

Does health of suburbs ride on rail?

BY DEBBIE GRIFFIN
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The St. Croix Valley Rail Group, formerly known as the Hudson-River Falls Area Rail Group, hosts a free presentation 7-8 p.m. Tuesday, Oct. 23, in the first-floor meeting room at the public library, 140 Union St.

The focus will be the meaning of recently released housing and population data.

The meeting, entitled, "Decline of Suburbs and the Future of the St. Croix Valley," will be led by rail advocate and SCVRG member William "Bill" Draves.

He said discussion will focus on U.S. Census data that says cities are growing faster than suburbs.

"We live in a suburban area," Draves said about the data's relevance to River Falls. "This is a huge change."

Leading housing experts also say suburbs are now in long-term decline and that more people are moving to cities that have light rail. The areas that have it are the ones growing, according to Draves.

He said young people, students, senior citizens, telecommuters and others are opting

to forego having a vehicle. Gas prices, maintenance expense, registration and other costs have people deciding to live in places with other modes of transportation.

Vehicle miles traveled have also been decreasing and, as a result, so has the gas tax. Draves emphasizes that this "shift" is huge for both business and home owners.

He said statistics show that between 2007 and 2011, St. Croix County grew only 6% in population. From 2000 to 2007, it grew 27%.

Between 2010 and 2011, there was no population growth at all in the county, and the number of people in three age groups — 35-39, 40-45, and 46-54 — also decreased by 9%, 5% and 3% respectively.

Relative to housing growth, St. Croix County sits at about one-quarter of the home sales reported in Ramsey and Hennepin counties. Draves points to the partially developed subdivisions of River Falls as an example.

"Local officials should not be concerned," he said. "They should be panicked."

Draves said the SCVRG meets monthly and is com-

prised of 26 members from River Falls, Hudson and New Richmond. Draves said for example, St. Croix County Board Supervisor Clarence "Buck" Malick and River Falls Mayor Dan Toland attend the rail-group's meetings.

Some may recall this group forming years ago under the name Hudson-River Falls Rail Group.

Draves says they changed the name to broaden the group's reach, since the issue of rail and suburban decline affects many municipalities in the St. Croix Valley.

The local rail group has followed the progress and action of the Gateway Corridor Commission, which is responsible for planning of the transportation 'corridor' that begins at the St. Croix River bridge on the states' border and ends in the Twin Cities. Learn more about the commission and its activities at its web site: www.thegatewaycorridor.com

Draves invites all interested to attend the meeting and "join us for a fascinating look at the future for area business and communities in the St. Croix Valley."



SUBMITTED PHOTOS

The St. Croix Valley Rail Group holds a gathering Oct. 23 at the River Falls Public Library to convey information about the "Decline of Suburbs and the Future of the St. Croix Valley."



William Draves



The St. Croix Valley Rail Group's Steering committee plans the Decline of the Suburbs program taking place at the public library. Left to right: Wendy Dadez of New Richmond, Dori Marty of New Richmond, Erin Tomlinson of River Falls, Jeff Horner of River Falls and Mike Noreen (back to camera) of River Falls.

Shared geography: Dive into the confluence

BY DEBBIE GRIFFIN
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A National Park Service conference in 2009 sparked the idea of local communities working together to share common concerns, foster partnerships and encourage tourism.

The Confluence Project started not long after with local and regional people working toward the goal of creating a common vision of education, conservation and recreation at the confluence of the Mississippi and St. Croix rivers.

Members of the project include people from two national parks, the Mississippi National River and Recreation Area and the St. Croix National Scenic Riverway; the Carpenter Nature Center in Hastings, Minn.; the Friends of Freedom Park in Prescott; the Minnesota DNR; Pierce County, Wisc.; Dakota and Washington counties in Minnesota; the city of River Falls; Prescott; and the Minnesota cities of Afton and Hastings.

Mayors from each of the cities gave a presentation Friday at the River Falls Public Library describing their town's unique characteristics.

River Falls Mayor Dan Toland told about the Kinnickinnic River's unique attributes, as well as the many opportunities for recreation in and around it.

Toland highlighted the city's trails, history tours, many festivals and more. Resident and longtime member of the



DEBBIE GRIFFIN PHOTOS

About 50 representatives from four communities gathered in River Falls Oct. 12, to get a peek at a recently established website that promotes regional assets and natural-resource awareness.

Community Arts Base Sue Beckham also presented information.

Website builder Mandy Matzek also spoke to the crowd as she showed the site on a big screen: "Its main job is to inform," she said, adding that the designers of it worked hard to procure photography that highlights the stunning visual beauty of the area.

She explained that the website includes a powerful map feature with layers that already show many of the region's natural assets. It will continue to grow and expand to include more things.

The speakers said the symposium was the official "soft" launch of the website that intends to bring visitors to and from all four areas of the confluence.

Members of GRC define its geography this way: "This project encompasses the physical territory around the conflu-

ence of the Mississippi and St. Croix rivers located in the greater Afton, Hastings, Prescott and River Falls areas."

The site aims to promote not only the region's natural beauty, but also its fishing, boating, canoeing, hiking, commercial shipping, trains, swimming, motorcycling, biking, hiking, history and more.

The Confluence Concierge portion of the website gives visitors a chance to zero in on specific activity packages that might include music, wine, patio dining, dessert, a bed-n-breakfast stay, or a creative combination of several things.

Margaret Smith, executive director for the Friends of Freedom Park Center, said she often receives requests from people looking for that kind of guidance.

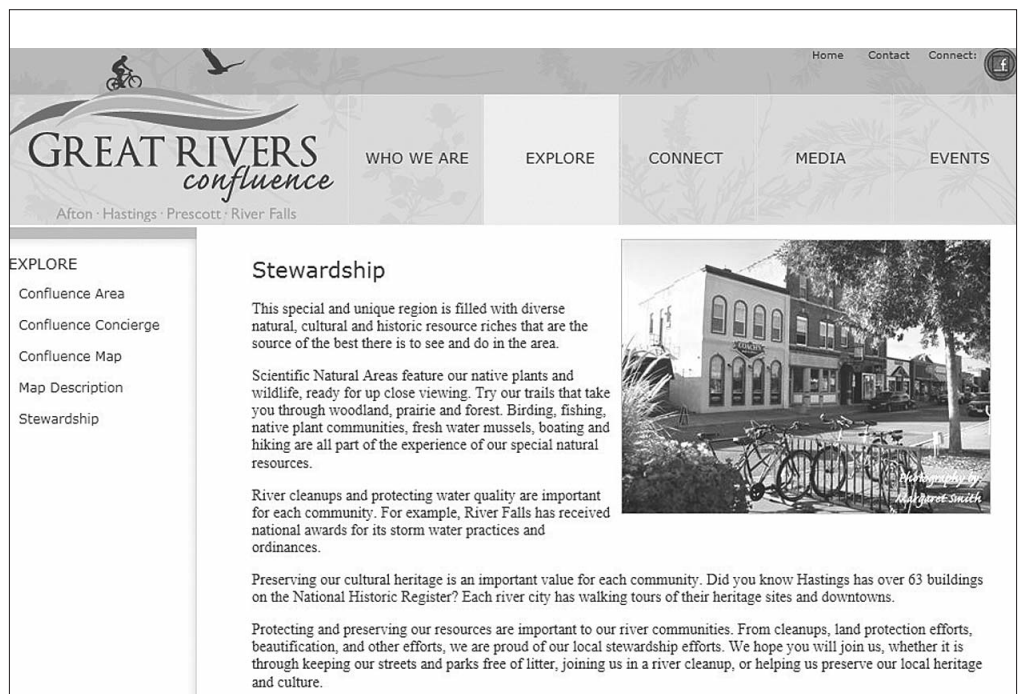
For example, maybe they'd ride bikes or motorcycles into town and ask where they could hear live music along the route.

Others may want to do outdoor recreation then fine dining. People can choose and create any number of combinations that take them to the four main communities of the GRC.

As people raised their hands to mention or ask about specific areas, activities or entities, the presenters made clear that the website is and will always be a work in progress.



Mayor Dan Toland made a presentation to the crowd attending the symposium "Commerce, Culture and Connections" held by the Great Rivers Confluence project at the River Falls Public Library last Friday.



At the new website, www.greatriversconfluence.org, visitors will find maps, information about trails and other outdoor recreation, a culture and history section and lists of places for overnight stays.

The idea is to add to it, enrich it and give people something that helps them come and enjoy all the region has to offer.

"We also recognize there are a lot of things missing on here that we need to add," said Gene Groebner of the Minnesota DNR.

Presenter Matzek agreed, "Partnerships are going to be key."

Symposium packages included a list of all the atten-

dees to encourage immediate networking and communication. Participants spent the first part of the day inside the library hearing presentations and seeing the site. They were on a bus tour for the second part of the day that included seeing River Falls parks along the Kinnickinnic River and trails, the new Point Douglas Trail site, the Carpenter Nature Center, the new Hwy 61 bridge and its trail, Hastings trails and a prairie restoration project,

and the LeDuc Historic Estate and Prescott's Orange Dragon Art Gallery.

The presenters encouraged everyone to check out the site, refer other people to it and provide feedback.

Much more information is available about the Great Rivers Confluence Project and its activities at the newly launched website: www.greatriversconfluence.org

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Death by Chocolate
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DINNER AND CHOCOLATE BAKE-OFF

Friday, 9th November 2012
Kilkarney Hills Golf Club
5:30 PM Social Hour | 6:30 PM Dinner
Music provided by Meyer Middle School 8th grade Jazz Band

Free drawing for a pair of Packers tickets • Fun games
Gift basket silent auction • Chocolate dessert live auction

Professionally judged chocolate bakeoff - Cakes only, please.
Only a limited number will be accepted. Prizes for top 3 entries.
Please call Kim at 715-425-7604 or 715-425-7540 to enter or with questions.

Tickets are \$50 and include entry in a drawing for Packers tickets.
Purchase tickets at 1st National Bank, RF Chamber of Commerce, Royal Credit Union, St. Croix Valley Gas Company.
Limited number available at the door.

For more information contact
Carole Mottaz at mottaz@presenter.com

In 2011 the River Falls Rotary Club raised:

- \$13,000 for our area school children
- \$10,000 for the school forest
- \$1,800 for Relay for Life
- \$1,000 for Habitat for Humanity
- \$2,500 to buy books for a traveling library for children in Peru
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