Growth & Justice is staking out crucially important statewide policy turf for 2017 and beyond, with new attention and emphasis on what rural and Greater Minnesota communities need to enjoy broader prosperity and vitality.

In a Star Tribune Op-Ex section cover article on Aug. 28, we noted how legitimate concerns in rural Minnesota about being left behind economically were being exploited for political advantage. We explained how intransigent legislative opposition to the Southwest Light Rail Transit project (SWLRT) was designed to fan the flames of rural resentment against the Twin Cities and widen the urban-rural divide. Instead of helping rural Minnesota, the resulting impasse ended up doing harm to both rural and metro regions.

Minnesota has arrived at that proverbial fork in the path. Down one path is worsening regional enmity and envy, tinged with racial overtones.

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If our communities of color, top business leaders, and our leading academic experts are all on the same train, it might just be advisable to climb aboard.”

That was the bottom line and the closing sentence in a Growth & Justice commentary published by MinnPost in late summer. The op-ed made a strong case for funding the Southwest Light Rail Transit (SWLRT), in the face of stubborn resistance in the Minnesota House.

The article cited new maps and an abundance of other current data and advice for transit and workforce development, contained in an impressive report that was released toward the end of the regular session by the University of Minnesota Center for Transportation Studies. Growth & Justice served on an advisory board for that study, entitled "Linking the Unemployed to Jobs: Integrated Transit Planning and Workforce Development.

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CAREER PATHWAYS RESEARCH & ADVOCACY

Regina Wilson and Samantha Raines are Anoka County moms who were underemployed and homeless at various times in 2014 and 2015. But thanks to emerging new “Career Pathways” models, both happily found themselves in 2016 with not only good jobs at last, but also with some pretty clear ideas about how they might advance next in their new careers.

Regina enjoys her work at an assisted living facility for the elderly in Columbia Heights, with better pay and benefits than she’s ever had, thanks in part to a recent hike mandated by the state for healthcare attendants in nursing homes. She also has a small foundation of six college credits, on which she intends to stack more. She declares: “I’m in love with health care and I love helping people.”

Samantha is beginning to thrive as an administrative accounting assistant for the National Sports

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TRANSIT INVESTMENT GOOD FOR GROWTH AND JUSTICE

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FROM THE PRESIDENT

Minnesota needs our reasonable voice and our constructive influence on public policy.

The bitterly divisive 2016 political election campaigns reinforce the singular value of Growth & Justice as Minnesota’s beacon for high-minded and practical policy, toward a progressively broader prosperity.

We don’t get sidetracked by endless ideological arguments and we don’t call names. We strive instead to find bipartisan support and agreement between business leaders and social justice advocates on specific solutions that build a healthier society and a stronger economy.

Your continued (and increased, please!) support helps us keep Minnesota on this higher road of civility and problem solving. Even more important, your support of Growth & Justice is gradually improving the lives of millions in our state who benefit directly from policies that build a shared and more inclusive economic growth. In the long run, even those at the top do better, when we ALL do better.

No organization in the state is more persistent and positive in making the case that erasing racial disparity and reducing inequality, through public investment in human potential and physical infrastructure, is actually a recipe for sustainable business growth.

That’s the important theoretical policy framework we advance, finding the sweet spot where business leaders and social justice champions can agree, and persuading legislators and decision-makers to invest in best practices. We also are adept at communicating through the news media, keeping a high profile, and putting a human face on our policy agenda, showing how real people are making real progress with the most cost-effective public investment.

A case in point is this year’s storytelling around the emerging “Career Pathways” models that are quickly putting credentials and skills into the hands of underemployed and under-educated young adults, and on the path to careers. (See article on p. 1 that describes Career Pathway advocacy).

We also help connect the “grassroots” with the “grassstops” for listening and learning about the best course for public policies. The “Hungry for Equity” conference we organized earlier this year (and described in an article on p. 4) illustrates how we help empower Minnesotans who are often not invited and not sufficiently engaged in the policies that affect their futures and fortunes.

That event was a complex and highly collaborative effort by seven organizations. And it exemplified our skills as a ringleader and cheerleader, and team player on numerous coalitions. These include: charter membership in the MinneMinds coalition for early education advocacy; Invest in Minnesota, an enduring alliance of religious, non-profit and labor groups that advocate for sufficient revenue and a progressive tax system; the MSPWin Coalition, seeking workforce training improvements and equity; the Restore the Vote Coalition, which pushes for restoration of voting rights for felons who are no longer incarcerated; and the Education Partnerships Coalition, comprised of highly organized community organizations that focus on improving education equity and outcomes, from the Northside Achievement Zone to the St. Paul Promise Neighborhood, to Greater Minnesota efforts in St. Cloud, Northfield, Red Wing and Austin.

Meanwhile, we are in high demand on the speaking circuit. We deliver presentations or participate in panel discussions almost weekly. Our travels this year have taken us from the Worthington Kiwanis Club in far southwestern Minnesota, to the statewide annual gathering of policy analysts at the University of Minnesota, to the Recharge the Range meeting on the Iron Range, to the Austin Human Rights Commission near the Iowa border.

So as you give thanks this season for your bounty and blessing, and as you weigh your end-of-year giving options, remember that your donations to Growth & Justice actually reinforce your support for all of these causes and groups. Remember also how important it is that Growth & Justice continue to play our distinctive role as a voice and influence for positive and progressive outcomes, helping all our people improve their lives and contribute to the greater good.

MINNESOTA NEEDS OUR REASONABLE VOICE AND OUR CONSTRUCTIVE INFLUENCE ON PUBLIC POLICY.

GROWTH & JUSTICE

Growth & Justice is a research and advocacy organization that develops innovative public policy proposals based on independent research and civic engagement. We believe when Minnesota makes smart investments in practical solutions it leads to broader prosperity for all.

GROWTH & JUSTICE

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STUDENTS OF COLOR LEAD OUR “HUNGRY FOR EQUITY” EVENT

An Ethiopian immigrant described shocking racial slurs at a private college in Greater Minnesota. Latino community college students voiced frustrations from seldom being taught by teachers of color. A black college student described the “sad truth of the black experience in Minnesota: sub-par education, the cycle of poverty, the (lack of) access to expensive higher education…and all the destructive practices of this social construction we call race.” These were the voices of student last March at a unique “Hungry for Equity” forum, organized by Growth & Justice and six other influential organizations. The event was designed to gather ideas for new policies and best practices that erase Minnesota’s unacceptable racial disparities in higher education attainment and readiness for skilled jobs and good careers. We commissioned Amy Sparks, a gifted graphic recorder, to create a mural that captured the themes and learning from this event, which we plan to reprise in 2017.
TRANSPORTATION continued from page 1

The report provided a strong foundation of support for two fairly straightforward propositions. One, our metropolitan region really does need aggressive investment and a faster build-out of both commuter rail and other transit options, to help alleviate both an emerging labor shortage and to address mounting concerns about racial equity and widening disparities in workforce and economic outcomes.

Two, transit development really must be more closely coordinated with workforce training and workforce development policies. Under-skilled and underemployed young adults of color living on the North Side of Minneapolis for instance, could be nudged more specifically into fast-track Career Pathway training for the specific kinds of jobs opening up in the suburbs, to which a transit build-out will provide quicker access.

In the end, a patchwork revenue package was cobbled together by federal and state officials that draws them to a region to live or work. Gone are the days of moving to a city or region because of work; today’s workers choose first where they want to live, and then seek a job in that location.”

RURAL EQUITY continued from page 1

Up the other higher road is a “One Minnesota” philosophy or “Better Together” policy agenda that builds infrastructure and investment in rural Minnesota, and that addresses emerging racial diversity in rural areas and disparities that are actually quite similar to those in the urban core.

The infrastructure investments - incentives for economic development projects, sufficiency of Local Government Aid and other public money for schools, colleges, cities and counties - are traditional Greater Minnesota demands that should remain a bedrock concern. New emphasis on universal high-speed internet or broadband capacity, as well as billions of dollars in future water quality needs, are now rising to the fore.

Growth & Justice believes these traditional needs for state funding of basic infrastructure need to be coupled with much greater emphasis on equity - a term generally applied to policies and investments that reduce inequality and help lower- and middle-income households improve their educational and economic outcomes.

Maps created recently by the Minnesota Rural Education Association (MREA) show how prevalent rural poverty has become. More than a third of the students in many rural districts now qualify for free-and-reduced lunch and written by Growth & Justice last year show that builds infrastructure and investment in rural Minnesota, and that addresses emerging racial diversity in rural areas and disparities that are actually quite similar to those in the urban core.

Maps created recently by the Minnesota Rural Education Association (MREA) show how prevalent rural poverty has become. More than a third of the students in many rural districts now qualify for free-and-reduced lunch programs.

Growth & Justice has been taking this message on the road, delivering presentations or meeting with key leaders this summer and fall in Worthington, Fergus Falls, Austin, and the Iron Range. Watch for more developments and updates on the road, delivering presentations or meeting with key leaders this summer and fall in Worthington, Fergus Falls, Austin, and the Iron Range. Watch for more developments and updates on the road.

Center in Blaine. She is earning more than $30,000 a year, half again more than she was paid working in a series of entry-level jobs for big-box retailers in the Anoka County suburbs. She’s already thinking about the next rung, relieved to be self-sufficient, and she says flatly “I would not be where I am without Career Pathway training.”

These inspiring stories and those of seven other Career Pathway beneficiaries were researched and written by Growth & Justice last year in a series of magazine-style articles for the MSPWin funders collaborative. And the success stories for Regina and Samantha were featured in a Star Tribune commentary by Growth & Justice President Dane Smith as the 2016 session began. Our advocacy and influence helped ensure increased funding for Career Pathway type training. We’ll be advocating for much more in 2017.

As explained in the publications, Career Pathways are a holistic connection of existing programs and funding, combining specialized occupational training with more basic adult education, and social services support, and partners closely with local business sectors and employers. Research on outcomes, in the form of retention and increased income for participants, is very promising.

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