

The Alex Area Stewards have defined thirteen key Destiny Drivers that will work to strengthen economic vitality for the region. Over the coming weeks you will read about each Destiny Driver and its importance to the region. If you find a Driver that ignites your passion for the future, call the Alex Area Stewards at (320) 763-4545 or visit the website at www.alexareastewards.com and become part of shaping the destiny of our region.

‘tal ent /n – the natural endowments of a person; a special often creative or artistic ability.

Thriving as a regional community in the new economy is becoming less about good luck, past performance, and the availability of abundant natural resources. Success in these times will be defined by individual and community readiness for a new way of competing based on speed, quality, flexibility, knowledge, and information networks. What has become crystal clear is that all community institutions – education, government, and industry – will need to adapt to the new rules for success.

Critical to the future economic and social success of our west-central regional communities will be the ‘talent level’ of our citizens. For some time it has been known that a high school diploma is no longer an adequate entry-level credential for the world of work in the emerging knowledge economy. So . . . the question becomes *“How do we ensure that those who make up the workforce of the future for our regional community are ready for the dynamic economic times ahead?”*

A critical Destiny Driver of the Alex Area Stewards initiative is to “develop regional partnerships for students of all ages between educational providers and businesses to create distinct career pathways by 2014.” This driver is focused on developing that level of individual talent needed by the businesses and industries of this region of the state to maintain and grow the competitive differential that has set the Alexandria area apart as one of the leading rural, regional center cities in the upper Midwest.

We have been highly successful in our past and present efforts to match the skills of the workforce with the needs of our primary industry organizations. Recently, ISD 206 has implemented the *Project Lead the Way* initiative which focuses on providing challenging, integrated coursework for students interested in math, science, and engineering careers. Alexandria Technical College continues to provide next generation manufacturing skill access through the internationally recognized Center for Mechatronics and our Welding and Machining programs, specialized health care skills through the LPN and Associate Degree in Nursing programs, and unprecedented access to liberal arts transfer coursework through online and traditional learning systems.

As we build the work plan for this “talent” driver, we will focus our efforts on these and other initiatives:

- Bringing together regional industry with K-14 educational partners to create career pathways for young learners as they prepare for the world of work. Young people (and their parents) need to be aware of the amazing array of “high skill – high wage”

careers available to them at an early age so that they can prepare themselves academically for the future workforce. Learning pathways for these emerging career areas will be developed and made available all regional learners.

- Designing, in partnership with regional industries, state-of-the-art Customized Training coursework, in an effort to have the most highly trained workforce in the upper Midwest.
- Reinvesting in designing and delivering lifelong learning opportunities for older adults . . . some of whom may be interested in returning to the work place, and for those who want to learn for the sake of learning. With this investment in the “third age” (young people, middle-age, and older adults [the third age]), we are re-thinking this cohort’s role in the nation’s future and the promise it brings for future economic health.

No doubt there are many communities and regions in the upper Midwest that would give anything to be positioned where the Alexandria area is positioned. Skilled workers, a strong entrepreneurial spirit among our employers, a central location, a strong work ethic, and a nationally recognized learning alliance between our local and regional industries and our Technical College continue to set us apart. In addition, studies from the Minnesota Department of Employment and Economic Development (DEED) have shown that regional trade center cities in Minnesota have captured the largest share of population growth and investment over the last four decades. Data from DEED suggests that the Alexandria area has many things in its favor (beyond the natural resources and highly valued reputation of the area):

- Douglas County is expected to outpace the state in population growth from 2000 to 2030 (40.7% vs. 27.4%).
- Unlike other areas of the state, especially those in rural Minnesota, Douglas County is seeing big gains in the “prime working years” (age 25 – 54) population.
- Alexandria had the fastest population, firm, and job growth of all Minnesota Micropolitan Statistical Areas from 2000 to 2004.

Talent . . . driving the economic and social vitality of a community and a region . . . or, as Jim Collins suggests . . . putting into motion those essentials needed to go “from good to great.” Investing in talent development and providing next generation learning opportunities and pathways will continue to attract the most gifted, talented, and prepared workers for our communities and enhance the fascinating differentiation of the Alexandria region from other areas of this great state as we prepare for the dynamic times ahead!