

# E C O N O M I C C O M P E T I T I V E N E S S

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Photo Credit: Davin Brandt

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## WHAT WE'VE HEARD

"Our priorities are about our people and their quality of life, without losing sight that we are part of a much bigger picture that requires understanding, compassion and commitment to our shared local/global home."

Located just 20 minutes from Minneapolis or St. Paul, White Bear Lake is distinguished for its historic downtown commercial core, quality of life, variety of housing options and convenient access to major highway and interstate corridors that attracts an abundant workforce and a diverse set of employers. The city features a highly supported school district, private schools, a vibrant Arts District, and one of the largest 2-year community and technical colleges in Minnesota - Century College. White Bear Lake benefits from a strong tradition of civic engagement and volunteerism among community members which support its many local events, celebrations, and non-profit organizations. The City's economy is driven by a diverse composition of businesses and employment sectors including educational services, health care, social services, manufacturing, professional, management, and administrative services, and retail.

Looking forward, White Bear Lake will need to focus on retaining the variety of employment opportunities the community offers, continuing to build relationships with businesses and local community groups, connecting educational institutions with business needs, intensifying underused sites, and fostering a sustainable environment to maintain and improve White Bear Lake's position as an economic engine and destination for travelers and tourists in the northeast metro.

## GUIDING PRINCIPLES

### ECONOMIC INVESTMENT

Support the development of a strong, vibrant, livable community that attracts jobs, population and investment. Businesses and business districts are vital to a healthy economic environment, provide jobs, contribute to the tax base, provide goods and services, contribute to community events, and add activity and vibrancy on a daily basis.

### EMPLOYMENT AND WORKFORCE DEVELOPMENT

Promote employment opportunities within the City for persons in all educational levels and career phases. The City will be an innovative leader in facilitating collaboration between education and private sector to ensure positive economic outcomes for people at all socioeconomic levels.

### RECREATION, ENTERTAINMENT, ARTS AND CULTURE

Preserve and enhance recreation, entertainment, and arts opportunities. White Bear Lake, with its authentic and distinct downtown area, accessible lakes and lakefronts, local arts and theater, is well-positioned to remain relevant as changes in the retail landscape alters the built environment and individuals seek unique and experiential destinations.

### DOWNTOWN

Continue to support Downtown as the economic and social core of community and reinforce its role as the City's historic mixed-use and pedestrian-focused environment.

# WHITE BEAR LAKE WORKFORCE

According to the American Community Survey, 39% of White Bear Lake residents were employed in management, business, science, and arts occupations. Sales and office occupations (25%) and service occupations (16%) make up the next largest occupation groups.

In 2016, the City of White Bear Lake reached an average annual unemployment rate of 2.6%. A large proportion of residents are mid-career professionals with earnings that reflect a stable, livable community. According to the American Community Survey, the median earnings for male full-time year-round workers in White Bear Lake was \$52,419 in 2016 while for women, the median earnings was \$43,508. Over 25% of the City’s workforce is over age 55, which is slightly higher than the percentage for the Twin Cities region (22%). This suggests the possibility that area employers will be losing institutional knowledge and will have more jobs to fill in a tight labor market (Source: US Census On the Map). The City supports strong relationships between local schools and community businesses as a way to fill the employment gaps that will occur as the Baby Boomer generation ages.

Figure 4.2 Where White Bear Lake Residents Work and Figure 4.3 Where White Bear Lake Employees Live show the community’s commuting pattern. The highest concentrations of employers of White Bear Lake residents (shown in dark blue) are in Minneapolis, St. Paul, Downtown White Bear Lake, the commercial nodes along County Road E, and the 3M campus in Maplewood. People working within the City of White Bear Lake are from areas distributed fairly broadly across the northeast metro with the concentration focused in the White Bear Lake area and stretching into North St. Paul on the south, Hugo on the north, Vadnais Heights on the west, and Mahtomedi on the east.

**Figure 4.1 Occupations**

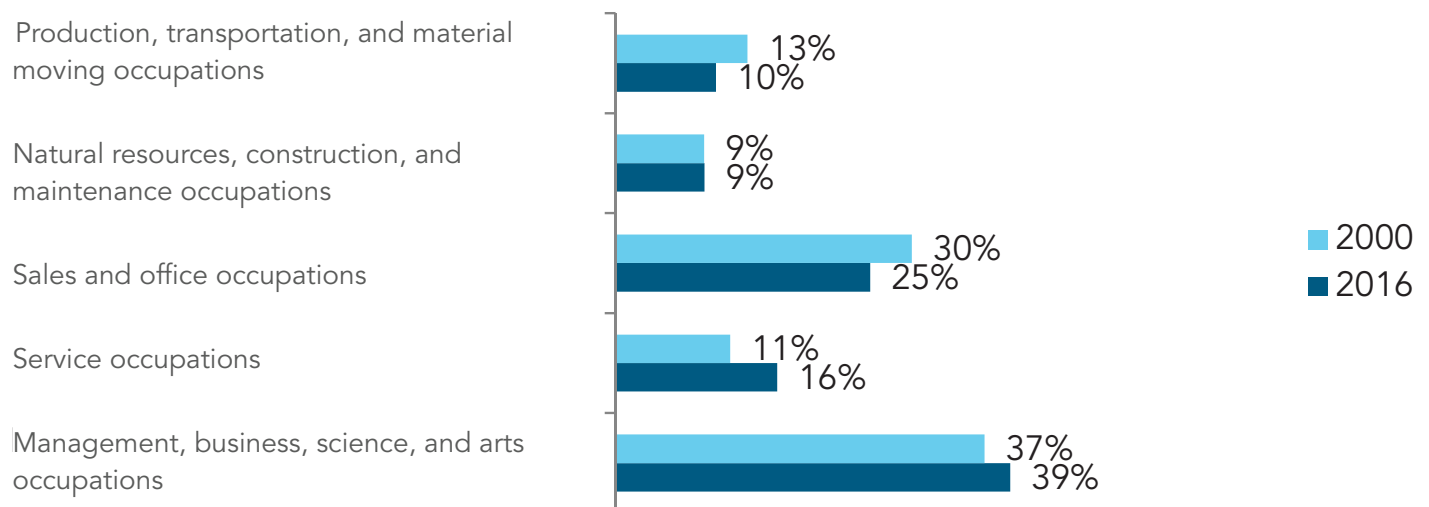


Figure 4.2 Where White Bear Lake Residents Work

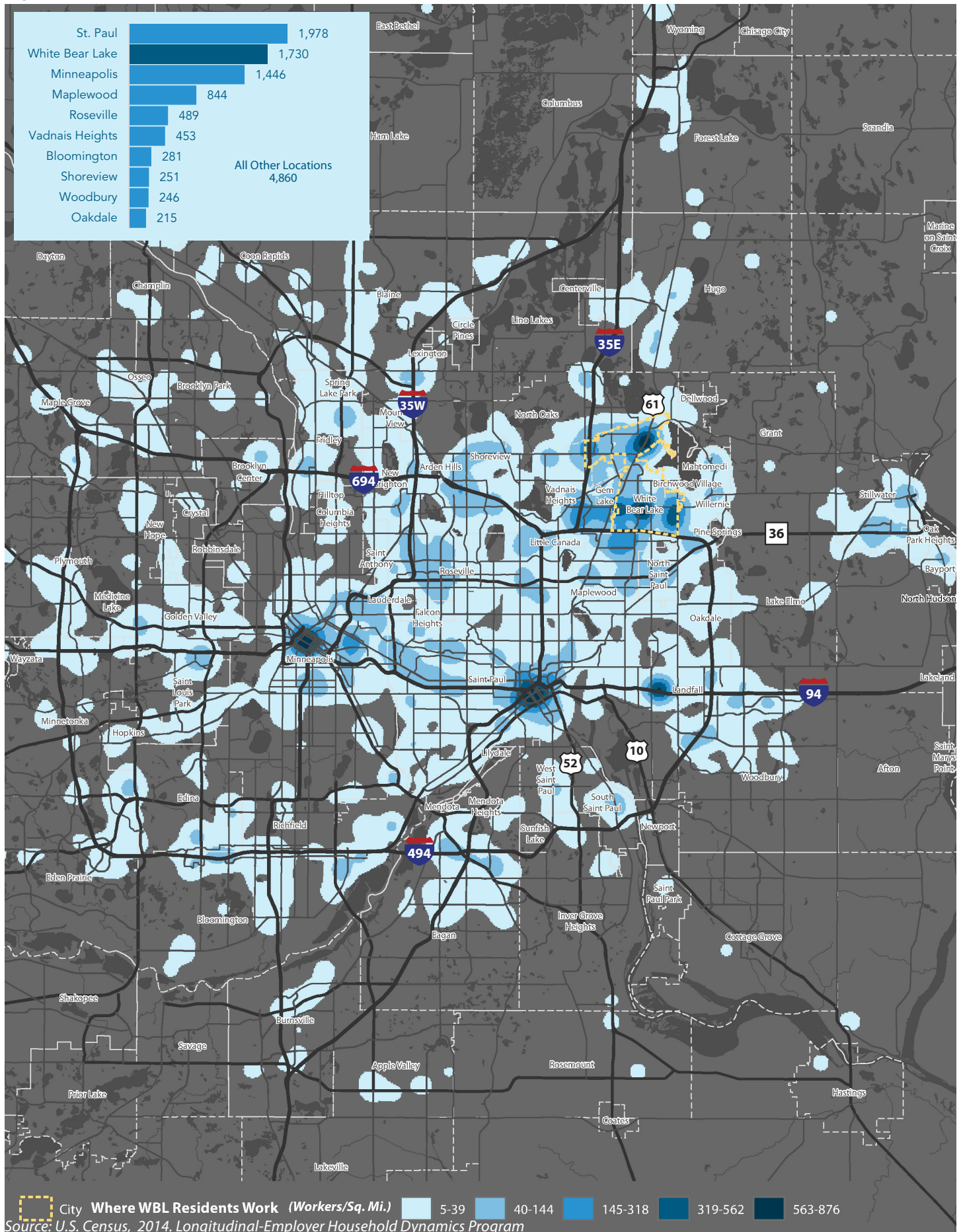
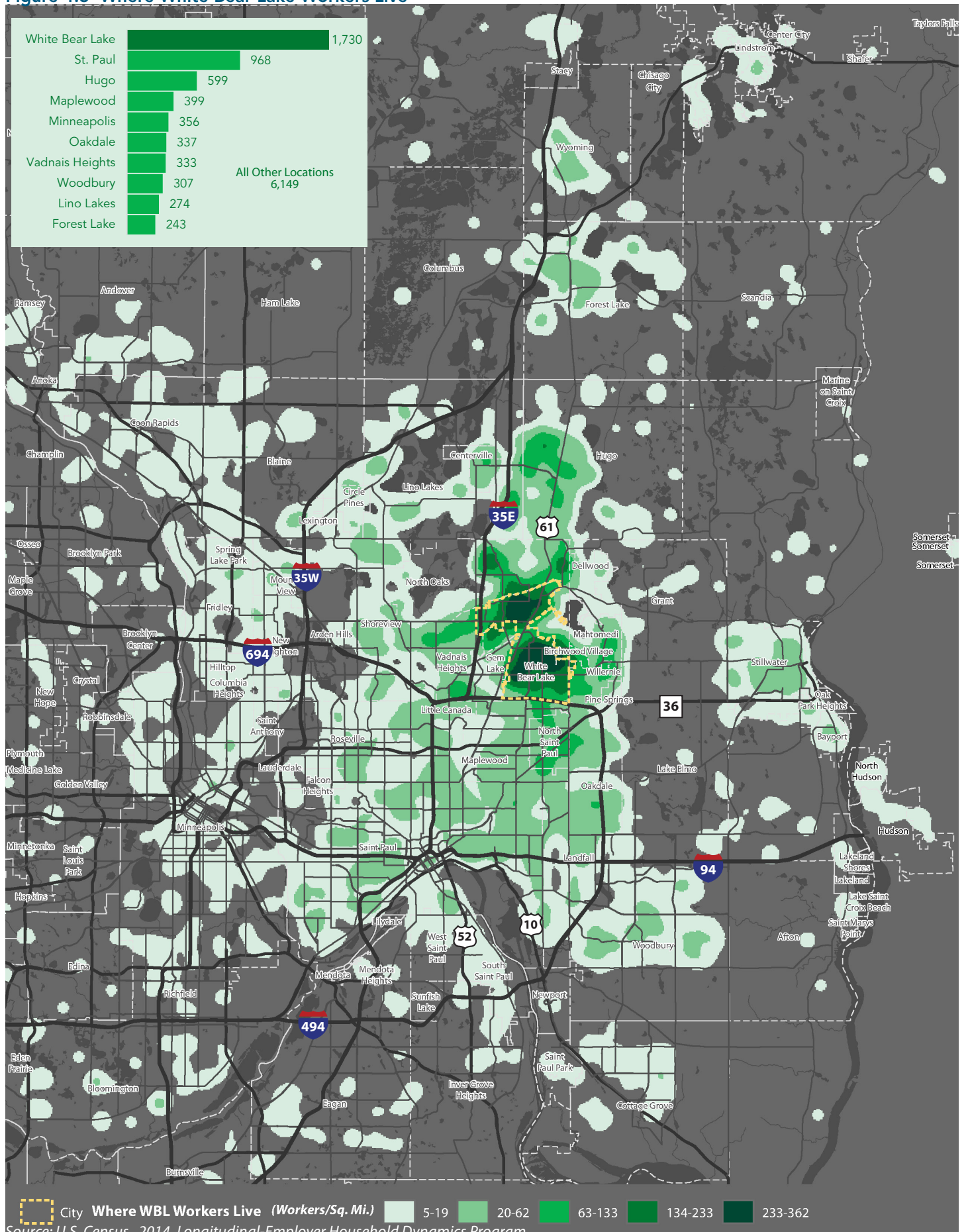


Figure 4.3 Where White Bear Lake Workers Live



Source: U.S. Census, 2014. Longitudinal-Employer Household Dynamics Program

# KEY ECONOMIC AREAS

## DOWNTOWN

Downtown was an area of focus for community members during the community engagement phase of this plan. Community members suggested several strategies to strengthen downtown including:

- » Providing better access to the downtown areas from surrounding residential neighborhoods
- » Modernizing the existing infrastructure, including updating sidewalks, lampposts, and signage
- » Providing better signage and removing old, obtrusive signs
- » Updating building exteriors



Fourth Street at Washington Square  
Credit: Dan Jones



Marketfest



Credit: Mike Brooks

## DOWNTOWN

White Bear Lake's downtown area developed in the late 1800s as a transportation hub along an active railroad. At that time White Bear Lake was a destination that attracted many visitors to the resorts along the lake. Today, downtown White Bear Lake continues to serve as destination for visitors. Many locally owned and unique businesses attract nearby residents and visitors to the area. The downtown remains historic in character while continuing to attract new users and strong investment. The downtown district hosts many community events including Manitou Days, a weekly Farmers Market, and Marketfest, a summer weeknight event that draws people and outside vendors downtown to support the local economy and enjoy the family friendly activities.

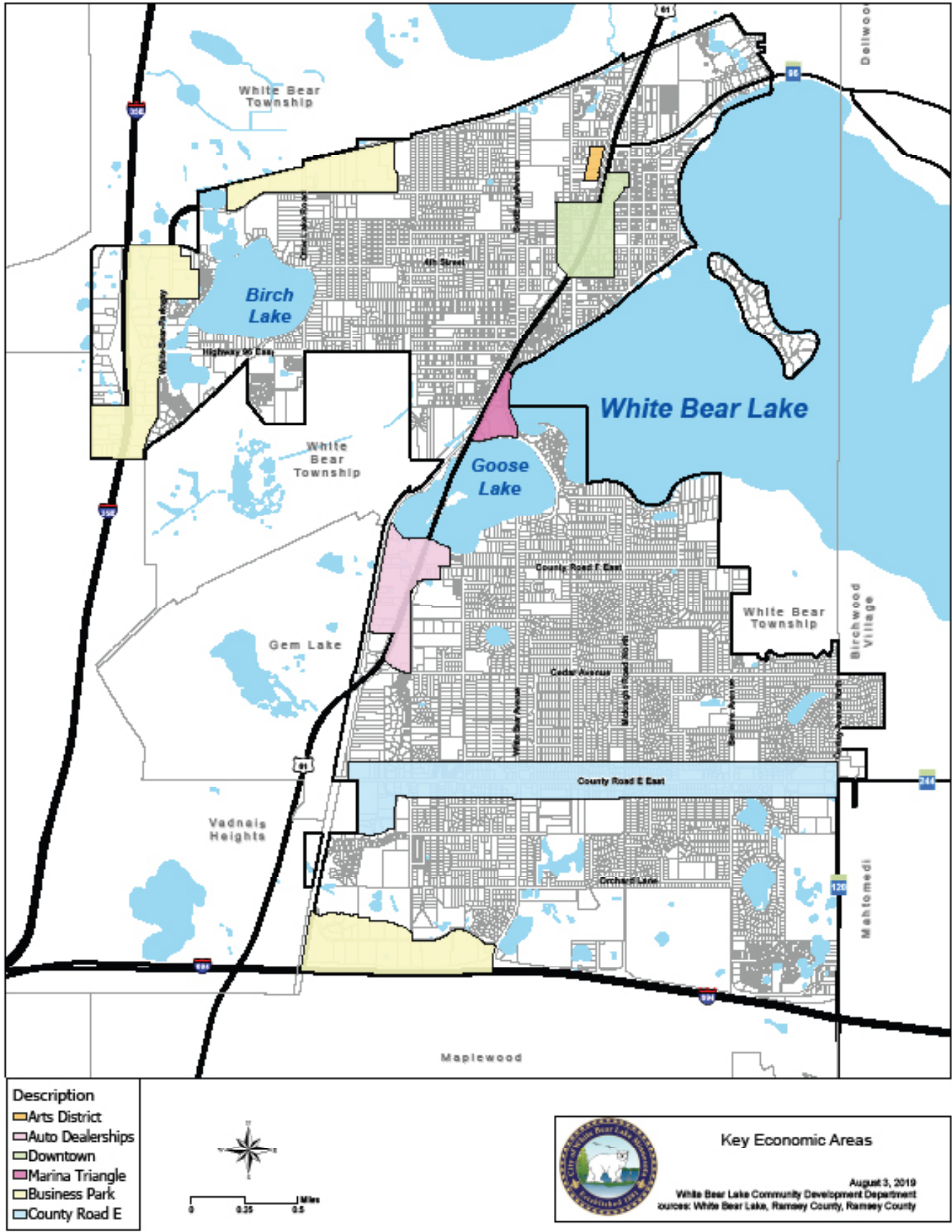
In 2014, McComb completed a Retail Market Demand Study for the downtown district. This study found that White Bear Lake's downtown district competes with Grand Avenue in St. Paul and Downtown Stillwater for some of the same customers, but that White Bear Lake had a unique edge over these areas due to its highly walkable, full-service downtown. The downtown district should maintain its mix of retail that attracts a variety of customers and shopping patterns. Over the next few years, infrastructure improvements planned for the district include reconstruction of parking lots and streets south of Fourth Street, which will include the streetscape improvements and upgrades (sidewalks, street lighting, and furnishings) that will create a consistent quality and character of the public space throughout Downtown.

## MARINA TRIANGLE

The Marina Triangle District is a 17-acre district located on the western shore of White Bear Lake. The Master Plan for this area envisions a compact and walkable community that is active throughout the year and offers a variety of public and private spaces, including an enhanced public realm along the lakefront and a village green, along with retailers, restaurants, and residential uses that attract residents and visitors to the lakefront district in all seasons. The most recent redevelopment on the north portion of the Marina Triangle was the



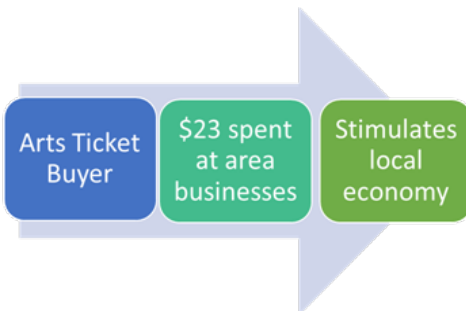
Figure 4.4 Key Economic Areas Map



## ARTS IN THE CITY

Members of the community are supportive of the arts in White Bear Lake and are interested in its expansion through various means including:

- » Sculpture walk
- » Arts commission
- » Art crawl
- » Artist residences
- » Artist studio/retail
- » Studio cooperative
- » Artist designed electrical box covers



Source: America for the Arts & Minnesota Cultural Survey

## HANIFL PERFORMING ARTS CENTER

In April 2018, the Hanifl Performing Arts Center opened in White Bear Lake. This state-of-the-art facility houses the Lakeshore Players Theatre, which has operated as a community theater in White Bear Lake since 1953, and the Children's Performing Arts group. The Center is 22,000 square feet and seats 250 people. The \$9.2 million dollar project was mainly funded by individuals and community members and serves as the centerpiece of the City's arts district.



Boatworks Commons redevelopment which features a market-rate multi-family apartment building, new public parking, a new multi-tenant retail building with a lakefront restaurant user, public art, restrooms, and a public boardwalk along the City's Marina area.

The Triangle's remaining ten underutilized acres, including the White Bear Lake Shopping Center site, are staged for future redevelopment. In the Marina Triangle area, the City is focused on enhancing linkages from the district to downtown and the surrounding neighborhoods, promoting pedestrian and bicycle activity around the lake, and fostering the retail and public areas throughout the district.

## ARTS DISTRICT

The arts are an integral force in White Bear Lake. The City has a flourishing and sophisticated arts culture including visual arts, performing arts, arts education, and many local artists living in the community. The Hanifl Performing Arts Center, which is home to the Lakeshore Players Theater and the Children's Performing Arts Center, and The White Bear Center for the Arts create a destination arts district the community will continue to embrace. The Lakeshore Players Theatre serves as the premier performing arts center for the northeast Twin Cities metro area and is one of the oldest continuously operating theaters in Minnesota. The White Bear Center for the Arts offers year-round exhibits, art classes, events, and community space.

A thriving arts culture can positively impact the economic health of a city. In recognition of this, White Bear Lake plans to leverage state and local funds to strengthen its arts district and establish more recognition for the district through signage, road improvements, district beautification, and encouraging art-related community events.

## COUNTY ROAD E

The County Road E corridor is a key transportation route between Vadnais Heights, White Bear Lake, and Mahtomedi, funneling traffic from I-35E, I-694, and Highway 61. The neighborhood retail centers located throughout this corridor benefit from the high traffic counts in the area and are supported by the residential neighborhoods and large employers located nearby. The two largest commercial nodes at the intersections of White Bear Avenue/ County Road E and Century Avenue/County Road E are supported primarily by the surrounding single-family residences and provide a large number of jobs in the area.

Century College's student and employee population is the other key area economic driver supporting the retail and food service businesses along this corridor. Meeting the demands of Century College's planned enrollment growth will require additional public transportation options for students and staff to get to campus. The College and City should reach out to Metro Transit representatives to discuss potential transit improvements if additional funding for transit operations becomes available. It will be essential to continue this dialogue once the Rush Line is operational and opportunities for lateral connections to



the transit corridor are available. Network Next is the appropriate document to reflect locally identified need for potential new routes or route improvements that serve White Bear Lake. The continued growth of Century College will provide future jobs, support area businesses and strengthen the skills of the area’s labor force. The City will continue to encourage investment into existing properties along this corridor and support the intensification of sites through redevelopment to create future residential, commercial, or institutional spaces to support the existing retail and service-oriented businesses along the corridor.

## AUTOMOBILE DEALERSHIPS ALONG HIGHWAY 61

The automotive dealer stretch along Highway 61 begins in Maplewood and runs through Vadnais Heights, Gem Lake and White Bear Lake. The automotive dealers draw traffic and awareness into the community as a destination for car shopping. The destination traffic into the White Bear Lake area supports local retail centers such as Downtown and County Road E. The automotive dealers provide jobs and synergy with other automotive related businesses that have located in the community because of the proximity to many potential or current dealership clients. As the automotive industry changes over the next several decades, the City should make an effort to remain connected with the industry to understand how these changes may affect the long-term viability of automobile sales sites and the economic health of the City as a whole.

## BUSINESS PARKS: WHITE BEAR PARKWAY, 9TH STREET & BUERKLE ROAD

White Bear Lake’s large commercial and industrial business parks house some of the City’s largest employers including Taymark, Smart Carte, Trane, and Cummins. These diversified business development areas have experienced low vacancies and strong business presence over the years because of their proximity to I-35E, I-694, Highway 96 and Highway 61. The City will continue to work closely with these businesses to understand their location and expansion needs, monitor gaps in housing and transportation for the local workforce, and facilitate partnerships between local schools and the business community to create awareness of commercial industries in the City and reduce labor shortages.

# ISSUES & OPPORTUNITIES

## REDEVELOPMENT

White Bear Lake is a primarily built-out community, with few undeveloped sites left in the City. Therefore, development opportunities will primarily be focused on redevelopment. While retail vacancies are rare throughout the community, four empty buildings and the City’s vacant parcel (all former gas stations) located at the



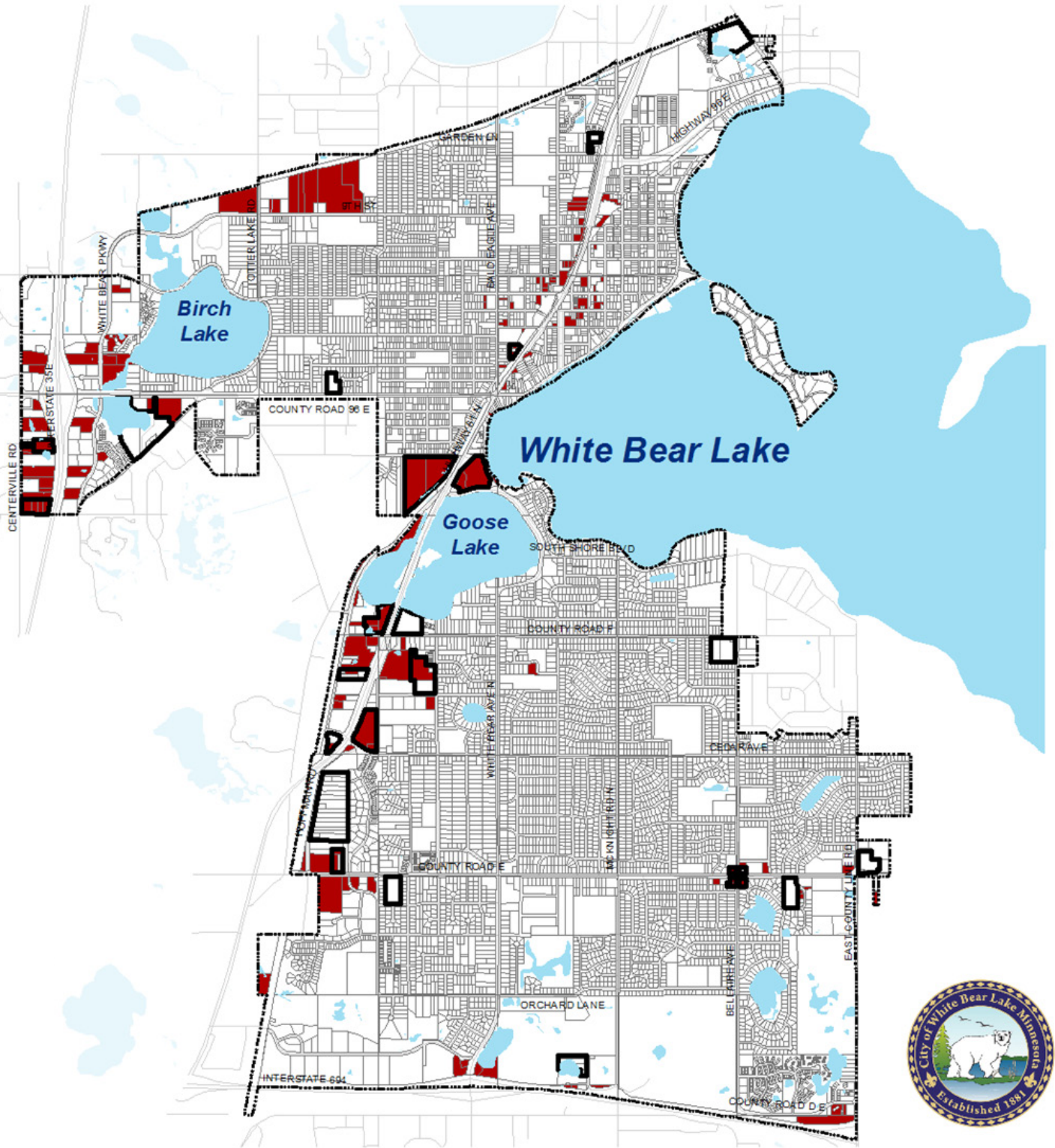
*Automotive Dealerships along Highway 61*

## BUSINESS AND THE CITY

Feedback from the community highlighted the importance of strong relationships between businesses and the City, including the role of the City to:

- » Innovate and attract local businesses
- » Encourage small businesses, especially tech startups
- » Continue to support businesses and encourage beautification of those businesses
- » Create tax breaks and programs to bring new businesses and jobs to WBL
- » Incorporate businesses better into community functions

Figure 4.5 Opportunity Parcels in White Bear Lake



-  Staff Identified Redevelopment Opportunities
-  Building values less than half of land value
-  Parcels

intersection of County Road E and Bellaire Avenue are available for re-use and/or redevelopment. Aging commercial and residential structures throughout the City indicate a need for the City and property owners to focus on maintenance and rehabilitation of existing structures. The City should consider offering additional financial programs aimed at helping property owners maintain their buildings. Figure 4.5 shows the opportunity areas for redevelopment that have been determined by the City including:

- » Wildwood Shopping Center
- » Marina Triangle
- » Birch Lake Shopping Center
- » TOD – Rush Line Corridor
- » 4th & Bloom
- » County Road E Corridor
- » Lowell Triangle
- » US Bank Site (Downtown)
- » USPS Site

## BUS RAPID TRANSIT (BRT)

While a majority of the infrastructure maintained by the City of White Bear Lake is conducive for leisure walking, most of the area is car-dependent for day-to-day errands. Currently, there are limited public transportation options to, from, and around White Bear Lake.

The future Rush Line (Purple Line) corridor will allow residents, employers, and visitors to the area an alternative transportation option to reach key locations around the City. The planned bus rapid transit stations for the Rush Line (Downtown, Marina Triangle, Cedar Avenue, and Buerkle Road) provide opportunities for transit-oriented redevelopment.

## TRAILS: BRUCE VENTO AND LAKE LINKS

Two area trails, the Bruce Vento Regional Trail and the Lake Links Trail are planned for expansion during the next two decades.

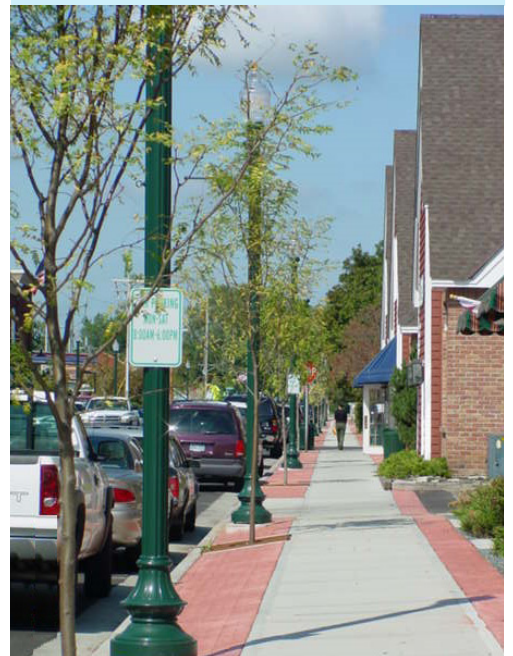
The City is currently working in collaboration with Ramsey County on the alignment for the extension of the Bruce Vento Trail north of Highway 96. While there is strong community support to extend the trail along the Highway 61 corridor through Downtown, such an alignment is problematic given the proximity of the railway and potential impacts on private properties, including the loss of customer parking spaces. The final design of the trail extension is anticipated to be completed by the end of 2019.

The Lake Links Regional Trail is planned to travel around the entirety of White Bear Lake. The segment of the Lake Links Regional Trail located within the City of White Bear Lake is also called the Mark Sather Trail. The regional trail segment is currently continuous from Highway 96 to Ramsey County Beach in the north. The local segment south of Highway 96 has been constructed through the Marina Triangle

## BUSINESS VARIETY

Feedback from the community demonstrated that people in White Bear Lake would like to continue to see the development of a variety of businesses including:

- » Non-chain shops
- » Grocery store
- » Upscale restaurants (on the water)
- » Shared workspace
- » Specialty shops
- » Outdoor/biking store
- » Venue for large events
- » Craft store
- » Sports bar



District and presently terminates at South Shore Boulevard (at Hazel Street). Efforts to extend the remainder of the local segment of the Lake Links Trail in the City along South Shore Boulevard into White Bear Township and Birchwood Village have strong community support and intergovernmental collaboration.

These trails will bring new opportunities and visitors through White Bear Lake and the downtown district in particular which will help support local businesses. For more information about the plans for these trail expansions, see Chapter 06, Parks and Recreation.

## CURRENT ORGANIZATIONS

### **White Bear Lake Economic Development Corporation (EDC)**

The EDC was originally commissioned as a separate non-profit entity in the 1980s to guide the economic development of White Bear Lake. After a period of inactivity, the EDC was re-commissioned in 2011. Since 2011, the EDC has served to champion the economic development of the City and coordinate private industry and commerce, local government, and community needs in order to develop a vibrant economy that enhances community well-being, stability, and services.

### **Downtown White Bear Lake Main Street Inc.**

This organization is committed to improving the quality and diversity of businesses in downtown White Bear Lake by encouraging economic, cultural and recreational development through promotional efforts. Downtown White Bear Lake Main Street Inc. is focused on building a strong business image through a combined effort from businesses, services, and community residents now and in the future.

### **White Bear Area Chamber of Commerce**

The White Bear Area Chamber of Commerce was created in 1923 and supports the economic development of the City of White Bear Lake as well as that of the surrounding communities. As of 2017, the Chamber is one of the largest business organizations in the Northeast suburbs, serving 12 different communities and representing almost 400 diverse members.

## FINANCING TOOLS

### **Revolving Loan and Grant Program (RLGP)**

The RLGP is aimed at improving the utility and appearance of businesses in the downtown district and along the County Road E corridor while encouraging the leveraging of private investment which would not otherwise occur. The program provides loans of up to \$40,000 for a term of up to 10 years at two percent interest. Revolving loan program participation requires a 100 percent match by an authorized participating White Bear Lake-located financial institution. The program also offers grants to those businesses financing at least \$20,000 and completing exterior improvements. The RLGP has provided 42 loans since 1989, spurring approximately \$1.6 million in

local investment.

### **Fire Suppression Financing Program**

The City of White Bear Lake's Fire Suppression Financing Program allows property owners to finance the cost of adding a private fire suppression system to a property by assessing the cost over 10 years at a 5% interest rate.

### **Center for Energy and Environment (CEE)**

The CEE offers financing to businesses for energy-related improvements. The CEE's Commercial Energy Efficiency Loan Program provides loans of up to \$100,000 at a 3.9% fixed interest rate to businesses making cost-effective energy efficient improvements including lighting technology upgrades, solar, and HVAC controls and upgrades.

### **Community Development Banks (CDB) and Community Development Financial Institutions (CDFI)**

Businesses in White Bear Lake are served by a number of development financial institutions which provide business loan programs specifically designed for small business owners that provide benefits which exceed traditional business loans. These organizations often provide additional technical assistance or are able to provide referrals to other services that support small business owners. Central Minnesota Development Company, SPEDCO, and TCM Certified Development Company are a few examples of organizations serving the area.

### **MN Department of Employment and Economic Development (DEED)**

DEED offers a wide variety of services for businesses and business owners including business guidance and financing programs such as the Minnesota Investment Fund, the Emerging Entrepreneur Loan Program, and tax credits.

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