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SPOTLIGHT

Northfield Micropolitan Summit promotes city's development potential

By PHILIP WEYHE pweyhe@northfieldnews.com Jun 14, 2017

About 70 attendees packed into a St. Olaf College meeting room in Northfield June 7 to take part in a micropolitan summit, sponsored by Minnesota Real Estate Journal. Panelists at the event talked about business, economics, health care and housing in Northfield. (Photo courtesy city of Northfield)

By PHILIP WEYHE pweyhe@northfieldnews.com

Northfield got the chance to show off a bit last week during an economic summit, hosted by the city and the Minnesota Real Estate Journal.

The summit, which took place at St. Olaf College June 6, brought in about 70 attendees — many local, but several from out of town and few from out of state. The summit was intended to provide communities, with populations between 10,000 and 50,000, the opportunity to share their development prospects and engage in discussions with local and regional realtors, brokers and investors.

The Northfield Economic Development Authority put on the event, lead by Northfield Community Planning Director Chris Heineman and Economic Development Coordinator Nate Carlson. Similar events were recently held in Owatonna and Red Wing.

“I think ours [compared well] to those summits,” Heineman said. “It exceeded my expectations in creating a vibrant, local event.”

The summit comprised of four topic-specific panel discussions. The discussions centered on Northfield’s economic trends, the historical business climate, commercial/industrial development opportunities and residential development opportunities.

Panelists represented many areas of Northfield — from the Northfield Arts Guild to Schmidt Homes to Northfield Construction. The idea was to provide a wide variety of perspectives within the Northfield business, development and real estate community.

“I think, in general, it gave the attendees a sense that Northfield is a good place to be, and our doors are open for people to grow their business here,” resident Mike Strobel said.

Strobel served as a panelist in the business climate section, which was themed “what makes Northfield a great place for business?” Strobel is the CEO of Aurora Pharmaceutical in town, a company which employs 110 people. He also served on the EDA Board.

He noted that Northfield has a lot of positives when it comes to attracting business, and the summit provided a good way to share those, while also addressing negatives, like a lack of affordable housing.

“A lot of good questions were asked,” he said. “It also highlighted that we have a city administration and support staff that are actively promoting and improve the reputation the outside world has of Northfield. I think it was a good thing for Northfield. It never hurts to tell your story.”

City councilor and Housing and Redevelopment Authority member Erica Zweifel attended the event as one of the guests. She said there was a mix of locals and folks from out of town, which she felt was an ideal combination.

“I was impressed with the turnout and the panelists and how they sold Northfield,” she said. “I think it can (help spur development in the city) and I’m very hopeful it will.”

First National Bank of Northfield Vice President of Business Development Rick Estenson also attended the event as a guest. He agreed with Zweifel that events, like the summit, can inspire growth.

“This is how it works,” he said. “A conversation, then somebody who knows somebody makes a comment that leads to a next step, and then the next step after that. I think it was a great opportunity to profile Northfield and the surrounding area with people that weren’t that familiar with us.”

Chris Jacobson, a health care real estate advisor for CBRE in Minneapolis, served as an out-of-town panelist for the commercial and industrial development opportunities section. Jacobson and his partner, Sue Wilson, have helped conduct several clinic transactions in Northfield.

His experience with the city’s health care and real estate markets allowed him to share a unique perspective on a draw to the city.

“Northfield has a large regional draw for health care,” he said. “People will travel far to get the best care.”

Jacobson said he has attended and spoken at numerous events, similar to the summit in Northfield. He said positive results often come from the events in his experience.

“I think they create quite an excitement,” he said. “You basically get a room full of people interested in the same vertical that connects them. At least three people in attendance that day have contacted us to talk about other topics.”

Overall, city staff were happy with the outcome of the summit. Heineman felt attendance could’ve been greater than 70, and Carlson noted that Minnesota Real Estate Journal representatives pointed to a lack of local realtors and brokers in attendance. However, Northfield’s message found a space to be shared, and staff hopes it was heard loud and clear.

“It was more or less an opportunity for outside people to hear us, local people to hear us,” Carlson said.

Reach Reporter Philip Weyhe at 507-333-3132 or follow him on Twitter @nfnphilweyhe.

Panelists

Market Analysis
Moderator: Nate Carlson, Economic Development Coordinator, City of Northfield
Tim O’Neill, Regional Labor Market Analyst, DEED
Lisa Peterson, Director of Tourism, Northfield Area Chamber of Commerce & Tourism
Jan Hanson, Vice President and CFO, St. Olaf College
Fred Rogers, Vice President and Treasurer, Carleton College
Heather Lawrenz, Visual Arts Manager, Northfield Arts Guild
Matt Hillmann, Superintendent, Northfield Public Schools
Business Climate
Ernie Hurlbut, President, McLane Company, Inc.
Mike Strobel, CEO, Aurora Pharmaceutical
Greg Closser, President, All Flex, Inc.
Jeremy Baer, Principal, Tekton Engineers
Commercial and Industrial Development Opportunities
Chris Kennelly, Owner, Northfield Construction Company & Bluewater Real Estate
Chris Jacobson, Broker, CBRE
Chris Stockness, Vice President, Shenehon
Peter J. Dugan, CBRE
Residential Real Estate
Lynn Johnson, Broker, Coldwell Banker
Andy Brandel, ISG
Steve Schmidt, President, Schmidt Homes
Tim Viere, President, First National Bank of Northfield