



The MIRACLE Group

Cass Lake, a small city in north-central Minnesota, approximately 250 miles north of Minneapolis/St. Paul, is the headquarters for both the U.S. Forest Service Chippewa National Forest and the Minnesota Chippewa (Ojibwe) Tribe, an umbrella organization made up of six of the Indian reservations in northern Minnesota. Cass Lake is the reservation's social and population center and is by Pike Bay Township.

Although thousands of people live within a 10-mile radius of Cass Lake, an economic and demographic squeeze has shrunk the city, itself, from 2,100 to 890 people. Bemidji, 14 miles to the west, established itself as the regional economic and retail hub and is where people work and shop – and part of the reason Cass Lake has no downtown retail left. Walker, 20 miles to the south, pulls in tourists from the Twin Cities, but they rarely continue on to Cass Lake because of its reputation for crime and violence.

The social problems associated with high unemployment, underemployment, and despair are evident in the community. The Cass Lake area is affected by the Leech Lake Reservation's high unemployment rate, which fluctuates between 20 and 35%. Much of the work is seasonal; year-round employment is generally with local bodies of government. The reservation's gaming industry is a major employer and operates three small casinos. However, because the casinos are not within a high population area, they do not benefit the community much, economically. Confronted with an array of social problems, the reservation uses most revenues to try to meet basic needs.

At a community meeting in 1995, a Cass Lake resident spoke for many when he said, “Our community seems to have everything bad in abundance: unemployment, drug abuse, alcoholism, crime and violence, vandalism, neglect and apathy.” In many respects, the community was abandoned. As outsiders gave up on Cass Lake, its residents followed suit. The houses fell into disrepair, giving the community a neglected look; the roadways were unkempt and littered. The community gradually went from economic isolation to insulation from outside influences and support. As a sense of self-sufficiency and self-reliance collapsed, the community became largely dependent on external systems and institutions. Not surprisingly, the overall mindset in Cass Lake was one of apathy and despair.

In 1996, a diverse group of local residents decided to tackle Cass Lake’s decline. They included members of the Leech Lake Band of the Ojibwe, the community, and Pike Bay Township. As they looked at the scope of effort needed to turn things around, someone said, “This is going to take a miracle.” The name stuck, and the MIRACLE Group was formed. Today, MIRACLE stands for Moving Ideas and Relationships for the Advancement of Cass Lake’s Economy.

The Incubator Model

The MIRACLE Group sees itself as an incubator for generating good ideas that take root – and structure – elsewhere once they are ready. The ideas emerge from the opportunities for community dialogue that the partnership facilitates. All of the Group’s meetings are open to the public, and an “open door” tradition encourages people to raise ideas or concerns. Sometimes the Group will invite a longer presentation on a particular issue. In a community of its size, not much escapes the MIRACLE Group’s attention.

As ideas surface, the partnership encourages everyone who is interested to form a working group and pursue the idea to the fullest. The MIRACLE Group is supportive and helps as needed, but does not see itself as “owning” any

particular issue. Instead, it nurtures and spins off new entities to deal with issues. Spin-offs so far include Community Voices Against Violence (which in turn won Weed and Seed funding from the Department of Justice and the MN Peace Prize), a Boys & Girls Club, an Economic Development Authority, a tourism partnership (involved in renovating a local highway rest area and in developing a trail system and scenic highway), housing redevelopment authorities, the Streetscape project, and plans and hopes for a wind energy generator on the area Superfund site. MIRACLE Group members sit on many of these boards; as a result, the partnership provides an easy way for the spin-offs to relate their activities to each other.

The MIRACLE Group has no budget, office, or formal staff, but its all-volunteer force has accomplished a great deal. What could have been obstacles are really advantages, in the eyes of MIRACLE Group members. In their view, they have had no money to fight over, no jobs to award, or power bases to juggle. Their goal continues to be to get the community not to see deficits, but rather assets and opportunity.

Bridging Racial Divides

Like other Native American tribes, the Leech Lake Band of the Ojibwe has faced the violence and degradation of racism for centuries. The MIRACLE Group's Native American members are very conscious of this history and its negative effects, yet they also recognize that "nobody's going away, so co-existence has to come about." Healthy co-existence between Natives and non-Natives, though, requires honest dialogue and exploration, not sweeping racism under the rug when it occurs.

An important aspect of the partnership's efforts to confront racism involves working together. "The MIRACLE Group was the very first venue in which different people, different interests, different perceptions, different histories, and

different beliefs began working on what they could agree were common issues,” the Group’s co-founders explain. Highway 2 formed a physical and psychological boundary between the Band headquarters, on the north side of the highway, and the rest of the town on the south side. First citizens and then government agencies began collaborating more closely as the MIRACLE Group’s community events, meetings, and surveys expanded. Today, every Board of Directors of the community organizations that have spun off from the MIRACLE Group includes significant representation from both Natives and non-Natives. Collaboration between Natives and non-Natives is now the norm within the greater community as well. Eight partnership members have been elected to local office and a Leech Lake Band member is now the Mayor of Cass Lake.

Revitalizing Cass Lake’s Economy

Looking back on better times, the MIRACLE Group’s members knew instinctively that periods of economic prosperity had coincided with less crime and violence, a more stable population (with young people staying in the community), and a general sense of optimism. As a result, economic revitalization (the “E” in MIRACLE) became one of the group’s first priorities.

A community-wide clean-up effort in the fall of 1996 was the beginning of a series of steps that led to a revitalization of Cass Lake’s downtown area. The clean-up effort drew a large number of volunteers, who then participated in community meetings to capture their ideas about how Cass Lake could be improved. “The quality of the input,” say the MIRACLE Group’s founders, “showed that the collective knowledge within the community could produce a sophisticated understanding of our problems and what options people believed were possible for turning things around.”

One immediate step was an invitation to the Minnesota Design Team to visit Cass Lake. The Design Team is a state-sponsored volunteer consortium of

architects, urban planners, engineers, landscape architects, economists, and others who work with communities on revitalization projects. Over 200 people – community members and representatives of Tribal, county, township, and city governments – attended the initial design meeting (an impressive turnout considering the size of the community).

In follow-up meetings and surveys, a community consensus emerged about principles that would guide Cass Lake’s economic development activities. These are:

- preservation of the area’s environmental resources – clean water, untouched forests, and wildlife habitats
- preservation of the “small town” atmosphere of Cass Lake (which meant no mega-malls or Wal-Marts)
- supporting small-scale or light industry that did not pollute the environment
- improving housing rehabilitation and development
- pursuing ecotourism and other tourism projects
- connecting activities to a unifying community theme that reflected the area’s Native American culture: “Where Eagles Soar.”

Since then, community residents have continued to be involved, helping to shape the specifics of economic development. A \$2.5 million StreetScape Project is now underway to give downtown Cass Lake a facelift, along with the renovation of a highway rest area into an interpretative center and the creation of an Economic Development Authority that is pursuing housing, business development, and job creation projects.

Supporting Youth and Curbing Violence

The same factors that battered Cass Lake economically took a terrible toll on the area’s young people. A survey of developmental assets among youth, conducted by the Search Institute, found that 76% of students in the Cass Lake –

Bena School District (80% of whom are Native American) had fewer than 20 of the possible 40 developmental assets required for positive, healthy youth development. The survey responses painted a portrait of a community in which youth did not feel valued by the adults around them and did not feel equipped or motivated to resist drugs, alcohol, and early sexual activity. A separate study ranked Cass County as Minnesota's worst county in terms of children's development on a variety of indicators, including attempted suicides, adolescent drinking and driving, youth poverty, and juvenile detention rates.

With extensive input from both youth and adults, the MIRACLE Group helped launch a new Boys & Girls Club (the first after-school program in the community since 1978). High school drop-out rates have plunged from 67% to 39% between 1995 and 2003, and a new \$2 million club facility is in the works.

Another community concern that overlapped with the problems facing Cass Lake's young people is that of violence. In response, a group called Community Voices Against Violence (CVAV) was formed. Community perspectives on the scope and causes of violence in Cass Lake (which experienced three murders in 1998 and more since then) revealed widespread distrust of local law enforcement. The MIRACLE Group and CVAV members were able to influence a broad search for a new Chief of Police, insisting that the new Chief be someone of unassailable honesty and integrity to counter the community's concerns. In 2000, four law enforcement agencies that formerly worked at cross-purposes – the State Patrol, Tribal Police, and County and City police departments – signed a multi-jurisdictional agreement to cooperate and collaborate on crime prevention efforts in the area. Prevailing in this and other efforts, such as stronger community policing, has led to an approximate 35% drop in crime.

Pathways to Collaboration

In 1996, when the MIRACLE Group got started, none of the efforts described above existed. Today, they not only exist but thrive. The partnership has brought over \$8 million into this devastated community, with more on the way. The funding has been critical, but even more important has been the MIRACLE Group's ironic lesson that it doesn't take a miracle, after all. It takes a collaborative process that brings people together to deal with issues they care about that affect their lives. That process, in turn, gives people a sense that change can happen. Because of the MIRACLE Group, Cass Lake is a very different place than it was just a few years ago, not just in terms of the actions that emerged from the MIRACLE Group's incubators, but because of the ways that people in the community interact – across Highway 2, across agencies and jurisdictions, across centuries of racism, mistrust, and hostility.

Of course, these accomplishments still leave plenty of unfinished business, and the MIRACLE Group is interested in learning how it can harness its “incubator/spin-off” model of collaboration to deal with other community concerns. For community residents, continued success would mean drawing in retail stores to downtown Cass Lake and eliminating existing environmental hazards. The community is battling a Superfund site that the EPA designated clean in the 1980s, but that has been found to still be contaminating the area's watersheds with dioxins and other pollutants. The community is pressuring the EPA for a true clean-up, but, regardless of the outcome, hopes for a clean wind energy generator on the site – transforming an environmental disaster into an enterprise that combines nature and economic development more harmoniously. There could be no more fitting example of the MIRACLE Group's artful weaving of nature and nurture in this ancient homeland.