

RURAL COMMUNITIES EQUITY ACTION GUIDE

Based on interviews between Mónica Maria Segura-Schwartz, Growth & Justice Policy and Outreach Consultant, and Patrick Moore, Meander Art Crawl co-organizer

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Case Study One

MEANDER ART CRAWL

Supporting local artists in the
Upper Minnesota River Valley.



Artist: Kathleen Marihart

Community Equity & Inclusion Focus

This project is about **placemaking** and increasing diverse, inclusive entrepreneurial development activities through and in support of the arts. The Meander Art Crawl is an example of a true partnership among community members from diverse sectors who are typically separated by stereotypical ideology and lifestyle but came together to build a more equitable and inclusive economic and community ecosystem.

Results are mixed. Over the years, the Meander has introduced many visitors to the beauty and cultures of the region, and the diversity of arts and crafts created in the area. The tour does bring people into small towns to experience other local businesses, events, and activities, but not all ethnicities are represented among the featured artists.

Summary

"The Meander" is a free, annual (in the Fall) and award-winning self-guided art studio tour featuring 45 artists from five counties in the scenic Upper Minnesota River Valley. A collaboration of artists, businesses, regional government and non-profits, The Meander has built connections to local history, culture, local arts, and landscapes since 2004. It has become a significant regional economic development event – giving rise to supporting events such as concerts and progressive dinners – that attracts visitors from 12 states. Total reported art sales in 2018 amounted to \$108,108 with average sales per artist for the weekend reaching more than \$3,000. Getting to this point of success was not easy. Achieving social and financial equity along the way remains a process in progress.

Background

Minnesota's southwest region encompasses much of the state's Great Plains prairie, but with surprising rolling hills and river valley cliffs where the Minnesota River turns north and east towards its meeting place with the Mississippi River in the Twin Cities region. Like much of western Minnesota, its economy remains tied to agriculture, agribusiness, food processing, and manufacturing, but is also home to education and health care related organizations and businesses.

Southwest Minnesota is home to nearly 300,000 people (per the boundaries of the SW Initiative Foundation, one of six business and community development catalyst and grant-making organizations co-created by local communities, state government, and philanthropy in the late 1980s across the state).

It is also home to three of the state's 11 regional development commission districts so there is a heritage of cross-sector intergovernmental collaboration going back at least three generations. And it is also the home of Dakota peoples, Upper and Lower Sioux Communities, and dozens of ethnic and immigrant cultures, from the Danes in Tyler to the Micronesians and Norwegians in Milan. Two generations of Hmong peoples reside here; Walnut Grove elected its first Hmong city council member over a decade ago.

Shortages of skilled workers, housing and childcare continue to challenge the region. Like many places in the state and in the United States, youth poverty is a growing problem. One in six southwest Minnesota children lives in poverty. The Southwest Initiative Foundation launched **Grow Our Own** to reverse the trend. Diverse entrepreneurship is one approach to keeping the region's vitality but is dependent on strengthening the welcoming nature of its communities, large and small.

The Upper Minnesota River Watershed where the Meander originated is an area of small towns and farming communities, two lane highways, and gravel roads. People can visit artists in their own environment who celebrate a lifestyle that represents the small, handmade, personal, and local culture of the area. This event has more than 33 individual studios in and near the southwestern Minnesota communities of Ortonville, Appleton, Madison, Milan, Dawson, Montevideo, and Granite Falls.

It started with a coffee shop. Patrick Moore, longtime resident of Montevideo and a former community organizer with the MN Land Stewardship Project, had once been told by a mentor, "If you want to change the world, you create a business."

When he and his wife, Mary, opened Java River in 1998 in Montevideo, their vision was that it would become the most welcoming coffee shop in the world. Specifically, he wanted to incubate and elevate the local businesses and creative spaces that had been devastated by the arrival of Walmart in the area.

Moore's mentor at the Land Stewardship Project, Steve O'Neil, came from Saul Alinsky's school of thought in organizing. However, he taught him that to be an effective community organizer in rural areas meant putting aside Alinsky's style of "rubbing raw the sores of discontent" to become less confrontational, less controversial, and more inclusive of different points of view.

Lesson learned: Every borrowed tool needs to be adapted to a new/different environment. Alinsky's organizing experience came from an urban area but with adaptation, can be used in rural communities.

Moore grew up in a big Irish Catholic family that welcomed company at the dinner table. When he moved from the Twin Cities to southwest Minnesota for his first job, he remembers feeling like an outsider in a town full of Norwegian Lutherans. "I was just 22: people would stop talking and look at me when I would walk into a cafe, but no one would reach out and say 'Hi'". His initial discomfort gradually became a realization that welcoming newcomers was just not part of the townspeople's experience. "People were shy and reserved," he says. "To be welcoming, you need to be confident and outgoing."

WealthWorks Capitals

Wealth Works Framework elements at play in the Meander (working towards eventual systems change towards an equitable economic ecosystem):



Individual Capital – artists/business owners & operators, visitors, community members skills



Social Capital – vendors, visitors, residents, community organizers bonding & bridging



Intellectual Capital – innovation, creativity, imagination



Natural Capital – array of environmental resources (air, water, land, flora, fauna) on display as visitors "meander" thru region to artist studios, shops, etc.



Built Capital – transportation & communications infrastructure, water



Political Capital – shift in how artists in region are seen - as entrepreneurs as well as creative placemakers, shift in cultural appreciation, increasing voice, access, inclusion in decision-making of traditionally underrepresented community members



Financial Capital – investment in organizing the meander by local businesses and organizations, increase in income (tho limited) for artists



Cultural Capital – changing dynamics, knowledge of who is known and what heritages are valued, collaboration across races, ethnicities, generations

Over the past 20 years the business that Patrick founded, Java River, became a showcase and marketplace for local artists and musicians, a place that welcomed everyone from self-described tree-huggers to Republican members of the country club. A group of nuns/coffee shop patrons helped Moore name and refine his practice of “radical hospitality”. “Everyone walking through that door would be a potential collaborator,” he says.

Lesson learned: “Radical Hospitality” turned out to be an important ingredient to build community, partnerships, and allies.

Process

The Meander Art Crawl idea emerged from what Moore describes as an organic process. “You have to serve what seeks to emerge,” he says. “One day a gentleman, Don Sherman, from Ortonville, MN, brought me a big manual of policies and said, ‘This is the economic development plan for North Minneapolis. We need to have something similar in this region.’”

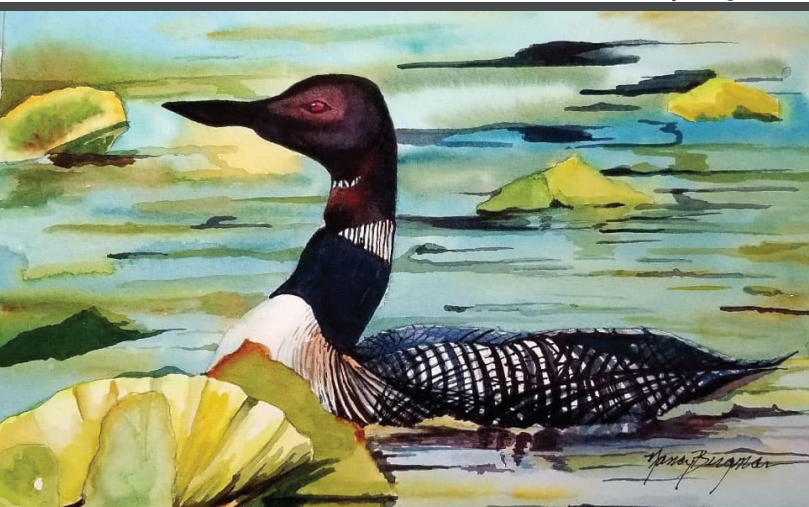
The two men sketched out some ideas on a napkin. The concept of an “Art Crawl” encompassing local art, geography, and culture, came out of this and subsequent conversations with various community members Moore had come to know through Java River. They discussed how local government could foster art based economic development. Moore set up visits between tourism and economic development-oriented business owners in Montevideo and Ortonville.

Local business owners especially liked the idea to attract visitors to the area and spread the word to their professional peers. Outreach to Dawn Hegland and Kristi Fernholz at the Upper Minnesota Valley Development Commission, a regional organization that was already working on eco-tourism projects, resulted in a formal partnership.

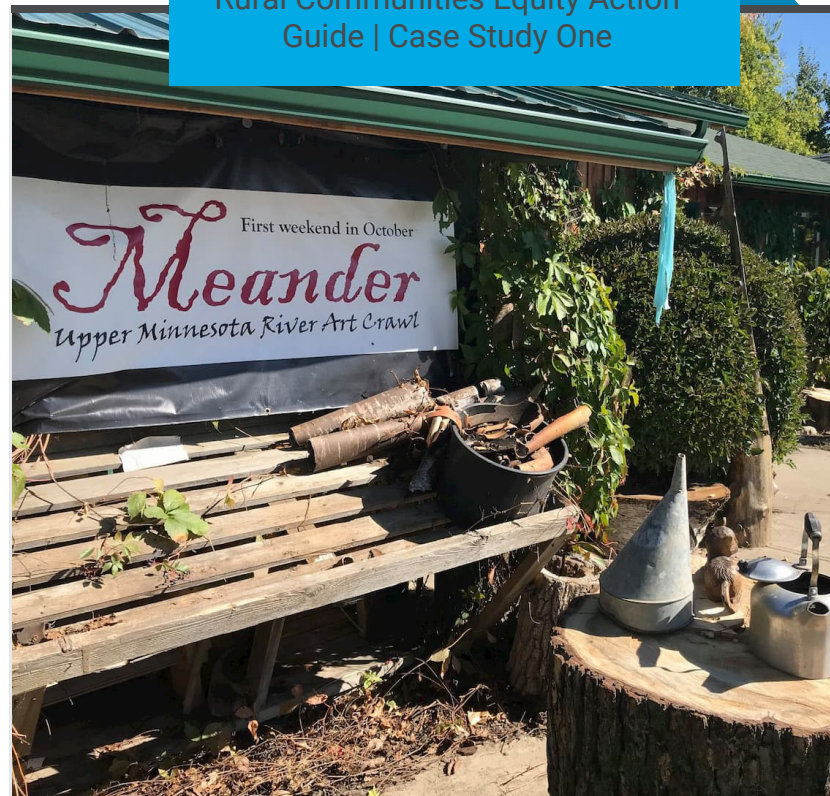
“Dawn ended up being a crucial driving force in moving ahead with the idea of an art crawl. What made it an attractive idea was that the Meander could highlight two major assets of the region: our landscape and river valley and our handcraft artisan culture. It was an idea that could knit together communities that heretofore saw themselves in competition with each other.”

Lesson learned: We all do better when we ALL do better. The trick is to have the patience and grow the relationships to find the how.

Artist: Nancy Bergman



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For everyone involved, the Arts Meander was good for community. It was not only about and for artists. “It was about the discovery that when we work together, we can make something good happen for everyone,” says Moore.

Local artists were obviously a key part of the mix. The planning group was thrilled when the Montevideo Economic Authority granted the initial project \$500. Andy Kahmann of A to Z Letterpress Printing was also a co-founder. Moore reports that local businesspeople and other politically conservative participants in the effort appreciated that the event gave a common purpose to all businesses while creating more awareness of local agriculture. They also liked that Moore invested his own funds in the venture instead of relying solely on grant money.

He also incorporated “Creative Class” ideas for economic development based on welcoming a diversity of people, incorporation of arts & culture (to foster creativity) and supporting a diversity of businesses. (The Creative Class approach was pioneered by Richard Florida when Florida was a business professor and researcher at Carnegie Mellon and Pittsburgh was trying to revitalize their economy that was once based on the then fading steel industry.)

The original idea was that The Meander would build on the reputation and activities of an existing spring tour of three established artists’ studios while elevating lesser-known artists at the same time. “It took some convincing, to show these artists that it was also in their interest to do this,” Explained Moore. It was because of the trust Moore had built with all parties and the relationships already established, that they came around.

The planning of the project had its ups, downs and demanded people's compromise. Moore "proposed doing community engagement and publicizing the event through social media, but the artistic community was not all that familiar with its promise and resisted it at first." Everyone had interests that needed to be considered. The artistic community wanted aesthetic control and preferred to design and distribute a traditional brochure to guarantee image quality. The planning group chose to hold The Meander in the fall to respect the existing Spring open house tradition and to stay out of the way of pre-Christmas sales.

Lesson learned: Diverse participation means diverse interests and in turn a more difficult decision-making process. But diversity and inclusion of all stakeholders assures inclusive results.

Moore's extensive experience as a meeting facilitator helped everyone come together initially but it took a while to get and stay organized. The first Meander happened in 2004, and it was a great success. "We asked each artist to contribute to have a listing in the brochure. Local businesses also paid to be listed. A local sign making company – Impact Plastics – donated the 45 original signs used to identify the artist location sites. We pulled the first Meander off on a shoestring budget of less than \$5,000."

After this first event's success, the group found themselves in need of other elements to become sustainable. There were many details that needed to be solved such as appropriate (agreeable) advertisement, financial mechanisms, organizational structure (whose responsibility was it to do what, for how long). At that point there was some disagreement regarding roles, responsibilities, and levels of ownership. This led to internal tensions.

Lesson learned: a less formal structure created a leadership group that could be responsive to community input but also may have made it harder to raise money together and sustain operations over the longer term.

The artist community preferred that The Meander not become a formal organization. A steering committee emerged instead.

Lesson learned: Build consensus early on about operating and planning infrastructure. Make decisions and clarify expectations about committee leadership, record-keeping, delegating action steps, and managing finances. This does not always happen organically. Work through these tensions. Don't give up if everyone believes in the ultimate goals.

Artist: Doug Peterson



Results

Results are mixed. Over the years, the Meander has introduced many visitors to the beauty and cultures of the region, and the diversity of arts and crafts created in the area. The tour does bring people into small towns to experience other local businesses, events, and activities, but not all ethnicities are represented among the featured artists.

There's a regional pride generated by the Meander but there is also a challenge keeping it going in the face of continuing difficulties for small towns and rural artists to stay in business, especially as necessary COVID restrictions currently challenge economic health across the region and the state.

Reflections

The Meander has changed the urban myth of rural areas being bereft of an arts community. However, arts support is harder to sustain in rural areas, especially in southwestern Minnesota because it is so far away from more dense urban centers of population (and potential customers/visitors) such as the Twin Cities.

The organizing process behind The Meander was so organic that community need was not explicitly identified at first. There was just a general feeling that economic development and entrepreneurship in rural areas is difficult due to population density challenges and therefore needed creative ways to generate more market strength. The community needed to do something more to encourage young people to stay or to return home after exploring the rest of the world. The Meander started as a response to these general concerns; clarifying conversations about objectives and tactics came later.

For everyone involved, the Arts Meander was good for community. It was not only about and for artists. "It was about the discovery that when we work together, we can make something good happen for everyone," says Moore.

However, there continued to be challenges, too. "After the first event in 2004, continuing the project was a struggle," he says. "It had no money, no structure, and no one knew if it was going to still exist." It took a few years for respective roles to be defined and for financial management and clerical infrastructure systems to become operational and trusted by all.

The Meander needs "to become more inclusive of Native People and People of Color. So far, this has been a white middle class effort. As an organizer, you always want to work yourself out of the job. You don't want to hold onto power. You have to let go. They need new artists. We need to have new Minnesotans in our midst, too."

Lesson learned: Building full diversity and inclusion, and shared leadership in community means White people, the currently dominant culture, need to let go and share power.

"Some people in this region don't want to hear the Native American perspective. Neither that, nor new immigrants, or a gay perspective or anything 'different.' 'Diversity' in this area has been between Irish and Germans, Lutherans and Catholics," says Moore.

"I had the opportunity recently to participate in a Worthington Art of Hosting meeting about what it means to belong in Minnesota," says Moore. "If you look for these stories, it is the new frontier. I feel increasingly like an old white guy who needs to step aside."

Lesson learned: Having inclusive leadership from the beginning is the best way to ensure inclusive participation.

Says Moore, "Eventually this effort will have to be led by a new generation of people with a diverse mix of ethnic backgrounds. All I can do is pass on a platform to reimagine and foster new ideas and events that reflect the changing times and nature of southwest Minnesota."

Artist: Dale Streblov

