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CST & Morris up for Carter Award

Summary: The partnership between the Center for Small Towns and the City of Morris is one of five finalists for the prestigious Carter Partnership Award for Campus-Community Collaboration.

(December 21, 2005)-Like a novel, over the past 10 years the partnership between the Center for Small Towns at the University of Minnesota, Morris and the city of Morris has had many chapters. Community revitalization has been the underlying mission of the partners since inception, with notable success in addressing issues of community leadership, visioning, planning and dynamic action toward a stronger future. Today, the partnership has evolved into a purposeful and organized effort.

The Center and the City together are one of five finalists for the prestigious Carter Partnership Award for Campus-Community Collaboration. Named for President and Rosalynn Carter as a tribute to their life-long efforts to develop and support safe, healthy, and caring communities throughout the world this award honors exemplary collaborations undertaken by a college or university in partnership with a community group which addresses critical areas of public need.

At UMM, the primary focus leans toward student and faculty involvement, and is geared to the cultural, economic and social orientation of the City of Morris.

The partnership's goals are best expressed through several recurring themes:

- Community Organizing
- Neighborhood Revitalization
- Economic Opportunity
- Opportunities for Young People
- Shared Planning and Visioning
- Building Leadership Capacity

Success at reaching these goals over the years has been measured by concrete outcomes such as the establishment of the Prairie Renaissance Project that led to the formation of the Prairie Renaissance Cultural Alliance (PRCA), which opened a cultural center and art gallery in Morris to serve the surrounding area.

With the support of the Center, the Prairie Renaissance Project also created partnerships with UMM and the Morris schools to enhance service learning as a community development tool by engaging students with community projects. Dozens of UMM students participated in a variety of roles to carry out activities including assisting with feasibility studies and survey tools about area parks and local foods projects, planning for a local business incubator, construction of a skate park, and mentorship programs.

The Center also partnered with Morris Area Schools to complete a strategic plan for the school, using the expertise of the UMM faculty and students. A similar approach was used to complete the comprehensive plan for the City of Morris. As a whole, these projects have contributed to the sky rocketing of civic engagement activities by UMM students.

Less tangible but just as important, the Center and the Morris partnership resulted in a clearly changed community sense of its ability to effect change and seize opportunity.

"When I moved to Morris 10 years ago, I was aware of the strong bond between the campus and the community," said UMM Chancellor Sam Schuman. "I sensed a real commitment to shared decision-making in the community, and I learned about the rich history of cooperation. Now a decade later, this commitment has brought about an imbedded culture of public service within the community we call home."

Today, the Center for Small Towns/City of Morris partnership has become a process with which to affect change in Morris, through shared decision making and continual examination of opportunities. University faculty, staff, and students work mutually with hired and elected city and county officials, staff from non-profit organizations and grassroots initiatives to co-investigate issues and plan activities.

"I'm really proud to be a Mayor of Morris because people just get excited about things," said Carol Wilcox, mayor of Morris. "[The City] could've died a long time ago, but that's not happening we're vital, and that doesn't mean we don't have problems and we don't have challenges, but we work on them, we get them done and we work together."

The current initiative of the Center/Morris partnership features a three-year project focusing on housing, economics, and community organizing and neighborhood revitalization which is funded in part by a \$400,000 grant from Housing and Urban Development through the Community Outreach Partnership Centers (COPC) program. Challenges for small cities, like Morris, are different from those faced by metropolitan areas, and the solutions need to fit the local situation. A part of the project includes the development of a model for other small, rurally situated cities.

The COPC partnership features a participatory, grassroots approach to community improvement activities by creating new or strengthening existing partnerships between U of M departments and programs with private sector business interests, public sector housing agencies, City of Morris staff and elected officials, economic development representatives, social and cultural institutions, public school personnel, along with interested community residents. The broad range of participation reflects deep roots of support in the community and on campus.

Taken together, the strong foundation created by the Center and Morris partnerships suggests a long and secure future of collaboration between the two entities. Tom McRoberts, interim director of the Center stated, "This award acknowledges a remarkable 10-year partnership between the City of Morris and the Center."

Through personal and academic discovery, the University of Minnesota, Morris provides opportunities for students to grow intellectually, engage in community, experience environmental stewardship and celebrate diversity. A renewable and sustainable educational experience, Morris prepares graduates for careers, for advanced degrees, for lifelong learning, for work world flexibility in the future, and for global citizenship. Learn more about Morris at morris.umn.edu or call 888-866-3382.