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Rural Life & Engagement: Public Views from Minnesota County Fairs

Roger P. Rose
Center for Small Towns

Tim Lindberg
University of Minnesota, Morris

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UNIVERSITY OF MINNESOTA MORRIS



*"Believing in a bright,
prosperous future
for small communities."*

Rural Life & Engagement: Public Views from Minnesota County Fairs

RESEARCH REPORT FROM A 2016 PILOT SURVEY OF SIX COUNTY FAIRS

Roger P. Rose
Director, Center for Small Towns
Associate Professor of Political Science
University of Minnesota, Morris

Tim Lindberg
Assistant Professor of Political Science
University of Minnesota, Morris

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Introduction: Searching for Public Opinion at County Fairs

Surveys of public opinion among residents of Greater Minnesota are uncommon. The major exception is the Blandin Foundation Rural Pulse survey conducted approximately every three years. This high-quality phone survey, however, would prohibitively expensive for smaller organizations like the Center for Small Towns (CST) to emulate.

Inspired by the University of Minnesota's D2D research station at the Minnesota State Fair, CST explored the possibility of conducting surveys across Greater Minnesota's county fairs, with a goal of creating an affordable, annual, short survey on rural issues and rural life. This report explores the results and the lessons of CST's survey exploration effort across six different county fairs in West Central, Southwest, Central and Northwest Minnesota.

CST's county fair survey generated almost 200 responses, with 178 coming from rural MN residents; it provided a limited "snapshot" of the public's view on the following topics of interest and concern to rural Minnesota – quality of community life, the future of rural communities, views of key issues confronting the region and the level of civic involvement.

Major Conclusions from the Survey

Based on responses from county fair attendees, the following results are notable for people of Greater Minnesota to consider:

- ☑ Our respondents reported highly positive views about the quality of life in their rural communities. Older respondents were more positive toward living in a rural community, as we would expect. Women, Republicans, married persons, and those who volunteer were also more positive about rural living.
- ☑ The fair-goers were optimistic about rural communities and their future. When asked about the past five years, over 43% of respondents said that their rural communities were "better off or improving," compared to 20% who saw their communities "in decline or worse off." Regardless, they generally felt close to their communities.
- ☑ People were most concerned about the availability of good jobs, daycare, and affordable housing. They expressed little concern about LGBTQ and racial minority populations and the quality of law enforcement.
- ☑ The respondents reported being heavily engaged in volunteer life. Over 72% had volunteered in the past year, a far higher level than found across the state of Minnesota. Nearly half also stated a willingness to assist their cities and local governments if asked.
- ☑ Survey respondents were representative in terms of the racial, political, and age characteristics of the broader communities we sampled from, but they were also some of the most engaged, well-off, politically interested, and stable residents of rural Minnesota. As such, they cannot be said to mirror the overall population of each county nor of their regions.
- ☑ County fairs are difficult environments for obtaining a representative sample of regional residents. We do not recommend this approach for other organizations, unless for specific purposes that complement ongoing plans to be part of county fair.

Part I. Views of Rural Life, Key Issues and Civic Engagement (Volunteering)

1. Section on Views of Quality of Life

A number of items in the survey asked respondents whether or not they agreed that certain characteristics of their rural community were better or worse than in urban communities, largely based upon common perceptions of urban versus rural life. For example, one question asked respondents whether they agreed or disagreed with the following statement: “Rural life is boring and/or monotonous compared to urban life.”

A total of nine statements were provided to respondents, and the direction of the statement¹ was switched for some of the questions to encourage thoughtful responses and limit bias. Table 1.1 shows the various levels of agreement across the nine items. From this cursory examination, it is clear that rural respondents do not always find these preconceptions accurate, and they are largely positive about living in a rural community.

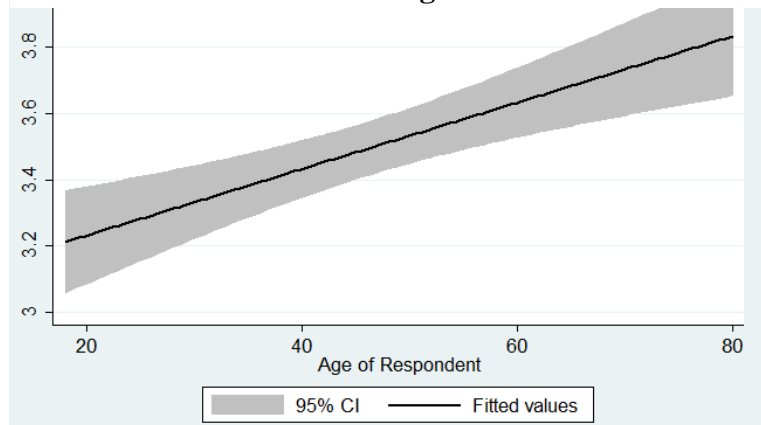
Statement	Strongly Agree/ Agree	Neutral	Strongly Disagree/ Disagree
Rural communities are more friendly than urban communities (n=177)	83.1%	13.6%	3.4%
People in rural areas care more about others than people in urban areas (n=175)	65.7%	22.9%	11.4%
There is less crime and violence in rural communities (n=174)	64.4%	19.5%	16.1%
Rural life is boring and/or monotonous compared to urban life (n=176)	16.5%	17%	66.5%
Living in a rural area means doing without many cultural and entertainment options (n=176)	36.4%	24.4%	39.2%
People in rural areas are more suspicious and prejudiced than people in urban areas (n=177)	24.3%	32.2%	43.5%
There are fewer opportunities to get involved in a rural community than in an urban community (n=177)	32.2%	22%	45.8%
There are fewer problems with illegal drug use in rural communities (n=177)	19.2%	28.2%	52.5%
The government services provided in an urban community are better than those provided in a rural community (n=167)	28.1%	43.1%	28.7%

¹ The “direction of the question” refers to asserting positivity or negativity toward rural life by selecting the “agree” responses. For example, the statement “*Rural communities are **more friendly** than urban communities*” has the opposite direction from the statement “*People in rural areas are **more suspicious and prejudiced** than people in urban areas*”.

While the nine statements asked are clearly not an exhaustive list of potential perceptions of rural versus urban life, there are enough items to provide some evidence of how rural Minnesotans feel about their communities. In order to better analyze this, we recoded the variables so that all of the agree/disagree statements indicated positivity toward rural living. We also dropped out the illegal drugs question, which was an outlier among the respondents' answers. This allowed us to create a "Rural Positivity" scale (RPS), where the strength and direction of agreement of the remaining eight items are added together and then divided so that they remain on a scale of 1 to 5. The resulting average score among our respondents was 3.5, higher than a neutral viewpoint of rural living (a score of 3).

Age is a major factor, with older respondents being more likely to have a higher RPS score than younger respondents. To illustrate this connection, Figure 1 presents the predicted relationship of age and positivity: a small, but steady rise in RPS scores with an increase in age.² This relationship between increasing RPS scores and age is expected – those with lower "Rural Positivity" are more likely to move elsewhere, leaving those with highest RPS scores in the older cohort. It is encouraging to see this sensible relationship supported by the data we collected.

Figure 1: Predicted Rise in Rural Positivity Scale Score with Age



Additional analysis can show us which factors are most strongly correlated with higher RPS score among our respondents (Table 1.2). Women had slightly higher RPS scores than men, and Republicans had higher scores than either Independents or Democrats. More frequent religious attendance, being married, and having volunteered in the past 12 months (factors typically associated with being more connected with local community) were also associated with slightly higher RPS scores.

Gender (n=161)	Male: 3.42		Female: 3.56
Party Identification (n=148)	Republican: 3.58	Independent: 3.49	Democrat: 3.41
Religious Attendance (n=156)	Less than monthly: 3.30	Monthly/ less than weekly: 3.51	At least Weekly: 3.62
Marital Status (n=161)	Married: 3.57		Unmarried: 3.38
Volunteered (n=159)	Yes: 3.54		No: 3.43

² This convenience sample is not a random sample of the six counties or the fairgoers, so the fitted values line and 95% CI only illustrate a possible relationship. We are not suggesting any statistical significance here.

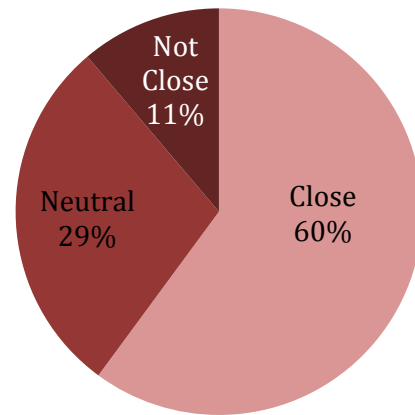
2. Optimism about Rural Communities and Their Future

In addition to having a positive outlook on rural versus urban living, respondents in our survey also answered optimistically about the current state and future direction of their rural communities. We asked respondents who had lived in the community for 5 years or more (n=159) how their community compared to five years ago and the results show that a strong plurality of respondents are optimistic about the direction of their communities (Table 2).

Better Off/ Improving	Pretty Much the Same	Worse Off/ Declining
49%	29%	22%

We also asked respondents to tell us how close they feel to their community. As we can see in Figure 2, about 60% of respondents felt at least “close” to their community and less than 12% felt “not close” to their community. Comparing these two measurements shows that, unsurprisingly, there is a clear relationship between people who believe their community is improving and those who are close to their community, as nearly 72% of respondents who thought their community was improving also felt at least close to it. Yet, even among those who believed their community was declining compared to five years ago, 40% (14) responded that they were close to their community, with another 37.1% (13) with a neutral sense of community closeness.

Figure 2: Community Closeness
How close do you feel to your community? (n=178)



3. Issues of Greatest Concern: Jobs, Day Care & Housing

The survey asked respondents to rate a set of issues that confront Minnesotans in terms of whether or not they were problems that government should work on. From a set of 14 issues, ranging from crime to housing affordability to infrastructure to energy and environmental protection, three issues stood out as major concerns—“creation and retention of good jobs,” “availability of day care options,” and “affordable housing”. On these items, a plurality of respondents rated as the issue as “a major problem” (Table 3).

Interestingly, neither gender nor age is related to the level of concern over daycare options or problems, though women are more likely to consider affordable housing a major concern (46% to 34% for males). Concern about the availability of good jobs is equally widespread among men and women, young and old, and even employment status.

The issues of least concern were the “quality of local law enforcement,” “protecting the rights of racial minorities,” and “protecting the rights of minority and LGBT persons” (Table 3). It is worth noting that those who responded as “Unsure/Don’t Know” are excluded from these analyses, which causes the number of responses for item to vary substantially.

Statement	% Major Problem	% Minor Problem	% Not a Problem
Creation and retention of well-paying jobs (N=155)	45.8	37.4	16.8
Number and quality of child daycare services or options (N=131)	41.2	36.6	22.1
Affordable housing (N=151)	41.1	35.1	23.8
Tax burden (local/state) (N=149)	34.2	38.9	26.9
Availability of housing options (N=147)	29.2	49.7	21.1
Protecting the environment and cutting down on pollution (N=157)	28.0	29.9	42.1
Quality of transportation infrastructure (roads, bridges, highways, etc.) (N=167)	27.0	41.9	31.1
Access to quality and efficient health care services (N=164)	24.4	32.3	43.3
Senior/elderly housing (N=149)	24.2	48.3	27.5
Affordable energy costs (heating/cooling) (N=157)	24.2	42.7	33.1
Protecting the rights of LGBTQ (lesbian, gay, bi-sexual, transgender, queer) persons (N=129)	16.3	27.9	55.8
Protecting the rights of racial minorities (N=147)	15.0	36.0	49.0
Quality of local public safety and law enforcement (N=158)	10.7	26.0	63.3

4. Respondents Reported High Levels of Volunteering

Volunteered in past year	Yes 127 (72.2%)	No 49 (27.8%)
Factors (n=176)	Volunteered	Not Volunteered
Organizations (Mean)	3.15	1.53
Religious Attendance (Mode)	2-3 times per month	Once a month
Average Age (Mean)	48.25	40.36

Survey respondents reported extraordinarily high levels of volunteering. Nearly 73% recorded that they had done at least some volunteering during the past year, a level of voluntarism that far exceeds the reported volunteering rate across the state of Minnesota (38%). We suspect this high rate of reported volunteering reflects

that more engaged people would be both more willing to take our survey and attend local fairs in their region.

Keeping in mind that this volunteering rate is not representative of the whole of Minnesota, a few factors – level of organizational involvement, religious involvement and age – help explain who is likely to volunteer (Table 4). Specifically, volunteers in our survey reported belonging to more than twice the number of organizations as non-volunteers (3.15 vs. 1.53, on average), were more active in religious life (80% of volunteers reported attending services at least once a week), and were older (82% of those over 55 volunteered, compared to 60% of those ages 18 to 35). Volunteers also had slightly higher incomes, but volunteer involvement did not differ by employment status, gender, nor perceptions of one’s “closeness” to community.

5. Volunteering & Willingness to Volunteer for Local Government

Recognizing that many local governments in Greater Minnesota face ongoing budget difficulties, voluntarism stands as one potential avenue to provide government services at lower costs or address particular, finite community issues. Among 170 fair-going respondents, 33% reported having volunteered for a local city, county or other local government that was not education related. The respondents also appear quite willing to assist local city or county government if asked by their local government, with nearly 49%

Willingness (n=178)	Percent
Very unlikely	3.4
Unlikely	8.4
Neutral	29.3
Likely	37.1
Very likely	11.8

saying they were “likely” or “very likely” to volunteer in an area of interest to them if asked (Table 5). Similar to volunteering, organizational memberships, religious attendance and age are positively connected with a willingness to serve local governments, but those who feel “close” or “very close” to their communities also reported a higher willingness as well (above 57% “likely” or “very likely”). Even assuming that these figures are somewhat high, this level of willingness suggests that cities would find sufficient recruits for work that engages people if they asked.

Part II. Methodological Limitations and Lessons from County Fairs

As an attempt to gain a representative sample from regions of rural Minnesota, this project proved to be a challenging and frustrating exercise. In search of at least 500 responses across the county fairs, the six county fairs yielded less than 200 completed surveys, of which 178 were from Greater Minnesota. This convenience sample, as noted below, is skewed and not well representative of rural county fair attendees. The conclusions we have drawn, therefore, are limited and cursory at best. While we do believe that for some purposes county fairs can be a beneficial venue for gaining relevant and useful information from a survey instrument, we would caution other researchers to think carefully about their goals before approaching county fairs as a source for information.

The Promise of County Fairs

In many rural Minnesota counties, the annual fair is one of, if not the biggest, gathering of people each year. Unlike the Minnesota State Fair, most attendees are from local communities, or at least live within the immediate region. These fairs are also relatively compact and crowded events, which should allow for attracting the “typical” fair-goer. For these factors, county fairs seemed a useful location for gathering closely representative data via an in-person survey collection effort. We found, however, there were numerous challenges and limitations to this survey methodology, beyond the usual concerns over a non-random selection system. In short, because collecting data at fairs will likely lead to subjects who are not representative of the typical fair attendee, we would caution other researchers against using county fairs to measure public attitudes.

How Representative?

In some ways, the demographics of our sample mirror the samples of other survey projects used to measure rural Minnesotan attitudes. The 2013 Blandin Foundation Pulse Survey, a telephone survey of over a thousand rural Minnesotans, had a similar racial breakdown, with 92% of respondents being Caucasian/white, just as our study did. Age breakdown and employment status categories were similar as well. Yet, our sample was heavily female (58.8%), skewed strongly toward those who consumed news frequently, and were more politically and civically engaged (even for Minnesotans). Rates of homeownership varied greatly by county. There was also a

County Name	Average Age		Owner-Occupied Housing Rate	
	Census*	Sample	Census*	Sample
Becker County	42.6	42.2	79.2%	52.6%
Hubbard County	47.5	54.6	81.3%	75.9%
Pipestone County	42.2	43.1	73.9%	86.2%
Sibley County	40.9	44.4	79.2%	94.1%
Stevens County	32.9	54.6	67.8%	69.0%
Swift County	44.5	57.8	74.0%	55.1%

* Source: 2014 U.S. Census American Community Survey estimates

strong bias toward wealthy households. Nearly two-thirds of our respondents reported a household income of at least \$60,000/year, despite the fact that the 2014 median household income in Minnesota is \$60,828, which includes the much wealthier Twin Cities

metro area (U.S. Census). Table 6 compares a few of our sample statistics and Census data for age and home ownership from for the counties in which we visited.

While our sample was also strongly Republican leaning, the areas of rural Minnesota that the surveys were administered, also tend to skew toward the GOP and therefore appear closely representative in terms of party identification. In other words, while the respondents to our survey at the county fairs were representative in terms of the racial, political, and age characteristics of the broader communities we sampled from, they were also some of the most engaged, well-off, politically interested, and stable residents of rural Minnesota.

Further Challenges

We faced a number of other challenges in gaining a quality sample from the county fairs. Some of these were due generally to limitations of in-person surveys, while others were specific to the setup of county fairs.

Perhaps the most significant limitation was time; we sent survey teams to each county fair for only one day (except for the Stevens County fair, which we sampled for a day and a half). While we did consult with the fair organizers to ensure we were present during the most heavily attended fair days, this was a prominent limitation for two reasons. The first was that fair organizers, understandably, did not typically provide our survey teams with ideal locations on the fairgrounds. They gave priority to those who were going to be active for the entire length of the fairs (typically 2-3 full days), so our survey teams were not consistently in good locations to recruit subjects. Most fairs also would not permit them to walk around the fair asking people to respond. Finally, being there for one day was a significant limitation as there were only so many respondents our teams could approach given the “flow” of crowds during the day.

In addition to the time commitment, there were difficulties surrounding sampling. The subset of individuals at the county fairs may not be the best representation of the overall county/community population. Some of this bias is probably due to some groups being more likely to attend county fairs, even though there is no cost for simple admission in most rural areas. Perhaps, the unrepresentative nature of our sample is more likely tied to who is most likely to take an in-person survey at a county fair. First, as reported by our student survey teams, women were much more approachable and willing to respond to the initial request to take a survey than men. Second, the survey itself took most respondents about five minutes to complete; though brief, it was difficult for attendees with children or with time constraints to participate. Third, our survey instruments were only available in English, meaning that we would be much more likely to miss respondents who spoke English as a second language, who were uncomfortable with their language skills, or who could not read English proficiently. The Stevens County Fair was our most successful venture and, despite a day and a half of collecting responses, we did not reach our initial goal of 100 surveys completed.

Weather was also out of our control, but quite influential. It rained off and on at Swift County Fair, which dampened fair attendance greatly, thereby affecting the availability of participants for our survey.

Recommendations

Given the broad range of methodological challenges we faced in this project we would heavily caution other researchers against using county fairs as a way to administer survey instruments. If considering this method we would make the following recommendations (in no particular order):

- Attend a fair for its full duration. This will ensure both a better location and a more thorough sampling of fair attendees.
- Have surveyors who are strongly outgoing and willing to actively recruit respondents.
- Use a survey instrument that is short and clear. Many fair attendees are unwilling or unable to sit/stand to respond to a survey of significant length.
- Find creative ways to ensure a balance of respondents by age, gender, and particularly race. Have surveys available in non-English languages that are spoken and/or read by significant numbers of persons in the community/county the fair is located in.
- Use clear and interesting signage for your project. Make sure people know WHY they should stop and talk to you.
- If using incentives, make sure they appeal to a broad range of potential respondents. We used drawstring bags (with UMM logos), pens, and candy, with varying success. There were also minor cash incentives for people who completed the survey later online.

Methodological Conclusions

Surveying rural areas is inherently a challenge due to low population densities and a lack of central locations where people gather regularly. One of the few opportunities for researchers to find concentrated groups of people who live in rural areas is at annual county fairs. Our pilot project attempting to use county fairs to gain a fairly representative sample of rural Minnesotans, however, was filled with logistical and methodological challenges. We were able to find at least a subset of rural Minnesotans who are positive about living in a rural area, are close to their communities, and are civically and politically engaged. While our sample cannot be representative of the larger county populations, there were intriguing results that merit further investigation. In particular, the types of people who are more positive would be important to examine in more depth. Given the difficulty obtaining a representative sample in this pilot project, the Center for Small Towns (CST) will be pursuing other options for surveying rural Minnesotans on their perceptions of rural living, their communities, and policy issues.

Acknowledgements

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Appendix A: County Fair Survey Data & Method

Survey approach

Data for this pilot study came from in person surveys at six county fairs (Becker, Hubbard, Pipestone, Sibley, Stevens and Swift³) during July and August of 2016. The fairs were selected primarily because they represented different areas of greater Minnesota – West Central, Northwest, Central, and Southwest – and because attendance at each fair was at least 10,000 people in 2015. From their assigned booths at each fair, student workers from CST recruited subjects and offered respondents a drawstring bag as incentive to take the survey. For approximately 20 subjects who expressed interest in the survey but could not take the survey at the fair, we offered an online version for them to complete.

The level of response was notably affected by the visibility of our assigned fair space, the space available near the booth to complete the surveys, and the weather conditions (which dramatically limited fair attendance in one county). Thus, the number of completed surveys varied across the fairs, with the most coming from nearby – Stevens (78), Hubbard (32), and Pipestone (32) – and fewer from further – Becker (22), Sibley (21), and Swift (9) – County fairs. A total of 194 completed surveys were collected from the six fairs and the online option. About 16 cases did not fit our criteria (being from non-urban Minnesota) and were excluded in most analyses⁴. Missing data on specific questions items further reduces the sample for some of the statistics reported (see tables in the report for “n”).

Limits of the data

As a convenience sample, a population frame of county fair attendees are obviously not necessarily representative of the respective counties or cities hosting the fairs. Importantly, the Stevens county fair had the largest attendance and potential subjects were more likely to know of UM, Morris and the Center for Small Towns. In addition, fair-goers are likely to be longer term residents, especially among those who visit the building housing the displays and exhibits (where our survey workers were assigned to collect responses).

Pilot Study

As a pilot project with the goal of ascertaining the feasibility of a new survey instrument and the appropriateness of county fairs to generate a robust sample, the sacrifice of generalizability is expected and necessary. However, one should keep in mind that these “pools” of respondents are probably more optimistic about rural fairs and that they are taking the survey in an atmosphere of “celebration” of the respective counties. The high rate of reported volunteering and willingness to volunteer, in particular, we believe to be the most strongly skewed by the fair-going survey takers.

Question Wording

Survey questions will be provided upon request.

³ A preliminary survey was also conducted in Polk County using a different, non-comparable survey instrument, and so that data is not included here.

⁴ Seven respondents were from North Dakota, South Dakota, or elsewhere; nine respondents were from urban areas: Twin Cities, St. Cloud, or Moorhead.

Appendix B: Basic Demographics of the Full Sample

Demographics of Rural MN Sample						
Gender (n=177)	Male 41.2%			Female 58.8%		
Average Age (n=147)	46.2					
Race (n=171)	Caucasian 91.2%	Hispanic 1.2%	African Amer. 1.2%	Native Amer. 2.9%	Other/Mixed 2.9%	
Party Affiliation (N=164)	Republican 23.2%	Ind., Lean Republican 13.4%	Independent 34.1%	Ind., Lean Democrat 10.4%	Democrat 18.9%	
Marital Status (n=177)	Married 64.4%			Unmarried 35.6%		
Children under 18 at home (n=177)	Yes 33.9%			No 66.1%		
Employment Status (n=175)	Full-Time 48%	Part-Time 18.3%	Work in House 4.6%	Unemployed/Disabled 7.4%	Retired 17.7%	
Living Situation (n=174)	Own Home 73%	Rent Home 11.5%	Rent Apartment 8.6%	Senior Living Housing 1.1%		
Annual Household Income Level (n=159)	\$0-29,999 25.8%	\$30-59,999 7.5%	\$60-89,999 37.7%	\$90,000+ 28.9%		
Religious Affiliation (n=174)	Protestant 28.7%	Evangelical 21.8%	Catholic 16.7%	Jewish 5.7%	Other faith/tradition 19.5%	No Affiliation 12.6%
News Consumption (Days/Week) (n=177)	Average 4.87/week	0-2 Days 22.6%	3-5 Days 27.7%	6-7 Days 49.7%		

University of Minnesota, Morris Center for Small Towns

The mission of the Center for Small Towns is to focus the University's attention and marshal its resources toward assisting Minnesota's small towns with locally identified issues by creating applied learning opportunities for faculty and students.

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Center for Small Towns

University of Minnesota, Morris

600 East Fourth Street

Morris, MN 56267

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