



Explore Minnesota for Business Council Meeting

Thursday, October 8, 2026

Attendees

Council: Amanda Taylor, Jennifer Byers, JoLynn Shopteese, Lauren Bennett McGinty, Matt Varilek, Michael Flynn, Nick Leonard, Nicole Crews, Pam Schechtman, Sean Higgins

Explore Minnesota (EMN) Staff: Frances Fyten, Karina Hill, Lyndsey Hanson, Sean Lydon

DEED Staff: Kevin McKinnon, Sydney Zayethri

Other: Jill Christianson, Sam Voss

Council Updates

Jennifer Byers

- Chamber Foundation released its business retention and expansion analysis. The analysis shows that businesses are expanding in MN but lagging against Midwest peers, so there are opportunities for growth.
- Domestic migration was also up this year, which is important for employers and the economy. We are going to continue to strategize and partner with agencies like DEED to help attract more workers and companies to come to MN.

Nick Leonard

- Working closely with the state's education partners. Many other MN counties are doing similar work to better understand what the career pipeline looks like.
- We are working with the U of M system to better understand how to move students into a track they're interested in and then how to pull them back into our community or greater MN.

Pam Schechtman

- We have been partnering with insurance brokers and communicating the MN paid leave process to help potential clients and MN employers. We've also held speaking engagements and mini conferences to inform and answer questions about MN paid leave, thank you to Matt and his team for the support.
- Looking at AI, we're finding that organizations are using AI but not seeing the ROI. It may increase efficiency but how does that equate to dollar amounts? Many CFOs are asking these questions as they go into their strategic plans for 2027.

JoLynn Shopteese

- Welcome JoLynn, Executive Director of the Minnesota American Indian Chamber of Commerce.
- Putting together a directory of every American Indian-owned business on and off reservation that are in MN.

- Step two of this project will be looking at impact: How many are employed by these Native-owned businesses, what's the impact, where are we going?
- Another priority is a website refresh and rebrand.

Sean Higgins

- Launched a financial wellness app for young people to drive awareness around prediction markets and how dollars lost today end up being future dollars you'll miss out on, such as buying a house or car, etc.
- This app lunched with one of the top five banks in the US and will make it to colleges in February.

Michael Flynn

- We invested \$8M last year into building a shared incubator wet lab. It has been operational for about a month.
 - One company from the UK is the first tenant, working on new diagnostic tests for various neonatal diseases.
 - Main priority is getting the space filled with around 25 companies. Marketing and recruitment efforts include identifying early-stage biotech companies that would benefit from the space.
- Next infrastructure project: a home innovation lab, which is a single-family residence designed for companies that are developing different diagnostic and health-care AI tools to help people live and age successfully in place.
- Another project we're working on is related to military medicine and healthcare delivery in austere environments.

Amanda Taylor

- City budget constraints are a huge issue. Cities are experiencing budget shortfalls and exploring business attraction in new ways and not always knowing what to do.
- We are working to build greater awareness of the health of the regional economy. We are positioning ourselves this year to bring alignment into what it takes to grow the economy and see positive impact for communities.

Nicole Crews

- Transitioning into a new role focusing on AI and organizational transformation, as well as supporting employees with AI adoption.
- We are looking at how Agentic AI transforms the work of everyone, from the CEO to workers on the floor. How do we show measurable success with the use of these tools from adoption to value creation?

Matt Varilek

- To add to the business retention expansion report, we had good GDP numbers from the second quarter where the growth rate was 3.4%, which landed us the fifth fastest among states. This was the best since 2016.
- Unemployment rate is still above the national average, which is anomalous and has not yet been corrected.
- Job growth numbers are also good, indicating 1.5% growth, which isn't huge but in comparison to the state of national economy it's positive.
- We are celebrating Manufacturing Month and National Disability Employment Awareness Month.

- Paid leave is going well, and we announced the premium rate would not be changing for next year.
- We attended a Governor's business development mission to Denmark, Iceland and Sweden. We visited many businesses that have HQs there and have MN operations as well as companies interested in breaking into the North American market. There were lots of leads we will follow up on.
- We have eyes on the transition of leadership after the November elections.

Strategic Priorities Update

- EMN recently did a review of the strategic priorities that brought us into FY2027 and combined efforts for simplicity and alignment with the work we're doing to include not only tourism and business, but also film and outdoor recreation.
- We wanted to make clear that we are working to strengthen MN competitiveness, boost national and global visibility and champion MN's future.
- A lot of the objectives should resonate with the business council and the work we're doing here.
- We've shifted these strategies because while things naturally change over time, we're also dealing with a rapid, dynamic current environment. We wanted to make sure our strategic objectives meet the moment and are looking to the immediate future as opposed to building out ten-year plans.
- We completed a high-level SWOT analysis to help the new administration understand where we are and what we're doing as an agency. We are actively monitoring certain threats such as lack of workers and worker retention. We're also working with DEED to come up with key items to be aware of.

Resident Attraction Update

- Mini campaign
 - Ran May 5- June 30, 2026, in Chicago and Madison, WI.
 - Targeting tech, health and wellness and professional services.
 - Goals: To drive awareness and increase newsletter sign-ups.
 - Results and key learning:
 - Continue to drive awareness for Minnesota as a top place to live and work (20.28M impressions) and seeing an increasingly efficient pace for that awareness year over year.
 - Newsletter signups were more limited, so we'll be prioritizing top and mid-level funnel objectives under limited budgets.
 - Chicago was our stronger performing market for both impressions and engagement.
 - Madison was not as high but still had strong engagement.
 - First time using TikTok as a workforce attraction tactic and it performed really well. Cost of living messaging and assets outperformed general MN brand-level messaging.

- In process: Subject Matter Expert Database
 - Agency-wide external relations efforts
 - Flexible living list of expert voices to tap into for media opportunities to share individuals' experience living and working in MN.
 - Currently sending outreach to potential candidates.
 - For livability and quality of life perspective, we're reaching out to relocation and real estate experts, economic development professionals, and newcomers to MN, higher education.
 - General: tourism space, outdoor rec, arts and culture, food, etc.
 - This database will help expand EMN to have a larger national presence and land bigger stories and utilize some of these experts for paid partnership opportunities as well.
- Fiscal Year (FY) goals and work in-process
 - Increase awareness and perception of Minnesota
 - Completed a small sponsorship in partnership with ORIP to increase awareness and perception of MN at Outdoor Retailer in August. Drove awareness to targeted groups of business professionals and influencers in outdoor recreation space.
 - Outdoor Retailer will be returning to Minneapolis next year, so there will be opportunities to continue to grow that relationship.
 - Increase alignment with partners around the state
 - Paid campaign planning will begin soon, focusing on alignment with partners around the state, such as U of M's 175th anniversary.
 - Add more MN-related materials to prospective student's acceptance letters.
 - Engage with alumni network.
 - Secure additional support for workforce attraction
 - Proposals are underway.
 - Working on remapping the current state of workforce attraction in MN and reassessing how funding and individuals have changed over the decade.
 - Conducted a small survey to see how much is being spent and what people are doing. We will share that with legislators and the Governor's Office, so everyone is on the same page

Legislative Update

- All seats in the MN legislature are up for election in November so there will be lots of new relationships to build.
- Session begins Jan. 12, but with the new administration we'll have more time to submit the budget.

- We are working on budget proposals across the state government, which includes proposing more funding for Explore Minnesota for Business as we have shown this council and our workforce attraction campaigns have improved awareness of MN.
- Both gubernatorial candidates have been supportive of increasing business investment, so we're hopeful the additional funding request will go through.

Admin

- Minnesota Tribal Leadership Representative seat is still open.
- Representative from a MN College or University seat is also open. Dr. Denise Williams has retired, but she technically still serves on the Council until someone takes her seat.
- A few members' terms will be ending soon, so you should be receiving a notice. You will need to reapply if you want to stay on.
- No more meetings for 2026. We will send out schedules for 2027 soon.

Questions and comments

Q: In regard to the gubernatorial transition, have you had any conversations about the models that exist in other states for business promotion? There are quite a few different models that don't solely rely on just one general fund. Has that been part of the communication or approach?

A: It has not. If you have examples, please share with us. We haven't considered there would be other models other than a general fund. We are aware there are other models for tourism funding, but we'd be happy to review other solutions to sustain the work.