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**Morris Student Works with Willmar to Create an E-Co-Op**

*Summary: Morris student Zachary Johnson and Center for Small Towns help to coordinate a local online co-op system in Willmar.*

(October 11, 2012)-Looking for a new way to order and distribute groceries through an online ordering system, the Willmar Community-Owned Grocery (COG) partnered with the Center for Small Towns and Zachary Johnson '14, Fergus Falls, to launch the pilot program for its new "e-co-op." The project was funded by the University of Minnesota-Southwest Regional Sustainable Development Partnership—formerly the West Central Partnership—a citizen-driven initiative working to create and sustain healthy ecosystems, strong local economies, and vibrant self-reliant communities.

The service was established as an online grocery experience in which customers could order a variety of organic and local foods from various producers and pick them up in one location at the local farmers market. While making local food more accessible, the e-co-op also aims to promote healthy foods. COG members hope that the online service will serve as a transitional step towards a physical store.

Johnson had the complicated, but essential, job of managing the system and networking with involved community members. He was also responsible for reaching out to various individuals involved in the local farming community. Not only did Johnson establish a connection with local farmers and producers, but he also provided many with resources that teach the use of technology essential for running an online business. Other job requirements ranged from coordinating the system to ensuring invoices and orders were properly collected and processed.

Although the program's early-June start date did not provide Johnson much time to build a strong relationship with vendors prior to the seasonal farmers market, he is still planning to finish the project this October. Given the project's already positive impact on the overall community, Johnson considers it a success and hopes the e-co-op focus on community and health will continue, perhaps long enough to prompt steps toward implementing a COG in the area.

The U of MN Southwest Regional Sustainable Development Partnership engages citizens together with University faculty, students, and programs around education and research to further understand and achieve sustainability in the region. The Southwest Partnership has collaborated with the Center for Small Towns to offer the "Connecting Students and Communities" program that matches funding and Morris students to support community-identified ideas and projects.

The Center for Small Towns is a community outreach program housed at the University of Minnesota, Morris and serves as a point-of-entry to the resources of the University of Minnesota. Small towns, local units of government, k-12 schools, nonprofit organizations, and other University units are able to utilize the Center's resources as they work on rural issues or make contributions to rural society. Their mission 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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