



Dedicated to a Strong Greater Minnesota

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Rural voters felt left out and left behind — now is the time for action to strengthen Greater Minnesota

ST. PAUL—As new and returning lawmakers convene in St. Paul for the first week of the 2017 legislative session, city leaders from Greater Minnesota are urging them to heed the messages that rural voters sent when they cast their ballots last November.

“One major theme that came out of the election is that voters in rural Minnesota – and other rural areas throughout the country – feel left behind,” said Bradley Peterson, executive director of the Coalition of Greater Minnesota Cities (CGMC), during a conference call with members of the press this morning. “Residents in Greater Minnesota want strong communities and opportunities for their families and businesses. They are sick of having their needs swept under the rug; they want to be part of the narrative.”

For city officials like Alexandria Mayor Sara Carlson (who serves as president of the CGMC), Granite Falls Mayor Dave Smiglewski and Morris City Manager Blaine Hill, being “part of the narrative” means the Legislature must finally tackle – and pass – legislation that addresses the needs of their communities. The three city leaders joined Thursday’s conference call, where they outlined the CGMC’s top legislative priorities for 2017.

“With a GOP-led House and Senate and a DFL governor, we have no illusions that it will be easy to pass legislation this year,” Carlson said. “That is why we came up with a fair and reasonable list of priorities that will go a long way to help Greater Minnesota and which we believe will be greeted with strong bipartisan support.”

At the top of the list is a goal that has CGMC has been pursuing for the past two years – a \$45.5 million increase in Local Government Aid (LGA), which is the amount needed to bring the program back to its 2002 funding level. With the Legislature’s failure to pass a tax bill two years in a row, LGA funding has been kept stagnant while cities’ costs continue to rise.

“LGA means many different things to Greater Minnesota cities,” Carlson said. “It means being able to afford the basic services our residents expect, like police and fire protection, sidewalks and well-maintained streets. It enables us to provide the kind of quality of life that our residents want and deserve with amenities like parks, libraries and swimming pools. And it plays a critical role in keeping local property taxes in check.”

The CGMC is also hopeful that lawmakers will pass some form of transportation funding this year, an issue that has proven to be the source of much controversy at the Legislature in recent years.

“Realistically, we know that passing a comprehensive transportation package this year is a tall order,” Smiglewski said. “We would still like to see a large-scale investment in transportation, but at the very least we think our lawmakers can reach an agreement to pass some much-needed funding for city streets and the Corridors of Commerce program.”

The CGMC is seeking \$369 million for Corridors of Commerce, which aims to reduce bottlenecks and barriers to freight on the state’s highways. It is also asking the Legislature for \$50 million in funding to help cities repair their crumbling streets, an amount that would be divided equally between cities under 5,000 in population (which currently receive no state assistance for street funding) and those over 5,000.

The CGMC also has another holdover from 2017 on its list of priorities: the bonding bill. Specifically, the CGMC is seeking \$167 million in bonding dollars for grant and loan programs that help cities pay for upgrades or repairs to their water treatment facilities. Gov. Dayton included this funding in his bonding proposal, which he unveiled yesterday.

“Like LGA and safe streets, clean water is a quality of life issue,” said Hill, whose city – Morris – is among several Greater Minnesota cities that are facing multi-million-dollar costs to build or upgrade their drinking or wastewater plants to meet new regulations and replace outdated infrastructure.

“Clean water is a fundamental need in any community, but the infrastructure costs are extremely high and unaffordable,” Hill continued. “The House, Senate and Governor all supported including funding for clean water infrastructure in the bonding bill last session, and we hope that support amounts to actual dollars this year. We can’t afford to wait any longer.”

Now that the legislative session has begun, Carlson and the other city officials are hopeful that the Legislature will listen to the concerns expressed by residents in Greater Minnesota and finally take action on the key issues that have gone unaddressed for far too long.

“The 2017 legislative session will be a test as to which state leaders have truly heard the messages sent from Greater Minnesota,” Carlson said. “Action on LGA, transportation, bonding and other important issues will show that the Governor and legislators really understand the needs of rural businesses and residents.”

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The Coalition of Greater Minnesota Cities is a nonprofit, nonpartisan advocacy organization representing 88 cities outside of the Twin Cities metropolitan area. The Coalition educates legislators about issues important to Greater Minnesota. Visit the CGMC online at greaterminncities.org.