

# Healthy conversation on economic opportunities

## Our view

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In light of the recent visit by members of the Minnesota Legislative Commission to End Poverty and the discussion ensued among area residents, one might view economic opportunity in the Itasca County area as quite bleak; right now, anyway. Statistics are showing that food shelf use rose 84 percent between 2000 and 2006, more than 40 percent of Itasca County workers are earning less than \$10 an hour making \$10,000 less in annual salary than the state average, and poverty is crossing generation after generation.

However bleak and sad it was to hear the stories of families struggling just to make ends meet, with each story there seemed to be a slight glimmer of hope. Single mothers spoke of the aspirations they have for their own children and the fight they are taking up to ensure the dreams of the young are not blown out with the wind of complacency.

The visiting legislators echoed this charge, asking that the community view poverty as unacceptable and work at helping those who have known nothing else but poverty their entire lives. While inspiring, this challenge is not new to this community.

For years, local leaders such as the Blandin Foundation, Itasca Economic Development Corporation, KOOTASCA Community Action, Grand Rapids Economic Development Authority, the Grand Rapids Area Chamber of Commerce and Greenway Area Business Association have been tackling the issues behind economic disparity, while also supporting economic growth and sustainability that could breathe new life into the area.

In the wake of blows to the local economy, first within the mining industry and most recently within the forest products industry, these local leaders could have chosen to panic and focus only on the lasso that leashed new business. Instead, they stepped back and examined the entire health of the economy, including issues such as poverty, education, workforce development and more. By seeking this understanding first, programs have already been implemented and have already shown success at improving the economic health of the community at its heart.

Sure, we have some exciting economic opportunities coming our way with major projects on the horizon, but we can be proud that our leaders have really examined the core of our struggles so we can put our best foot forward when the time comes.

Editorials are written by Editor Britta Arendt with advisement from Publisher Ron Oleheiser.