

Virginia was for bonding, learning

73 went on leadership trip

By Dan Linehan

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MANKATO — When Barb Embacher planned the Mankato-area delegation's November trip to Charlottesville, Va., she asked each of the 73 participants to use different seats on their departure and return planes.

In addition to creating a busy itinerary so that delegates would learn from Charlottesville, she wanted to encourage them to learn from each other. Having them meet new people was one way to encourage that, said Embacher, vice president of community development for Greater Mankato Growth, a chamber of commerce and economic development group.

Delegates, too, saw the benefits of just being around each other from a Sunday morning through a Tuesday evening.

"Part of it (the benefit of the trip) was just the 73 of us together and the focus on these issues," said Tony Filipovitch, a past chair of community planning group Envision 2020.

Mankato Councilman Mark Frost said the most important part of the early November trip for him had little to do with Charlottesville itself.

" The biggest thing was

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just the enthusiasm of this community," Frost said. "I don't think Charlottesville did anything a whole lot better than we did."

The city's downtown may be an exception to that, as Embacher said the delegates universally praised the nineblock walking mall, bounded by an ice rink and outdoor concert pavilion at either end.

It didn't happen by relying on market forces alone.

“It took a lot of different people to dream up a plan and follow through,” Embacher said, and that included lots of government regulations and incentives.

The city also has something of an “anti-growth mentality,” she said, partly because the city cannot grow in size like Mankato or North Mankato can. In Charlottesville, all development must go outside the city limits, in the countycontrolled area.

The strategy to focus on tourism (the city is the home of presidents Thomas Jefferson, James Madison and James Monroe) has helped create a vibrant downtown, though there’s a trade- off, Embacher said.

The service sector has a bigger piece of the labor market, and its jobs are typically not high-paying ones.

Filipovitch, as a professor at Minnesota State University, took notice of the differences in the way the University of Virginia does business.

At UVA, tenure is granted largely based on whether their research attracts government and private sector grants and contracts — on whether you make money for the university.

But would that attitude transfer to Minnesota State University, largely a teaching institution?

“Oh yes, it would,” Filipovitch said. “ We could be doing more of that.”

Taxpayers may wonder what they received for their low investment in the 16 public officials who went on the trip at \$1,695 apiece.

That would be a maximum of \$27,120, if each billed the trip to their employer.

Frost said the fact that four members of the Mankato City Council made the trip might have been a bit much. It would depend on whether the members took something unique away from the visit.

And all the public-private sector mixing, so important for building relationships and community, also avails itself of capitalist motives.

For example, there were four representatives from architectural or design firms that seek business from local cities. In contrast, there were two retailers.

“ They were not afraid to say they want a piece of the candy,” Frost said.

Embacher said the delegation had very little free time.

The itinerary for Monday, the trip’s only full day, backs up that claim. The delegation was scheduled for activities from 8 a.m. to 8:30 p.m. They were invited to experience the downtown at night, but only about half of the delegates chose to do so, Embacher said, because many were worn out.

The plan to solidify and implement the lessons learned in Charlottesville will be led by Greater Mankato Growth. Embacher said the trips should be two to four years apart to allow that to happen.