

## Chapter 2

# Community Direction

**Benton County is a dynamic and growing area. The County balances growth within its cities while maintaining its historic characteristics of promoting agrarian lifestyles, natural resources and rural communities. Finding that balance presents both challenges and opportunities for the future. This chapter provides a snapshot of the economic, demographic and social trends within the County today, and highlights where we are going in the future.**

# Population

The central region continues to be one of the fastest growing regions in the state. Economic Development Region 7W includes a total of four counties, located in the larger 13 county Central Minnesota Planning Region. The region saw a 31 percent population increase since 2000, making it the fastest growing of the 13 economic development regions (EDRs) in the state, and now the third largest in total population after gaining over 100,000 new residents. Benton County grew by 16.8 percent between 2000 and 2016. In comparison, the State of Minnesota saw a 12.2 percent gain during this time period, meaning Region 7W accounted for 16.6 percent of total state growth (see Table 2.1).

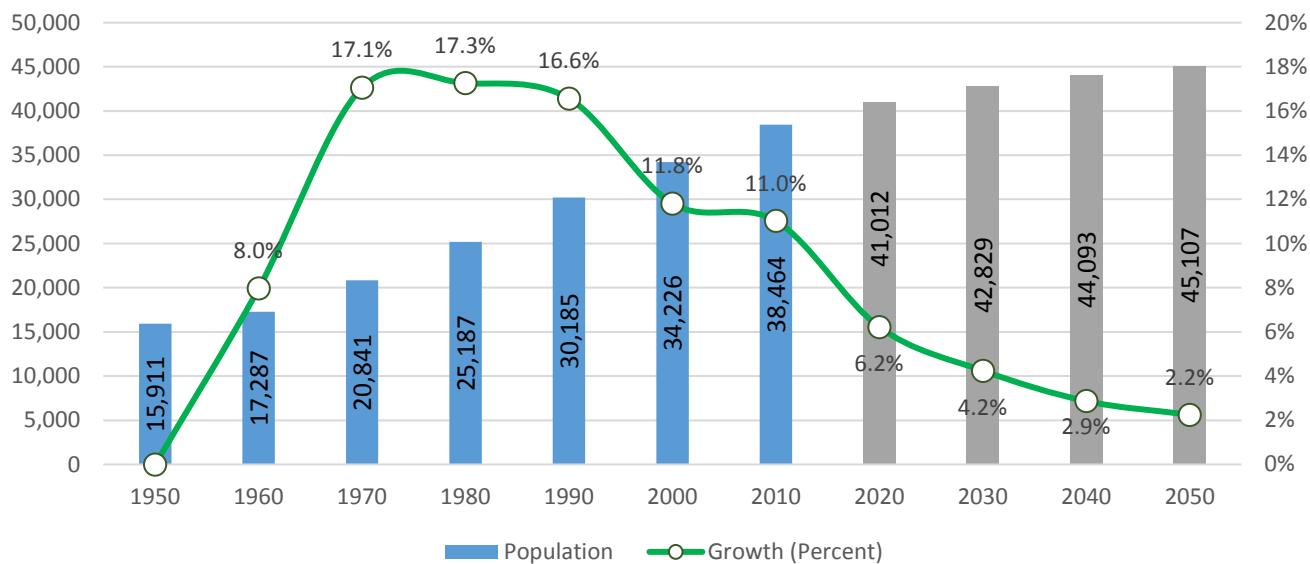
Figure 2.2 provides additional information on Benton County's historical population growth. The table also provides population forecasts generated by the State Demographers. Benton County is projected to continue to grow at modest levels, reaching 45,107 (5,776 new people) in 2050.

**Table 2.1. Population**

Area	2000	2016 (est.)	Number	Percent
Region 7W	321,795	421,722	99,927	31.1%
<b>Benton County</b>	<b>34,226</b>	<b>39,992</b>	<b>5,766</b>	<b>16.8%</b>
Sherburne County	64,417	93,528	29,111	45.2%
Stearns County	133,166	155,652	22,486	16.9%
Wright County	89,986	132,550	42,564	47.3%
Minnesota	4,919,479	5,519,952	600,473	12.2%

Source: 2000 Census - 2016 ACS

**Figure 2.2. Population Trends & Projections**



Source: State Demographer

As part of this growth, it is also important to recognize that the population is aging. Benton County's median age increased slightly from 33.7 to 35.8 between 2000 and 2016. This increase suggests residents are aging in place. The most notable change includes a decrease in the younger population between the ages of 15 and 29; however, there is a visible increase in the population of 35-44 year olds (see Table 1.3). This suggests the younger population is staying in the County as they enter adulthood.

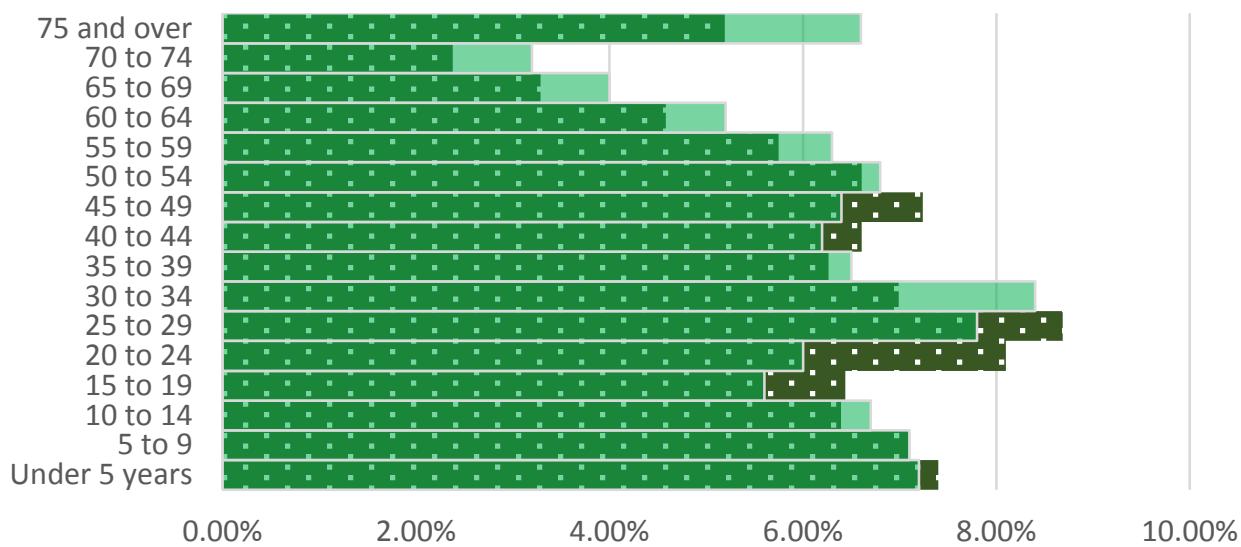
Furthermore, Benton County has a substantial senior population. Over 14% of the population is over the age of 65, and it is assumed this population will increase over the next ten years as the subsequent age groups continue to age in place (see Figure 2.3).

## Population Trends

According to the Minnesota Center for Rural and Policy Development, "more rural counties have had higher median ages and a larger percentage of their population 65 or older throughout the second half of the 20th century. With the combination of increasing out-migration of younger people to urban areas and an in-migration of older people to rural counties, the median age of our most rural areas is increasing faster than in urban ones. In 1980, the average median age in our entirely rural counties was 34 compared to 27 in our entirely urban counties (a gap of 7 years). In 2016, the average median age in our entirely rural counties increased to 47 while the entirely urban counties had an average median age of 36 (a gap of 11 years)."

It is important to examine the age distribution of current Benton County residents, because they will demand certain types of housing as their age and family composition changes. Spending patterns also change, which affects economic development. As the population continues to age, needs such as health care, loss of mobility, financial concerns, and home maintenance will change and new demands will be placed on Benton County.

**Figure 2.3. Age Cohorts**



Source: 2000 Census - 2016 ACS

■ 2016 ■ 2000

# Diversity

Benton County has seen an increase in minority populations over the last decade. In 2000, 96% of Benton County identified themselves as "white alone" (non-Hispanic/Latino) (see Table 2.2). By 2016, 92% of Benton County's population identified themselves as "white only," which is similar to neighboring counties: Wright (95%), Sherburne (94%) and Stearns (93%).



## Diversity Trends

Minnesota's population is changing and so is that of Benton County (see Sidebar). Like the State, Benton County is becoming more diverse. The Region 7W 2017 Regional Report recognizes these changing demographics. For example, the region saw a 23 percent gain in the number of "white-alone" residents, but saw a much faster increase in every other race group. The number of Black or African American residents rose by 350 percent.

These trends may be one of the defining elements of the region over the next decade. Benton County's ethnic diversity is changing slightly and over time may shape the County's housing demands and the delivery of services such as recreation opportunities, multiple language materials and communications, and school programming.

**Table 2.2. Race & Ethnicity**

Race	2000	2000 Percent	2016	2016 Percent	2000 - 2016 Change
White	32,796	95.82%	36,337	92.09%	9.74%
Black or African American	266	0.78%	1,046	2.65%	74.57%
American Indian and Alaska Native	177	0.52%	161	0.41%	-9.94%
Asian	392	1.15%	437	1.11%	10.30%
Hispanic or Latino	274	0.80%	791	2.00%	65.36%
Two or More Races	321	0.94%	685	1.74%	53.14%
<b>Total Population</b>	<b>34,226</b>	<b>100.00%</b>	<b>39,457</b>	<b>100%</b>	<b>13%</b>

Source: 2000 Census - 2016 ACS

# Minnesota's Changes in Race & Ethnicity

The following statements were listed on the Minnesota State Demographic Center's website:

- In 1920, about 1 in 5 Minnesotans was foreign-born. In 2015, about 1 in 12 were (8.3%, or about 457,200 residents). Forty-nine percent of Minnesota's foreign-born population are naturalized U.S. citizens.
- In 2015, the largest groups of foreign-born Minnesotans were born in Mexico (about 67,300); Somalia (31,400); India (30,500); Laos, including Hmong (23,300); Vietnam (20,200); China, excluding Hong Kong and Taiwan (19,900); Ethiopia (19,300); and Thailand, including Hmong (16,800). These estimates do not include U.S.-born children of these immigrants. They also likely underestimate the size of our immigrant populations because trust and language issues reduce response rates to Census surveys.
- 11.5% of Minnesotans (age 5+) spoke a language other than English at home. Behind English, the most common languages spoken are Spanish (about 193,600 speakers) and Hmong (56,200 speakers).
- In Minnesota, people of Color (those who identify as a race other than White alone, and/or those who are Hispanic) make up 19% of the total population. Non-Hispanic White Minnesotans represent the remaining 81% of the statewide population.
- All race groups have grown recently in MN, but between 2010 and 2015, the state has added four times as many people of Color as non-Hispanic White residents. Populations of Color are distributed unevenly across the state, and are more likely to live in metro areas than rural areas.
- Between 2010 and 2015, the fastest growing racial group in Minnesota was the Asian population, which grew by 22%, adding nearly 48,000 people. Second fastest was the Black population, which grew by 16%, adding 45,000 people, followed by the Hispanic population, which grew by 13%, adding 32,000 people. (Asian and Black race groups are that race "alone" and non-Hispanic).

(All data from 2015 Population Estimates, U.S. Census Bureau)

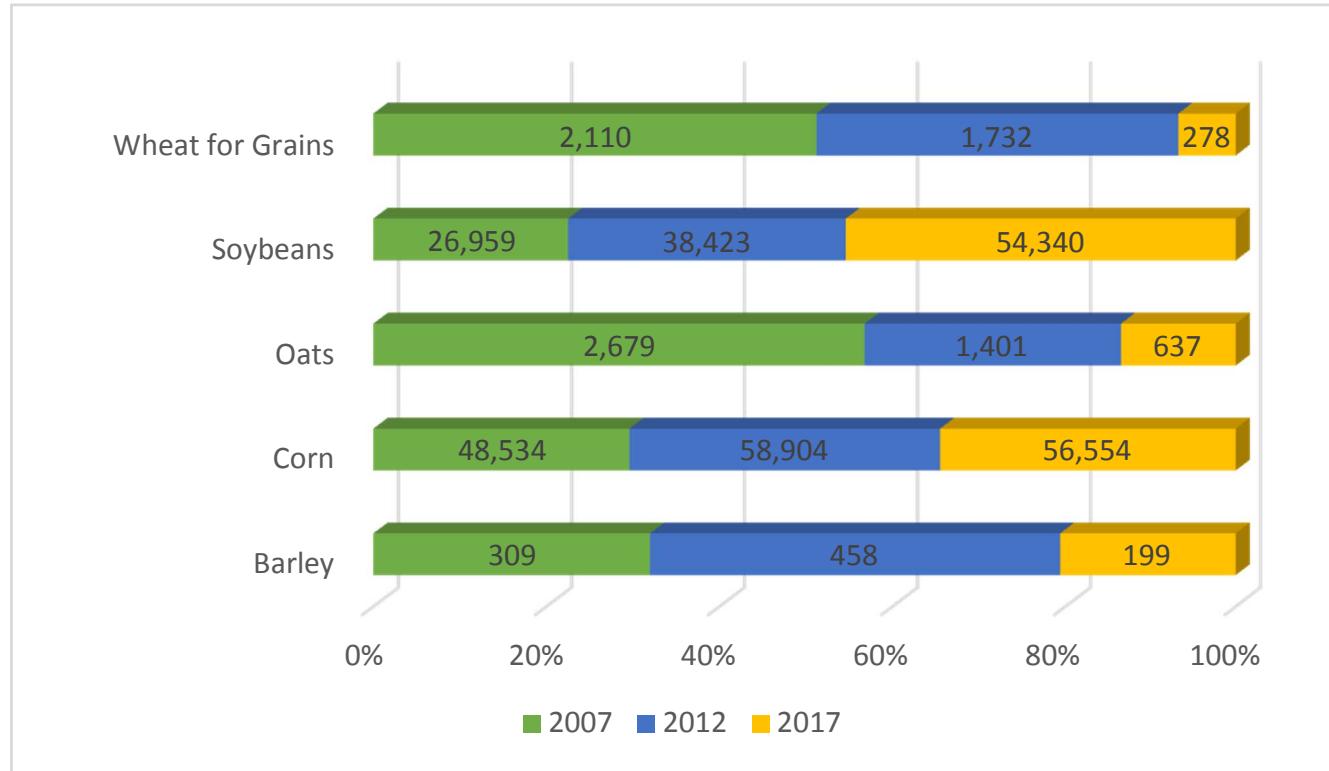
# Agriculture

Agriculture has been the center of economic activity for Benton County. In 1860, Benton County produced wood, grain, meat, and dairy products. Wheat and potatoes were the cash crops at that time. According to the 2017 US Census of Agriculture, the largest value of sales by commodity group included poultry and eggs, cattle and calves, milk from cows, and hogs and pigs. Cash crops continue to play a significant role in today's economy. However, Benton County has seen a shift in the production of certain field crops (see Figure 2.4). These shifts demonstrate the economic volatility in cash crops and how the supply and demand for a particular crop can change annually. Regardless of these shifts, Benton County still ranks above the 20th percentile for value of agriculture products sold amongst the 3,075 counties in the Untitled States.

In addition to the direct income from agriculture, many other companies are supported locally through sales to farms or by adding value to farm commodities, although that economic activity is not usually reported among the agricultural statistics. Local firms in farm implements, poultry processing, ethanol production or general retail sales are dependent on the basic farm economy.

Farming will continue to be one of Benton County's strongest economic engines. However, there has been significant changes in how farms are owned and operated at a national level. Figure 2.5 highlights these national changes, which include a decrease in the number of farms, while the average size of the farm has increased. Benton County has seen a decrease in the number of farms in operation between 1982 and 2017 (see Table 2.3), while the amount of land being farmed has increased. This finding suggests smaller farms are removing their land from production or selling to larger operations/corporations, which mirror national trends.

**Figure 2.4. Field Crops (Acres Harvested)**



Source: 2017 Census of Agriculture

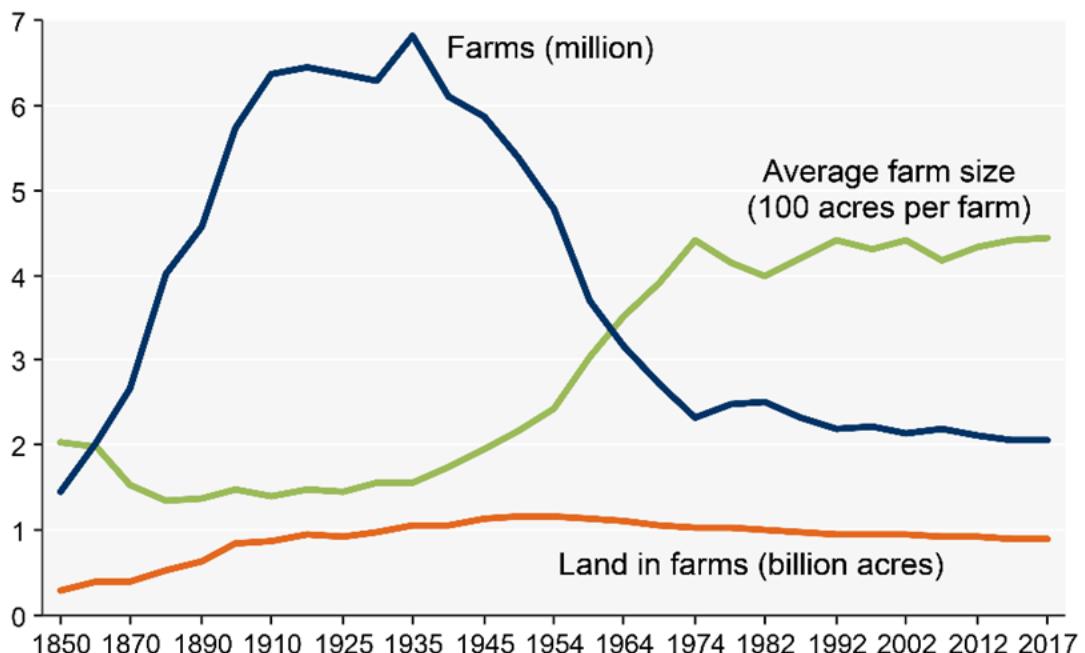
**Table 2.3. Farms in Benton County**

Year	Number of Farms	Land in Farms (acres)	Average Size (acres)	% of Total Land
1982	1,035	198,778	192	76.1%
1992	865	183,760	212	70.0%
2002	965	195,949	203	75.0%
2012	958	188,735	197	71.2%
2017	816	194,832	NA	75.3%

Source: 2017 Census of Agriculture

**Figure 2.5. US Farms, Land in Farms, and Average Acres per Farm, 1850 - 2017**

Million farms, billion acres, or 100 acres per farm



Source: USDA, Economic Research Service using data from USDA, National Agricultural Statistics Service, Census of Agriculture (through 2012) and *Farms and Land in Farms: 2017 Summary*.

## Agriculture Trends

Minnesota has the fifth largest agricultural economy in the US, contributing to the state's ranking as the eighth best in the nation for business. Benton County can position itself as one of Minnesota's leading counties for business by capitalizing on new markets tied to farming. Some of these new markets and trends are followed:

- **Farm to Table:** Farm to table is a social movement, which promotes the serving or preparing of foods directly from a farm to a restaurant. This movement has sparked a resurgence of entrepreneurs opening restaurants or "dinner on the farm."

- **Farm to School:** Nearly 6 percent of Minnesota school districts have a Farm to School program, up from 2.3 percent in 2006. These programs establish a direct link between a local producer where their goods (e.g., vegetables, fruits or meat) are acquired and used for student meals. This is a similar model as the “farm-to-table” model. Programs of this nature have helped educated students on the importance of nutrition, while connecting students to the farming community.
- **Hop Farms:** In 2011, the Minnesota Legislature passed a law legalizing tap rooms. Since that time, Minnesota has experienced a large number of breweries popping up across the state. This in turn has created a significant demand for hops and other grains. Benton County is now home to the first farm (Mighty Axe Hops) that processes hops into pellets that brewers use as a key ingredient in their beer.



Benton County should consider these emerging markets when establishing economic initiatives that support local agriculture and farming businesses.

Benton County should also be aware of the following trends that could impact the local economy positively or negatively:

- Minnesota agriculture will likely stay strong for the foreseeable future. Competition between different agriculture niches such as vegetable and grain crops and dairy have increased competition for farmland.
- National policies on tariffs continue to change, which may play a role in regional and local commodity prices, as well as the exporting of goods.
- Livestock farms (dairy and hogs) have grown in size creating concerns over manure management, noise, smells, water quality, and water quantity.
- Benton County has already seen climate changes. The projections for the County’s climate by the middle of this century indicate continued increases in temperatures. Additionally, precipitation patterns are anticipated to change, providing an increase in the overall rainfall as well as an increase in the number of days without rain - exacerbating both flooding and drought potential. These trends will play a significant role in crop production.
- Many farmers also lack adequate physical and financial infrastructure on their farm and in their region for harvesting, processing, storing, and distributing food to nearby markets.

# Labor Force

As depicted in Table 2.4, Benton County saw a significant increase (18.57%) in the number of jobs between 2002 and 2015. In 2015, the manufacturing industry holds the largest number of jobs within Benton County. This is followed by health care and social assistance, retail trade, and construction. It is important to recognize that the Census measures employment through surveys of "covered" industries (i.e., industries that pay unemployment insurance), which typically leaves out farmers and self-employed

individuals. Therefore, Table 2.7 may not provide an accurate picture of the number of agriculture or farming jobs in Benton County.

Overall, Benton County has seen positive growth in the number of new jobs between 2002 and 2015. However, the region will start to see a decrease in the labor force as the population becomes older (see Figure 2.3 and Table 2.5). This is also seen in Table 2.6 as the average age of a Benton County farmer has increased from 47 in 1982 to 54 in 2012.

**Table 2.4. Jobs by Industry 2002-2015**

Industry	Jobs (2002)	Percent (2002)	Jobs (2015)	Percent (2015)	2002 - 2015 Percent Change
Agriculture, Forestry, Fishing and Hunting	217	1.50%	239	1.30%	9.21%
Construction	1,173	8.10%	1,805	10.20%	35.01%
Manufacturing	4,369	30.20%	3,791	21.30%	-15.25%
Wholesale Trade	789	5.50%	1,098	6.20%	28.14%
Retail Trade	1,436	9.90%	1,905	10.70%	24.62%
Transportation and Warehousing	448	3.10%	1,111	6.30%	59.68%
Information	123	0.90%	233	1.30%	47.21%
Finance and Insurance	150	1.00%	216	1.20%	30.56%
Real Estate and Rental and Leasing	54	0.40%	235	1.30%	77.02%
Professional, Scientific, and Technical Services	203	1.40%	344	1.90%	40.99%
Management of Companies and Enterprises	265	1.80%	328	1.80%	19.21%
Administration & Support, Waste Mgmt. & Remediation	890	6.20%	908	5.10%	1.98%
Educational Services	1,011	7.00%	1,240	7.00%	18.47%
Health Care and Social Assistance	1,381	9.50%	2,269	12.80%	39.14%
Arts, Entertainment, and Recreation	36	0.20%	75	0.40%	52.00%
Accommodation and Food Services	970	6.70%	1,043	5.90%	7.00%
Other Services (excluding Public Administration)	612	4.20%	487	2.70%	-25.67%
Public Administration	334	2.30%	431	2.40%	22.51%
<b>Total:</b>	<b>14,461</b>	<b>100%</b>	<b>17,758</b>	<b>100%</b>	<b>18.57%</b>

Source: 2015 US Census Longitudinal-Employer Household

**Table 2.5. Labor Force by Age Groups**

Age Groups	2020 Labor Force Projection	2030 Labor Force Projection	2020 - 2030 Change Numeric	2020 - 2030 Change Percent
16 to 19 years	24,377	20,772	-3,605	-14.80%
20 to 24 years	47,880	49,370	1,490	3.10%
25 to 44 years	145,833	153,417	7,584	5.20%
45 to 54 years	77,001	71,742	-5,260	-6.80%
55 to 64 years	70,087	59,372	-10,715	-15.30%
65 to 74 years	18,092	23,798	5,706	31.50%
75 years & over	3,082	4,684	1,603	52.00%
<b>Total Labor Force</b>	<b>386,352</b>	<b>383,155</b>	<b>-3,197</b>	<b>-0.80%</b>

Source: 2017 Region 7W

**Table 2.6. Average Age of Farm Worker**

Year	Average Age of Farm Worker
1982	47.1
1992	50.0
2002	49.5
2012	53.4
2017	NA

Source: 2017 Census of Agriculture

## Labor Force Trends

Benton County will continue to experience a shift in the labor force as the population gets older. Retaining and attracting a younger labor force (born between 1981 and 1999) may be challenging given Benton County's proximity to job centers, such as St. Cloud and the Twin Cities. Therefore, it is important to recognize the jobs that are attracting a younger labor force that is interested in science, technology, engineering and math (STEM). For example, a recent study by the Minnesota Department of Employment and Economic Development (DEED) identified a list of top jobs for millennials based on wages, projected growth, millennial share of employment, and total number of jobs statewide. The jobs identified in this study align with Benton County's top industries (see Table 2.4), including construction trade workers and health care. National studies have also indicated a resurgence in farming. Farming is now seen as a profession that has evolved with science, technology, and engineering. These advancements have attracted a younger population to farming, as well as entrepreneurs focused on farm-to-table ventures.

Other notable trends described in the State of Minnesota (2018) report by Center for Rural Policy and Development include:

- Government continues to be a significant source of employment in rural counties. Through the second half of the 20th century, the private sector has declined across rural areas, driving that sector's employment lower. However, there is still a high need/demand for public-sector services in these areas. While some public-sector employment is geography-based, low population density doesn't mean less of a need for services.
- Minnesota has experienced significant increases in the percentage of 25- to 64-year-olds participating in the labor force since 1970. The largest increases have occurred in our more rural counties, where the labor force participation rate increased by 17 percentage points.
- A significant percentage of the workforce in the more rural parts of the state also operate as non-employers, meaning they have a non-farm business with no employees, have annual receipts of \$1,000 or more, and are subject to federal income taxes—what we generally think of as self-employed.

- Throughout the 1990s, unemployment was highest in our most rural counties. However, that began to change in the mid-2000s, and in fact, the most rural counties weathered the Great Recession better than other county groups, largely due to the healthy state of agriculture at the time. With the economy picking up again, all regions have recovered from their recession levels.
- The growing number of retirements and lack of growth in the labor force is contributing to vacancy rates.



# Mobility

Roadways provide for an integrated transportation system that will serve the future needs of its residents, businesses and visitors, and will support the County's agricultural and economic development initiatives. Maintaining and improving this system is important to the ongoing economic health and quality of life in the County. It is also important to maintain the ability to travel easily and safely to work and other destinations.

Benton County has many transportation needs that vary from urban to rural locations and also include recreational travel. Each need is important in its own right. These needs are served by the County roadways system and by the State and local area systems. Benton County is responsible for 225.59 miles of County Road (CR) and 224.42 miles of County State Aid Highways (CSAH).

## Mobility Trends

In today's funding environment, roadway agencies (township, city, county and state) are expected to do more with less. This imperative has resulted in a larger emphasis on preserving existing assets in a "state of good repair," while balancing the mobility needs for all modes of transportation (e.g., cars,

pedestrians, bicyclists, and trucks). In light of this situation, many Counties are faced with difficult decisions in prioritizing and budgeting transportation projects.

Benton County should consider the following rural transportation needs when planning for future transportation investments.

- **Recreational Needs:** Trails are an integral component in any transportation system. Trails offer residents safe access between towns and key destinations. Most of the trails in Benton County are destinations in themselves, offering scenic routes such as the Mississippi River Trail (MRT). In addition to trails, paved shoulders provide transportation along major corridors throughout the County.

Simple steps to make bicycling safe and comfortable pay huge dividends in civic, community and economic development. Given the opportunity to ride, residents enjoy dramatic health benefits, reduced congestion, increased property values, and more money in their pockets to spend in the local economy.

- **Commuter Needs:** The transportation network in rural Benton County has developed over the decades with a larger emphasis on the automobile. This development pattern is based on low population and employment densities in rural parts of the county that does not make transit feasible. The transportation network in these areas provide efficient connections between cities, townships and key destinations within and outside the County limits.

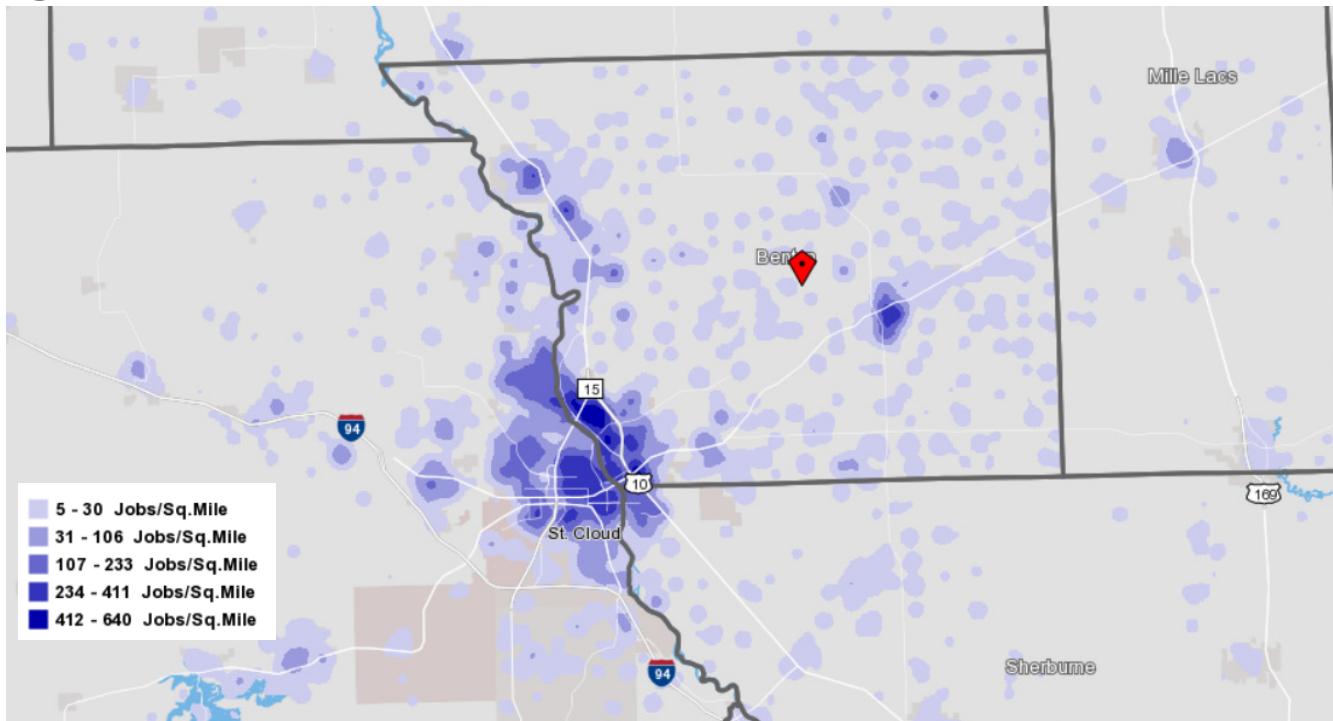
As illustrated in Figure 2.6, residents live throughout the county and commute longer distances to their jobs. According to the 2016 US Census ACS, the average travel time to work for a Benton County resident is 22 minutes. In comparison, it takes a St. Cloud resident, on average, 18 minutes to travel to work. It will be important to continue to provide safe and efficient transportation routes for rural residents.

- **Farm to Market:** As noted throughout this Chapter, farming plays a significant role in the

County's economy. The County should consider prioritizing transportation improvements that provide mobility benefits in moving goods (e.g., crops and livestock) between the farm and final destination (e.g., farmers market, school, distributor, processing facility or grocery store).

- **Senior Needs:** Transportation options for seniors will become increasingly important as the population ages in rural Benton County (see population trends on page 3). For example, seniors will need access to many services and activities on a regular basis, including health care facilities, grocery stores, community centers, faith-related gathering places, places that support social activities, and housing options.
- **Farming Needs:** Growth in agriculture has resulted in increasing demands on local resources and facilities. Farm equipment has also increased in size and weight, adding pressure to the local roadway system. Future roadway improvements should consider the design and pavement structure to handle an increase in vehicle weight.

**Figure 2.6. Jobs Per Square Mile**



Source: Census - OnTheMap

## Active Living Trends

Residents who can easily and comfortably move on foot in their neighborhoods tend to get more physical activity and feel more secure while also having a large impact on the economic development and growth of a community. Opportunities to walk or bike can decrease vehicle emissions, improve air quality, increase the desirability for people to reside in the community, and draw new customers into businesses in downtown districts. Being able to reach these types of destinations by means of walking, biking, or public transit is essential for healthy communities, but to be active, one must have safe and convenient access between neighborhoods, jobs, services, and recreational activities. Adequate pedestrian, bicycle, and transit infrastructure is necessary to create safe connections for all users, including people who do not own a vehicle. Ample parks and open spaces also provide residents with opportunities to integrate physical activity into their daily habits. Land use patterns should also promote active living and encourage a reduction in driving to improve air quality and respiratory health.

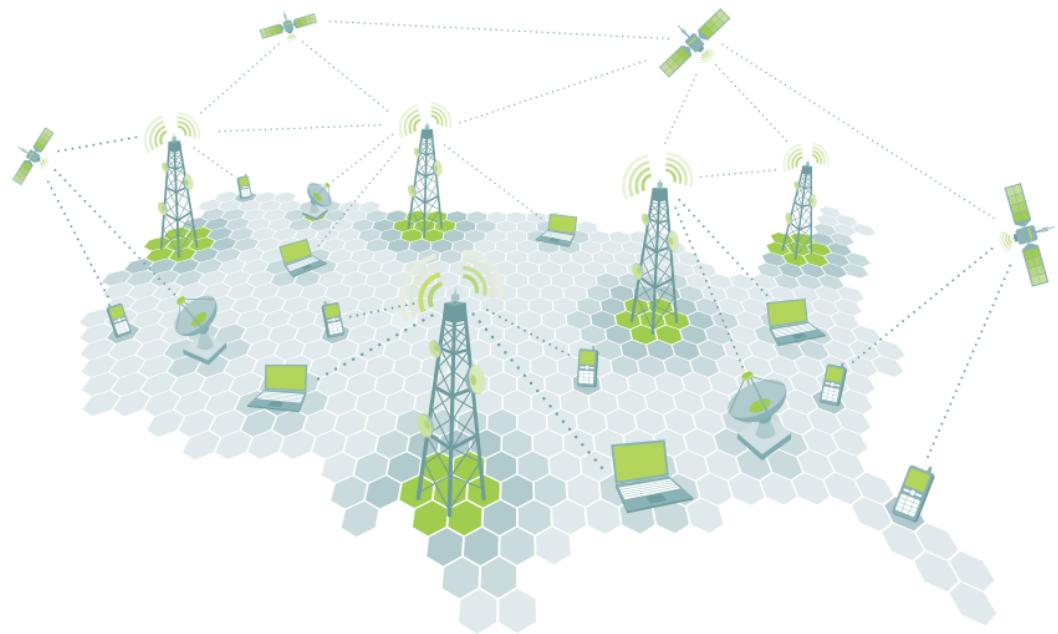
## Regional Active Transportation Plan

**The Public Health Divisions of Benton, Sherburne, Stearns, and Wright Counties, working together under the Statewide Health Improvement Program (SHIP), have developed a Regional Active Transportation Plan (ATP) that identifies a set of strategies that can be implemented by SHIP staff and/or community partners in the region. For this plan, a Regional Network was identified that connects the nodes and corridors in the region. The Regional Network represents high-level, conceptual connections between important regional origins and destinations and does not identify specific street routes or facility types. Benton County should continue to use this plan to help implement projects that support active living initiatives from a transportation perspective.**

### REGIONAL ACTIVE TRANSPORTATION PLAN

November 2015





# Communication

Reliable and affordable internet (wireless or broadband), also known as e-Connectivity, plays a fundamental role in our economic activity. More importantly, access to high-speed internet is vital for a diverse set of industries, including agricultural production, manufacturing, mining, and forestry. This connectivity acts as a catalyst for rural prosperity by enabling efficient, modern communications between rural American households, schools, and health care centers. In that respect, it is important to recognize the internet coverage in Benton County. In general, approximately 25 percent of the county is

served with wireless broadband, while 25 percent is underserved. The remaining 50 percent do not have access to any form of wireless broadband.

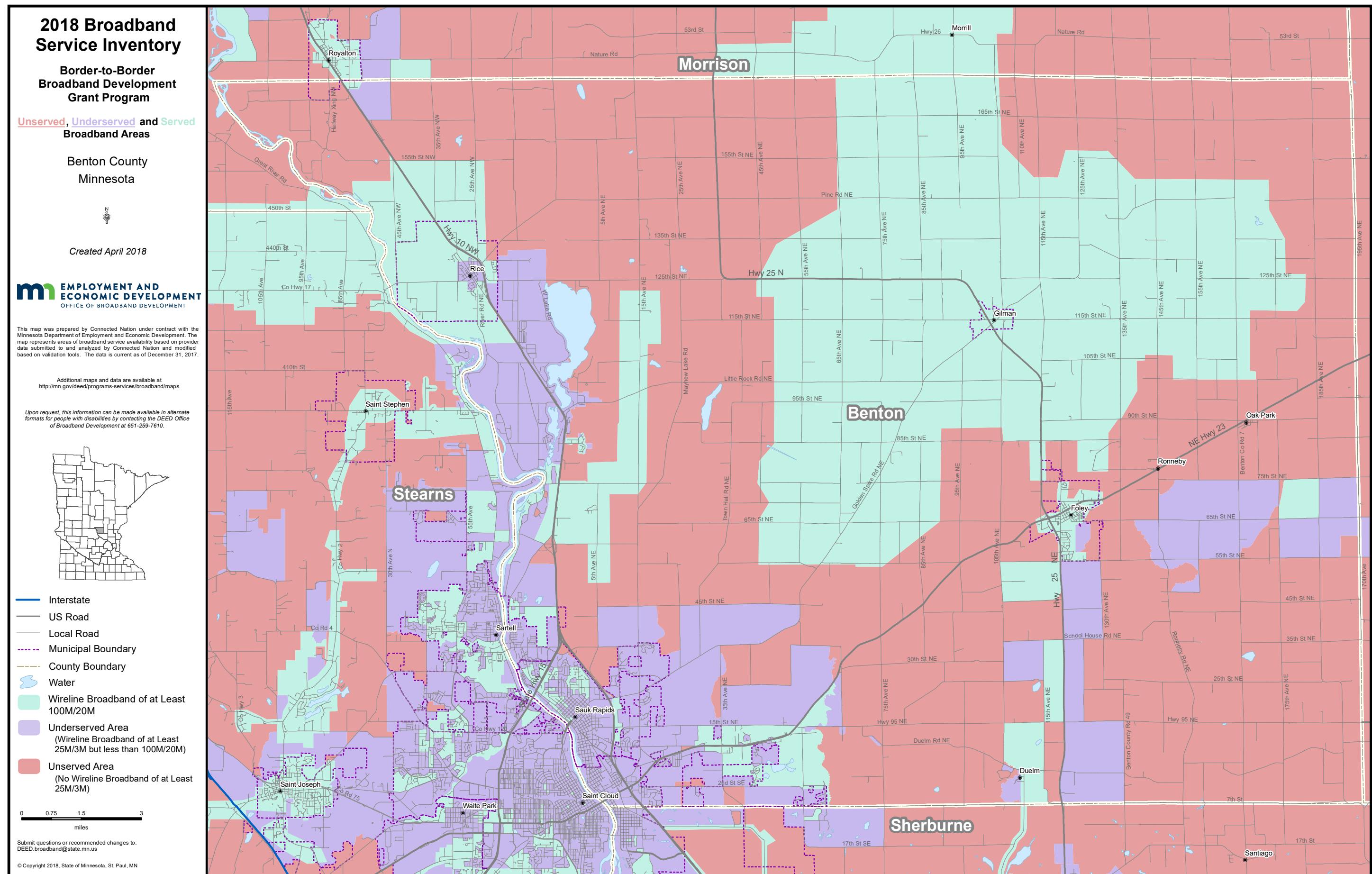
The 2012 US Census of Agriculture is another source of data to better understand Benton County's internet coverage (see Table 2.7). In 2012, 73 percent of Benton County farmers had some form of internet, which represents a 15 percent increase from 2007.

**Table 2.7. Internet Access to Benton County Farmers**

Year	Number of Farms	Farms with Internet	Percent with Internet
2007	919	537	58%
2012	958	695	73%

*Source: 2012 US Census of Agriculture (data was not collected as part of the 2017 US Census of Agriculture)*

Figure 2.7. 2018 Broadband Service Inventory



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## Communication Trends

According to a 2017 report by the Federal Communications Commission, 80 percent of the 24 million American households that do not have reliable, affordable high-speed internet are in rural areas. Key findings from this report include:

- From 2012 to 2014, mobile LTE broadband was newly deployed to 34.2 million people, including 21.5 million rural Americans. But in the following two years, new mobile deployments dropped 83 percent, reaching only 5.8 million more Americans, including only 2.3 million more rural Americans.
- Rural and Tribal areas continue to lag behind urban areas in mobile broadband deployment. Although evaluated urban areas saw an increase in data speeds (LTE broadband at speeds of 10 megabits per second and minimum upload speeds of at least three megabits per second) from 81.9% in 2014 to 90.5 % in 2016, such deployment in evaluated rural and Tribal areas remained flat at about 70% and 64%, respectively.
- Approximately 14 million rural Americans and 1.2 million Americans living on Tribal lands still lack mobile LTE broadband at speeds of 10 megabits per second and minimum upload speeds of at least three megabits per second.
- Approximately 92% of the population has access to both fixed terrestrial services at 25 Mbps/3 Mbps and mobile LTE at speeds of 5 Mbps/1 Mbps. In rural areas, 68.6% of Americans have access to both services, as opposed to 97.9% of Americans in urban areas. With respect to fixed 25 Mbps/3 Mbps and 10 Mbps/3 Mbps LTE services, 85.3% of all Americans have access to such services, including 61% in evaluated rural areas and 89.8% in evaluated urban areas.

- Approximately 98.1% of the country has access to either fixed terrestrial service at 25 Mbps/3 Mbps or mobile LTE at 10 Mbps/3 Mbps, with that number dropping to 89.7% in rural areas.

The Nation and State continue to recognize the wireless and broadband gaps that exist in rural areas. In response to this issue, the State of Minnesota has established two goals in providing better access:

- By 2022, all Minnesota businesses and homes will have access to high-speed broadband that provides minimum download speeds of at least 25 megabits per second and minimum upload speeds of at least three megabits per second.
- No later than 2026, all Minnesota businesses and homes have access to at least one provider of broadband with download speeds of at least 100 megabits per second and upload speeds of at least 20 megabits per second.

As part of this effort, Benton County should take an active role in helping advance affordable and reliable internet access from border-to-border.

# Housing

Cities within Benton County are seeing growth, and there is continuing demand for more residential options at the edges of these cities. Many townships within the County are seeing more demand for traditional "suburban" residential development, with large lot, single family detached homes.

There is a correlation between level of income, housing value and geographical location. The cities tend to have an older and smaller-sized housing stock which is declining in value. The housing just outside of the cities, however, is newer, larger, higher in value, and inhabited by higher wage earners. This was seen in the early 2000s as Sauk Rapids and Sartell felt a boom in housing. Both of these Cities

are experiencing continued residential growth within their City limits.

Table 2.8 ranks the townships and cities by median household income and median housing value. St. George Township has the highest median household income and one of the highest median housing value. Most of the cities are near the bottom of the list. In the southwestern corner of the county, Sartell, Sauk Rapids and St. Cloud are all characterized by lower median housing values and lower median household incomes than the surrounding townships. Sauk Rapids and Minden Townships have significantly higher median housing values and incomes than the cities they surround.

**Table 2.8. Median Household Income & Household Value**

Rank	City or Township	Median Household Income (2016)
1	St. George Township	\$79,375
2	Langola Township	\$76,250
3	Mayhew Lake Township	\$74,375
4	Gilmanton Township	\$74,107
5	Sartell (part)	\$71,959
6	Watab Township	\$70,938
7	Graham Township	\$70,833
8	Glendorado Township	\$70,781
9	Sauk Rapids Township	\$70,583
10	Rice	\$69,044
11	Gilman	\$68,750
12	Maywood Township	\$67,583
13	Minden Township	\$67,125
14	Alberta Township	\$62,679
15	Granite Ledge Township	\$61,071
16	Royalton (part)	\$52,778
17	Foley	\$52,394
18	Sauk Rapids	\$48,164
19	St. Could (part)	\$45,223

Rank	City or Township	Median Household Value (2016)
1	Mayhew Lake Township	\$239,200
2	Glendorado Township	\$230,600
3	Langola Township	\$227,200
4	St. George Township	\$222,700
5	Maywood Township	\$212,900
6	Graham Township	\$212,500
7	Gilmanton Township	\$209,900
8	Sauk Rapids Township	\$205,600
9	Granite Ledge Township	\$201,900
10	Watab Township	\$190,100
11	Alberta Township	\$187,500
12	Minden Township	\$181,700
13	Sartell (part)	\$180,300
14	Rice	\$153,600
15	Sauk Rapids	\$148,300
16	St. Cloud (part)	\$144,100
17	Gilman	\$140,300
18	Royalton (part)	\$132,100
19	Foley	\$131,100

## Housing Trends

According to a 2017 study prepared by the Urban Institute, the nation can expect the following housing trends in rural America:

- Rural areas will see slow growth rates.
- Rural Americans are aging faster than Americans in metropolitan areas.
- Rural households will become as racially diverse by 2030 as the nation was in 1990.
- Demand for housing in rural areas will increase.
- The housing needs of rural seniors will require urgent attention.
- A growing share of working-age rural Americans may need housing assistance, even if they do not qualify for it.



## Public Health

The comprehensive plan can play a pivotal role in promoting the health of the County. The natural and built environment provides the opportunity to support or limit healthy behaviors and active lifestyles. Our health begins with decisions on where to place things such as county facilities and services, transit routes, parks, trails, and highway investments. County operations, public entities, community organizations and businesses should be encouraged to consider community health as early as possible in the decision-making process to ensure all residents can lead healthy lives. A "health-in-all-policies" approach recognizes that community leaders, planners and engineers are in a unique position to improve the county's health by shaping the environments where people live, work and play.

The Minnesota Department of Health (MDH) and local public health agencies have recognized the impacts the built environment can have in achieving healthy communities. MDH has identified numerous practices that can be implemented to promote a healthier environment for our residents. In Benton County, this work is guided by the Statewide Health Improvement Partnership (SHIP) grant from the MDH, with a strong focus on reducing health care costs and reducing chronic disease by creating sustainable policy, systems, and environmental changes. Local public health agencies and SHIP are working to create healthier communities across Minnesota by expanding opportunities for active living, healthy eating and tobacco-free living. Comprehensive planning can draw upon these connections and put policies in place to support healthy communities. The Benton County Comprehensive Plan has started



the healthy community discussion by recognizing existing programs and initiatives, as well as highlighting health inequities and opportunities for chronic disease prevention by increasing active living opportunities and access to local foods.

## Planning for the Public's Health

Benton County Public Health tracks and monitors the health status of county residents. The county's overall health is defined based on various health metrics such as rates of chronic disease, substance and alcohol use, and nutritious food intake, to name a few. All local public health agencies in Minnesota must participate in assessment and planning to determine local public health priorities and focus local resources accordingly. These findings are primarily detailed in the following documents:

### Community Health Assessment (CHA)

The CHA is updated every five years. The CHA discusses a wide array of information about the conditions and factors affecting health, as well as indicators of population health status. It represents a snapshot in time of the health of people, adults and children, and the environments in Benton County. This assessment is one tool that helps to identify the top health priorities for community action. An area

of focus for this work is chronic disease prevention. Public Health works to improve health by reducing risk factors that contribute to chronic disease, resulting in reduced health care costs.

### Central Minnesota Community Health Survey

The Central Minnesota Community Health Survey is one part of the planning process that asks important questions about the health and wellness of the respondents and community. Surveying will occur on a three-year cycle, as both hospitals and local public health are required to complete the survey every three to five years. This survey is part of an ongoing collaboration between Benton, Sherburne and Stearns Public Health agencies along with CentraCare Health, Fairview Northland Medical Center and the United Way of Central MN. The results of this survey are invaluable to Public Health to assist in determining the direction of their work and measuring success.



## Community Health Improvement Plan (CHIP)

The CHIP is a long-term, systematic effort to address public health priorities identified in the county. The CHIP is used by Benton County Public Health and community partners to set priorities, coordinate resources, develop policies, and set actions to protect and promote health.

## Public Health Trends

The majority of Benton County residents would describe their health as good, very good or excellent. We fare well in many health indicators when compared to other counties in the state and at the national level. Yet when we really start to look at the data, we see that while we have made progress, we still have much work to do. We are particularly interested in health disparities, described as differences in key determinants of health such as education, safe housing, and access to healthy food, which may have an adverse effect on select populations.

We are also looking at health inequities which are described as differences in health that are not only unnecessary and avoidable but, in addition, are considered unfair and unjust. Health inequities are rooted in social determinants that make some population groups more vulnerable to poor health than other groups. Knowing where these disparities and inequities exist helps target our resources for those most in need.

Current health findings are documented in the County's CHA, Central MN Community Health Survey data and the CHIP, in addition to other public health resources.

## Food Access Trends

Ensuring access to a healthy, sustainable food system is key to establishing and maintaining a high quality of life. The ability to easily access basic needs and services influences a person's social, economic, physical, and mental well-being. Planning for future development requires integrated thinking about transportation (e.g., roads, sidewalks, paths, transit) and land use, including considerations about where and how people will obtain food. Long-range planning must support a balanced retail environment, including a fair distribution of food outlets, and a diversity of options to purchase healthy food. Access to healthy foods can reduce the rates of preventable diseases, improve the county's overall health, aid in community and economic development initiatives, and promote a fair share for all residents.

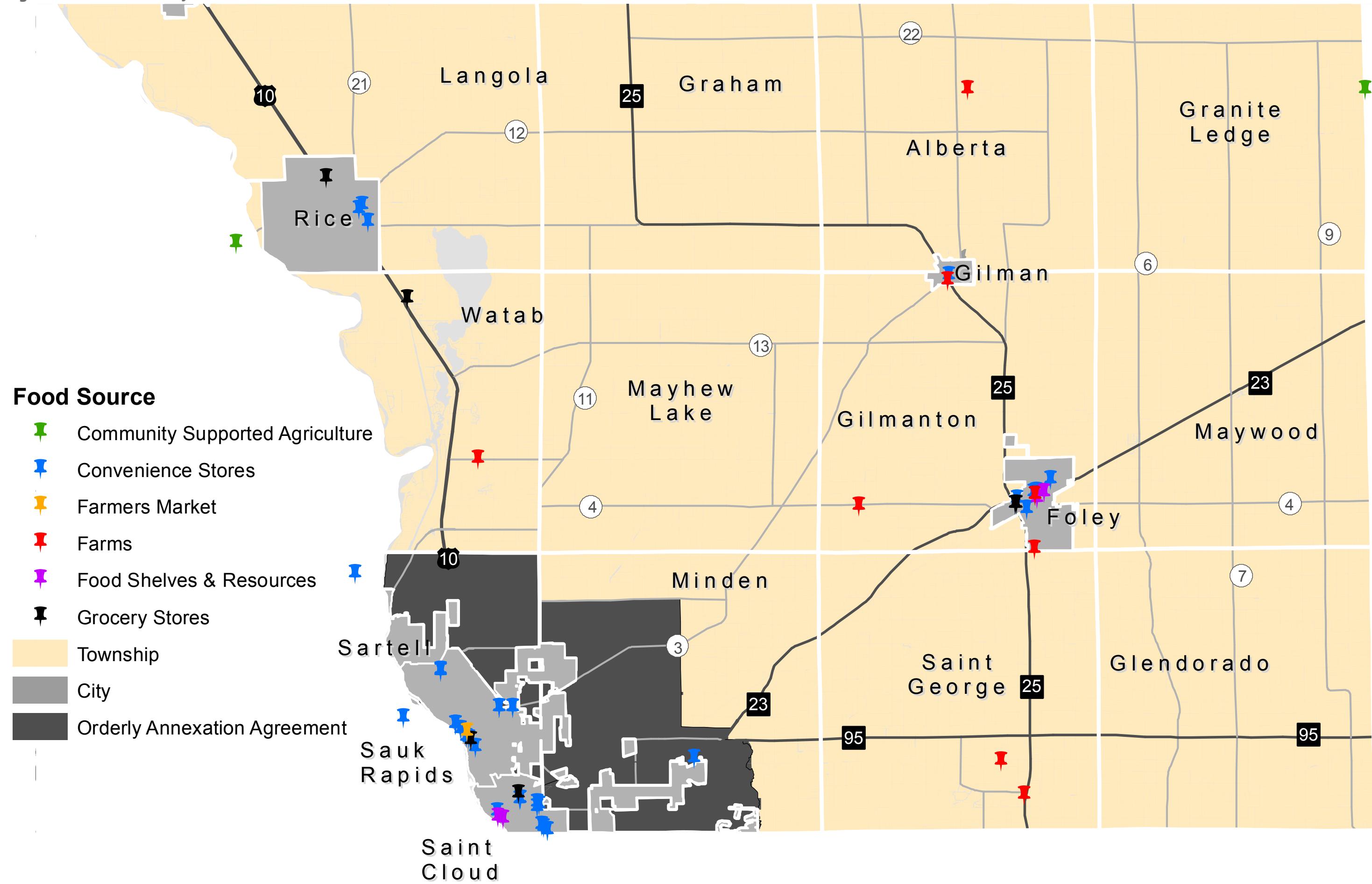
Access to healthy food is a challenge, particularly in rural communities. Long drives to healthy food sources, and associated transportation costs, are a deterrent to obtaining healthy foods and maintaining a nutritious diet. Distance is compounded for households that lack a personal vehicle or the ability to drive one. The growth of rural poverty means that more low-income households are located in communities where transit service is limited or nonexistent.

To address these needs, Benton County can move toward including food, equity, and health-related policy and systems changes in this comprehensive plan. This should include:

- Affordable, safe, and reliable transportation to food sources.
- Support for small- and medium-sized food and farm enterprises.
- Zoning code regulations that support healthy food infrastructure.
- Access to and preservation of land for food production.
- Support of community food assets (such as community gardens, pollinator-friendly habitats, food hubs, and farmers' markets).

Creating reliable access to safe, affordable, and healthy food is an important way to ensure health for all. Food access locations in Benton County and surrounding areas is shown in Figure 2.3.

Figure 2.8. Benton County Access to Food



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