

# Learning from Charlottesville

## Expanding our partnerships could offer positive results

One of the pleasures of traveling abroad is the sense that things are similar enough that one understands what is going on, and just different enough that one is wrong. It heightens one's awareness that there are other ways of doing things. While not another country, Charlottesville, Va., was similar to Mankato but just different enough to get me thinking about the way we do "it" here.

Like Mankato, Charlottesville enjoys a number of public/private ventures. But there are also instructive differences. In Charlottesville, the public sector assembles the stakeholders and sometimes sets the vision, but much of the funding comes from the private sector.

Their version of Riverfront Park, the n-Telos Pavilion, is on land rented from the city but is owned by Coran Capshaw, the business manager for the Dave Matthews Band.

They have a regional economic development collaboration, like our Region Nine Development Commission, but it is a private body something like Greater Mankato Growth. They have a bus system that runs for 75 cents a trip (35 cents for seniors) — due to substantial underwriting from the University of Virginia and businesses.

Perhaps this is a carryover from Virginia's plantation history and the tradition of "rank has responsibilities."

Thomas Jefferson funded much of the construction of the University of Virginia from his private wealth (and that of his friends).

Minnesota's tradition is one of yeoman farmers and communal barn raisings, a tradition of "we are all in this together." But as governments are living with less, perhaps we will need to turn more to funding from individual (and corporate) largesse.

Charlottesville also enjoys a vibrant downtown pedestrian mall. The Mall is anchored by the n-Telos Pavilion on one end and an ice-skating arena and hotel at the other, and in between there are seven blocks with 120 boutique shops, 30 restaurants & coffee shops (many with outdoor cafes), a movie theater and a live performance stage. These street-level activities are supported in part by people living in apartments and condominiums in the floors above the street level.

The street is replaced with a meandering brick walk (think of the Nicollet Mall without the bus lanes), with large maple trees scattered throughout. It doesn't hurt that there is a free trolley that runs from the mall to the University of Virginia. And the milder climate probably helps, too. Our downtown isn't there yet, but it has some of the same "bones" running along South Front Street through Old Town to Riverfront Park in the north.

Farmers in our area have told me that the cost of land for row crops is pricing the kids out of the farm. Land is even more expensive in rural Albemarle County. They practice "microfarming" and the local community college offers non-credit certificates in grape-growing, wine-making, beer brewing, beekeeping, plant propagation and seed-saving and vegetable (truck) farming.

We heard of one farmer who grew tomatoes, peppers, chickpeas and garlic and sold the produce as salsa and hummus. Perhaps more of our kids could stay if we helped them cultivate different crops and process them into finished products.

But the real eye-opener for me was the University of Virginia Research Park. We could be doing a lot more to nurture into commercial viability the ideas of our higher education faculty.

The University of Virginia operates three research parks, which among them support 25 companies and 2,200 employees.

