minutes are emailed to a long list of interested volunteers. Signs saying “Brought to you by Project Starbuck” were purchased by the Chamber of Commerce and are prominent around town. In addition, the group reaches out personally to others when recruiting volunteers for specific projects and events.

Technical Assistance

Project Starbuck leaders have been strategic when reaching outside the community for technical assistance. Minnesota Project and Tree Trust provided follow-up assistance after the Design Team visit through a grant from the Minnesota Office of Environmental Assistance. Minnesota Project helped by facilitating a few key meetings, connecting the group to other technical assistance providers and acting as a sounding board. Tree Trust helped Starbuck to become a Tree City USA.

In addition, Project Starbuck got help from the Minnesota Historical Society, which funded and coordinated a Historic Reuse Study for the old hospital building. A number of other individuals donated time to participate in the study and write up the report. The Minnesota Department of Transportation (MNDOT) Partnership Program provided landscape design for the new gateway and funding for plant materials.

Community Accomplishments

Within a couple of weeks of the Design Team visit, they were getting feedback from people that things didn't look very different yet, Project Starbuck leaders say. They realized that to build a sense of momentum and maintain community support, they needed to focus first on visible projects that could be completed quickly. At the same time, they kept the longer term, bigger projects moving forward.



By fall 2001, just six months after the Design Team visit, Project Starbuck had:

- Crafted a mission statement
- Set up a Community Fund as a sub-fund of the Starbuck Community fund at the West Central Initiative Foundation.
- Worked with MNDOT to paint crosswalks and lane lines to create the feeling of a narrower roadway on Main Street (State Highway 28)
- Conducted a city wide clean up on Memorial Day in collaboration with the City of Starbuck and Lions Club, partially funded by the Brang Foundation
- Completed beach clean up and added new sand to the beach. Sand and labor donated by the Jaycees



In addition, the Beautification Committee, which formed at the same time as Project Starbuck, completed the following projects.

- Planted donated trees in pots on the 4 main corners to symbolize Main Street improvements. The trees were donated. At the end of the first summer, they were auctioned off and the proceeds allocated to the historic hospital renovation.
- Added 30 additional benches in town in memory of family and friends
- Placed flowerpots and hung baskets in the downtown area

Between 2001 and 2003, Project Starbuck continued a number of these activities. Trees have been placed in planters on Main Street corners every summer, along with flowerpots and baskets. The group is actively involved in Heritage Days and the other City festivals. By the spring of 2003, Project Starbuck had the following additional major accomplishments:



New Gateway on Highway 28

A new gateway sign and landscaping has been installed on Highway 28 on the east side of town. The project was done through the MN DOT Partnership Program, which provided landscape design and funding for plant materials. Thirty volunteers and school children did the planting in October 2002, and the City will maintain the plantings.

Design Team member and local architect, Stephanie Howe, designed the new Starbuck entrance sign. The City put up temporary versions of the new sign on small billboards at each of the four entrances to the community. In typical collaborative and creative Starbuck style, the City had this done at no cost by providing a local billboard company with space on its right of way for a billboard in exchange for the new signs.

The next gateway featuring prairie plantings was originally planned for fall 2003 on the west side of town. However, state budget cuts have put the funding for that phase of the project on indefinite hold. That has not stopped Project Starbuck from moving forward on the project, however. They are



The historic hospital before a much needed paint job

seeking funds for the south and west signs and landscaping from other sources.

Minnewaska Hospital has a Face Lift

“The Design Team told us that once you tear down a historic building it’s gone forever,” says Lorie Billehus, a member of the group working to save the old hospital building. “That just stuck with us.” Project Starbuck is committed to saving the historic building, but it looked like an uphill battle at the start. Still, the old depot in town had been renovated by a committed group of volunteers some years ago, and Project Starbuck leaders saw no reason why they couldn’t do the same.



Hospital renovation in progress

Project Starbuck knew that the building structure was basically sound and could be saved because in the summer of 2000, Grooters Leapaldt Tidemand Architects in St. Cloud and Larson Engineering of White Bear Lake had surveyed the building and concluded, “If the restoration is completed, the building could successfully be used and maintained for a number of years and would be a valuable asset to the City of Starbuck.” They also cautioned, “If the City of Starbuck chooses to preserve the building, a viable reuse should be established.” (GLTArchitects, “Existing Condition Survey Minnewaska District Hospital, Starbuck Minnesota, 11 August 2000, 7.)

Nancy Rapp, head of the hospital improvement project, and Project Starbuck committee moved forward on two fronts at once. In January 2002, they applied to the Minnesota Historical Society for a Historic Reuse Study. Reasoning that the exterior needed painting no matter what happened, in the

spring of 2002 they received a grant of paint from Valspar.

The Reuse Study began in April 2002. A team of seven consultants met for two days in Starbuck to visit the building, meet with a number of interested community leaders one-on-one, hold a community meeting, and identify issues that would affect the future of the hospital building. The study report was completed in September. The report recommended a mixed use for the building, some combination of community center and offices or restaurant/offices/bed and breakfast or niche retail/offices. A community meeting to present the report was held in December 2002.

The Reuse Study confirmed that the first steps were to gut the interior, repair rotting siding, and paint the exterior. In a major push to get that done, Project Starbuck volunteers meet one evening each week all during the summer. They soon found, however, that they needed help with repairing rotten wood and with painting the second and third floors.

The group had been fundraising for the project all along; creatively coupling donated time and materials, with money from the sale of Project Starbuck trivets and individual donations to get it done. They paid a technical college student, area painters and carpenters to do the work. They did not wait until all the needed funds were raised, but moved forward each time they had enough to pay for the next step. They reasoned that people would be more supportive as the building started to look better, and they were right. Donations increased as the building took shape.

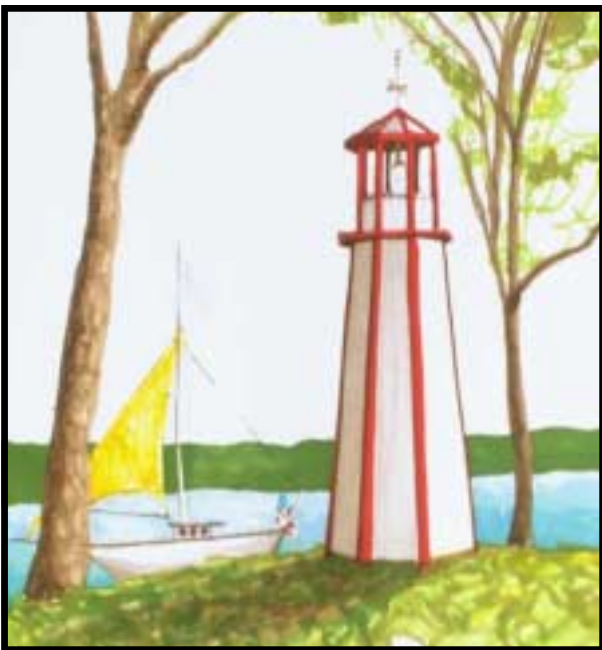


Renovation on historic hospital

Meanwhile, the Economic Development Director, Gene Wenstrom, worked with the City to evaluate options for using the building for community meeting space. As of summer 2003, the City had rejected any options requiring ongoing City funding because of budget cuts resulting from state reductions in Local Government Aid. Wenstrom is also working with several entrepreneurs interested in the space for a fitness center or spa. As of summer 2003, there is no definite use for the building, but it is looking more useable with each passing day and entrepreneur interest is growing.

Future Projects

Project Starbuck has a number of projects in the works. Some of them will move forward more quickly than others. The declining economy in 2003 and resulting state budget cuts mean more empty storefronts on Starbuck's Main Street, fewer City dollars for projects, and more demands on the Brang Foundation and other private donors. As a result, the funding for some projects may be reduced or just not be there in the next year or two. For others, fundraising may be slower. Volunteer time and energy will affect which projects move forward as well. With a full palette of ideas, Project Starbuck is poised to take advantage of opportunities that come up to move projects forward. Their future project list includes:



Design Team drawing



Design Team vision of a new beachhouse

- Moving the small lighthouse now at the campground to a more prominent location
- Building a new beach house at the park
- Building a trail and boardwalk between downtown and the beachfront park.
- Working with MNDOT on the rest of the landscaping and the highway redesign. An overlay is planned for Main Street (highway 29) in 2007.



Design Team bridge and walkway

- Installing new street lighting along the bike path south of town. Project Starbuck, the City and the Chamber have applied for a scenic byways grant for 60 streetlights and the south gateway sign.
- Refurbishing the front of the elementary school. This project is now on hold because of pending discussions about closing the school.

Elements of Success

When the Design Team asked at the community meeting whose job it was to implement their recommendations, the group wholeheartedly responded that it is everyone's job. Starbuck has succeeded in part because people recognized from the start that no one person or group could do it alone. "It does not now fall to the city to plan and fund these projects. It does not now fall to the chamber or local businesses. It falls to all of us to work together to come up with a plan that will work for every, or the majority, of people involved." Said Beth Hendrickson in an editorial the Starbuck Times following the Design Team visit. (Starbuck Times, April 11, 2001)

Project Starbuck was created to facilitate cooperation, and it has worked. Groups in Starbuck collaborate all the time to get things done. Sometimes Project Starbuck suggests or initiates projects and sometimes it simply helps other community groups to coordinate their work. Once the project is done, leaders make sure that everyone gets recognition and credit for a job well done.



Cooperation and collaboration is evident among individual leaders in Starbuck as well. There are many strong community leaders working together in Project Starbuck. One strong leader often carries ideas forward, but Starbuck excels because there are many working together. Each brings their enthusiasm, expertise, energy, and tenacity to the work. They believe that together they can make a difference, and they do.

Project Starbuck excels at fundraising as well. One of the first things the group did was to create a community foundation, a mechanism for accepting donations from the community. They talk



about fundraising at every meeting. They raise money all the time and at every event. Every lunch, dinner or community event has a basket out for donations, and there is always money in it at the end of the day. They believed from the beginning that community members would make want to chip in to support community improvements, reasoning since the Design Team visit and recommendations were widely supported, people would be willing to chip in to make them a reality.

A belief in abundance, not scarcity is one of the first steps in being able to raise money successfully. Project Starbuck leaders have this, plus they recognize that most philanthropy comes from individuals, not government or foundations. They asked the Brang Foundation for funding early on, but quickly expanded to many within the community.

They also reached out to people from outside the community who might have an interest for one reason or another. For instance, they thought creatively about funding for the old hospital and asked the heirs of the hospital founder for funding, even though they no longer live in town. Nancy Rapp, Project Starbuck leader and staff at the Chamber of Commerce says that people occasionally stop her on the street to make donations. Local giving like that is a key indicator that a project is widely supported.

Project Starbuck leaders have never waited until they had all the money and resources lined up before they moved forward, however. They move projects forward incrementally. They reason that as they make progress, more support will come, and they have been right.

Lessons Learned

Although Project Starbuck has had considerable success, some of the lessons learned have felt like hard ones. Like any community effort, there have been some bumps in the road along the way.

Project Starbuck leaders believed that there was a broad community consensus for action after the Design Team visit. They were disappointed to find that, despite continuous and honest efforts to involve lots of people and make sure that everyone in the community knew what was happening, naysayers came out at the end.



City Councils, County Boards, and other elected bodies have this happen all too often. Everyone knows about this phenomenon, but you feel it in a different way when it happens to you. People just don't pay always attention until a project nears its end, or they oppose an idea all along, but don't say anything until it looks certain that it will move forward. Sometimes the naysayers are loud and insistent, but represent a minority. When it does happen, it is time to reevaluate and either move forward in the face of some opposition or take a step back if necessary to make modifications or build stronger bridges to the community.

Some Project Starbuck members discovered that being in a volunteer role working on a visible project, was a very a public role. It opened people up to both accolades and criticism, and not everyone welcomed the attention.

Sometimes new leaders have to prove themselves with smaller projects before there is broad support for big changes. People don't like change in general and incremental changes are easier to embrace. An early large Project Starbuck proposal to the Brang Foundation was turned down, a huge dis-

appointment. The group did what they needed to, however, and regrouped, reevaluated, and have worked to build stronger relationships.

"If it were always easy, everyone would be doing it," one of the Design Team members counseled on a return visit.

Moving Forward

Setbacks, major and minor, are a normal part of life. The test is not whether or not there are ever challenges, but how the group deals with them. The people of Starbuck have shown over and over again that they have staying power. They are committed to working together, to letting people run with their ideas, to chipping in to help, to letting people shine, following their passion. In two short years, the community has accomplished more than anyone there or outside ever thought possible. They have proven that small towns can succeed, improve without growing, and keep community and economy strong, protecting their natural resources as they go.

For more information:

- Starbuck Area Chamber of Commerce, (320) 239-4220, www.starbuckmn.org, starbuckchamber@willmar.com
- Minnesota Design Team, www.minnesotadesignteam.org. Includes a detailed account of the Starbuck visit including the final drawings, www.minnesotadesignteam.org/starbuck
- Project Starbuck, www.starbuckmn.org/projectstarbuck.htm Beth Hendrickson, Project Starbuck chair, bhendrickson.mrhs@hcinet.net
- City of Starbuck, (320) 239-2525, mortsarbucks@hcinet.net
- Minnesota Project, www.mnproject.org, Lola Schoenrich, lschoenrich@mnproject.org
- Tree Trust, www.treetrust.org, Janette Monear, janettem@treetrust.com