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Greater Minnesota advocates: Legislature must remove barriers to economic growth

ST. PAUL—With a renewed focus on Greater Minnesota already emerging as one of the themes of the 2015 legislative session, leaders of the Coalition of Greater Minnesota Cities (CGMC) and the Greater Minnesota Partnership (GMNP) held a press conference via conference call today to discuss what needs to happen for the session to be considered a success for Greater Minnesota.

“Since the November election, there has been a lot of talk about making 2015 the ‘Greater Minnesota session,’ but it’s important to define what that actually means,” said Bradley Peterson, senior lobbyist for the CGMC. “If lawmakers are truly committed to achieving long-term growth and stability in Greater Minnesota, they must make significant progress on removing some of the key barriers to economic growth.”

Peterson, along with Dan Dorman, executive director of the GMNP and a former state representative, and Marty Seifert, a former state legislator and gubernatorial candidate who now lobbies on behalf of the CGMC, cited LGA funding, inadequate broadband access, workforce development concerns including the lack of workforce housing and skilled workers, and transportation needs as the main barriers that are holding Greater Minnesota back from reaching its full potential.

“If the state makes a significant investment in these key areas, it will be a game changer for Greater Minnesota,” Seifert said. “It is critical that we can report back at the end of the session that the Legislature has delivered on these issues. If not, legislators will have missed a prime opportunity to make a positive, long-lasting impact on Greater Minnesota and the entire state.”

Local Government Aid (LGA)

“LGA is the foundation that gives communities stability and the ability to provide needed services,” Peterson said. “LGA funding plays a crucial role in laying the groundwork for economic growth in our communities.”

Although positive changes to the LGA formula that were enacted two years ago have had a positive impact in restoring city services and restraining property taxes, Peterson said the LGA program still has not fully recovered since it suffered drastic cuts in the mid-2000s. He noted that the program receives less funding today than it did 13 years ago, which means many communities still struggle to afford many basic services like street maintenance, police and fire protection, and infrastructure repairs.

“The Legislature needs to make a strong commitment to funding LGA for the long-term health and growth of our communities,” Peterson added.

Broadband

Last year, the Legislature created a broadband infrastructure fund to help bring high-quality, high-speed broadband Internet service to parts of the state that do not currently meet Minnesota's connectivity goals. However, there is still a long way to go before the entire state is sufficiently connected. This year, the CGMC and GMNP hope the Legislature will expand upon the progress made last year by increasing its investment in broadband infrastructure.

"Our communities and businesses need high-quality broadband to be competitive in today's economy," Seifert said. "It is essential for business growth that everyone in Greater Minnesota has the same access to fast, reliable broadband that has long been available in the metro area."

Job Training

There are jobs available in Greater Minnesota, but many employers struggle to find workers who possess the skills needed to fill open positions. The Legislature needs to address this problem by creating a job training program that gives both employers and employees more flexibility in obtaining needed skills.

"We have a plan for a fast, flexible, employer-driven workforce training program," Dorman said, referring to legislation proposed by the GMNP. "This is a key component of successfully filling the many job vacancies that exist throughout Greater Minnesota."

Workforce Housing

In addition to the difficulties employers face in trying to find skilled workers, Greater Minnesota is also experiencing a serious challenge in attracting workers due to a lack of available workforce housing.

"Greater Minnesota is in the midst of a workforce housing crisis. There simply aren't enough units available to allow people to live and work in many of our communities" Dorman said. "We have bold new ideas on ways the state can encourage investors and contractors to build in Greater Minnesota so that our businesses and cities are able to grow."

Transportation

Another critical need for Greater Minnesota is funding for local roads and bridges and the Corridors of Commerce program, which is aimed at increasing capacity and removing bottlenecks on the state's highway corridors, many of which are in Greater Minnesota. As the transportation debate heats up at the Capitol, Seifert stressed that it is important that Greater Minnesota's needs are met.

"No transportation plan is complete unless it funds Corridors of Commerce and local roads in an ongoing, sustainable way," Seifert said.

As the session progresses, the CGMC and GMNP will be introducing legislation and advocating in support of these core issues that are necessary for economic growth and vitality in Greater Minnesota.

"This is a critical moment for us," Seifert said. "Legislators have a unique opportunity this session to prove their commitment to Greater Minnesota. It's time to make good on some of the promises that have been made over the past few months and show that they are willing and able to do what it takes to make Greater Minnesota strong for years to come."

The Coalition of Greater Minnesota Cities is a nonprofit, nonpartisan advocacy organization representing 85 cities outside of the Twin Cities metropolitan area. The Coalition educates legislators about issues important to Greater Minnesota. Visit the CGMC online at greatermncities.org.

The Greater Minnesota Partnership is a nonprofit corporation devoted to advocating for state economic development policies and resources that benefit Greater Minnesota. Its members consist of businesses, chambers of commerce, economic development authorities, cities and nonprofit organizations from throughout Greater Minnesota. For more information about the GMNP, visit gmnp.org.