

WHAT TYPE OF HISTORY CENTER DOES A GROWING COUNTY DESERVE:

OLMSTED COUNTY COMMISSIONERS GIVE A SIGNAL WITH PLAN TO CUT \$50,000 FROM HCOC BUDGET

By Wayne Gannaway, Executive Director

The county administrator notified us earlier this summer that the County Commission intends to permanently cut the History Center's budget by \$50,000. That's 17.5% of our annual funding from the County and almost 10% of our overall revenue in 2020. It's important for all of us to understand the rationale of our elected officials but also the likely impact on the programs and services we offer.

Making an Apples-to-Apples Comparison

As we understand it, Commissioners are basing their cut by comparing Olmsted County's annual allocation to those made by other Minnesota counties to their respective historical societies. When we look at the basket of counties, all members of the Minnesota Inter-County Association (MICA), to which Olmsted County is being compared, we see an apples-to-oranges mismatch in terms of population and economic growth trends. In the graph below, we can see two categories: population size (small, medium, and large) and location (Greater Minnesota and the Twin Cities Metro area).

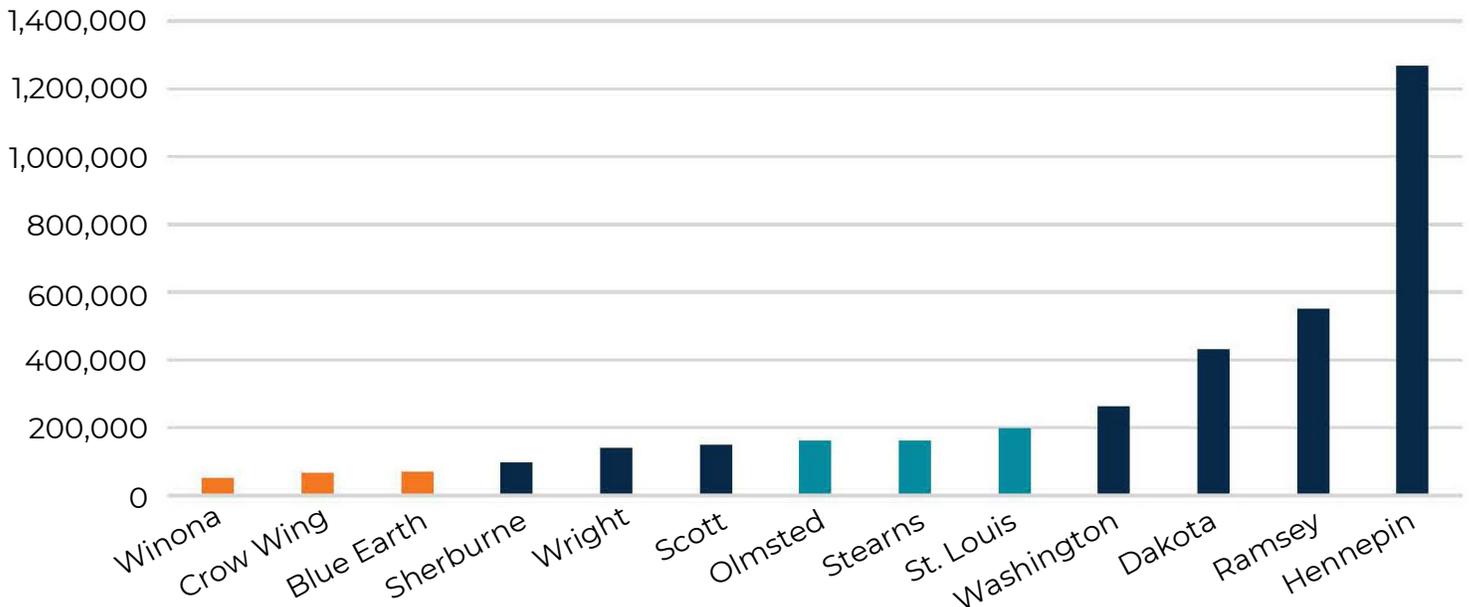
See Figure 1.

Figure 1

POPULATION COMPARISON, 2019

■ Population less than 70,000 ■ Greater Minnesota, Pop. 159,900-200,000
■ Minneapolis-St. Paul Suburbs

What is Comparable to Olmsted County?



Olmsted County definitely has one thing in common with Winona, Crow Wing, and Blue Earth counties: we are all located in Greater Minnesota. But strong growth in Olmsted County for the last couple decades has placed us in a very different position than those other counties. Yet, we are not part of the Twin Cities, with its Metropolitan Council, MSP International Airport, numerous foundations, abundant cultural and heritage attractions, and so on.

By our reckoning, with a population of 162,847 Olmsted County is most comparable to Saint Louis County (200,000) and Stearns County (158,292), each of which are also located in Greater Minnesota. But our county is expected to grow to nearly 200,000, with Stearns following behind, and Saint Louis County actually losing population. Among all counties in the state, Olmsted was the third fastest growing and is expected to grow by 24.2% by 2053.

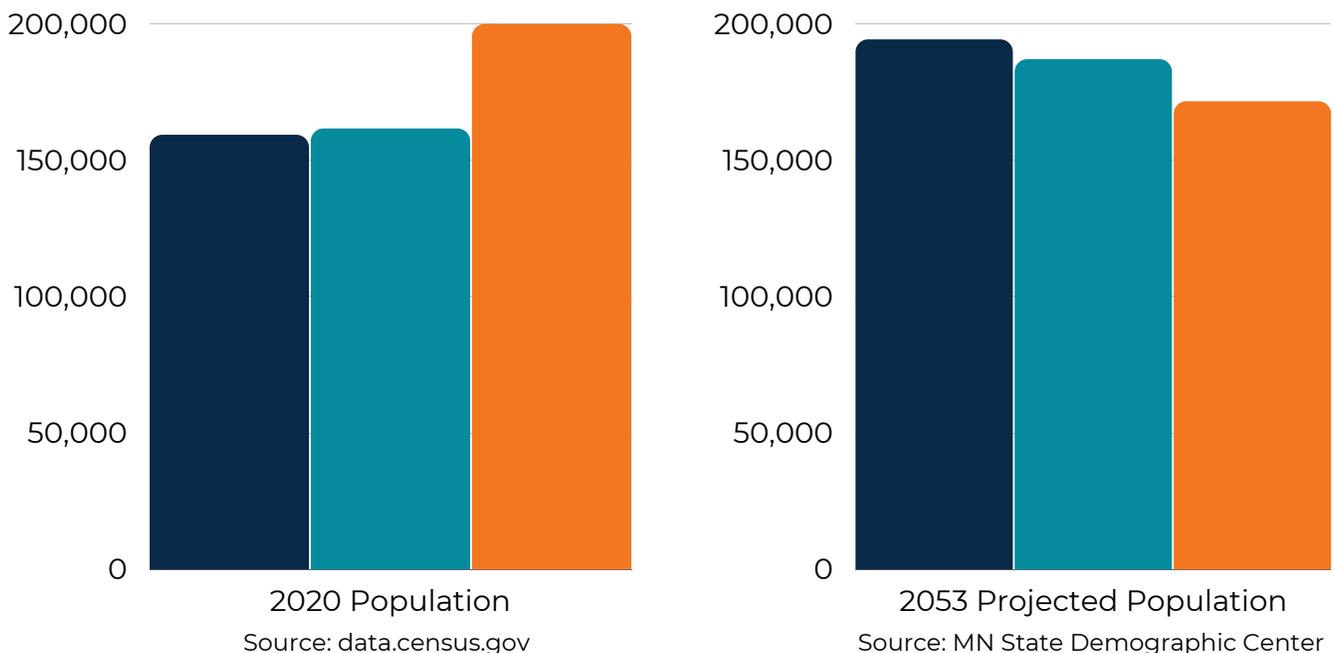
See Figure 2.

Figure 2

DYNAMIC POPULATION

■ Olmsted ■ Stearns ■ St. Louis

2020 Population Compared to 2053 Projections



It is worth noting that some MICA counties have modest economic capacity. That is not true of Olmsted County. Based on tourism-generated gross sales and overall gross domestic product (GDP), Olmsted County is nearly even with Saint Louis County and eclipses Stearns County. According to National Association of Counties,

“ long term, output for [Olmsted] county increased by 71.7 percent, going from \$6.3B in 2001 to \$10.8B in 2019. During the same period, medium-sized county economies grew by 37.8 percent, and the U.S. economy grew by 44 percent. ”

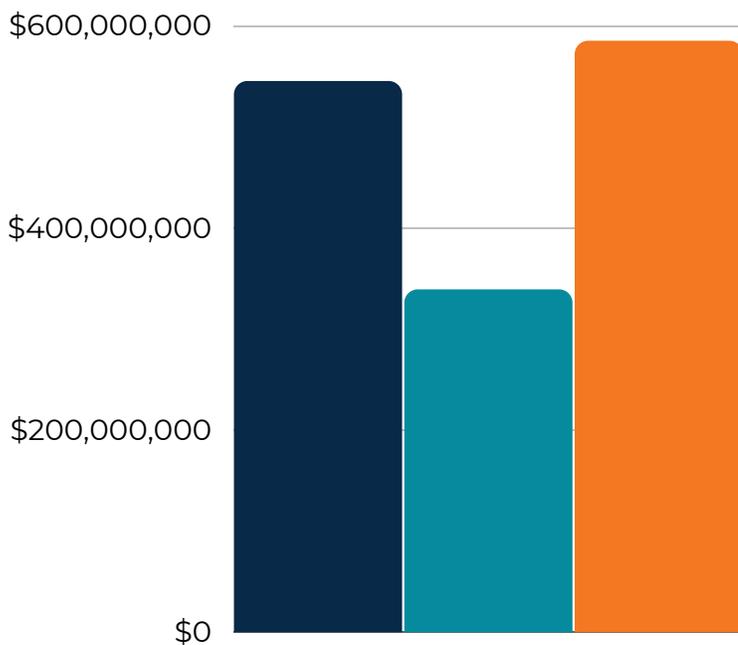
See Figure 3.

Figure 3

TOURISM AND ECONOMIC CAPACITY

■ Olmsted ■ Stearns ■ St. Louis

2019 Tourism-generated Gross Sales



Source: https://mn.gov/tourism-industry/assets/FactSheet_2021_tcm1135-468754.pdf

2019 County GDP (in billions)



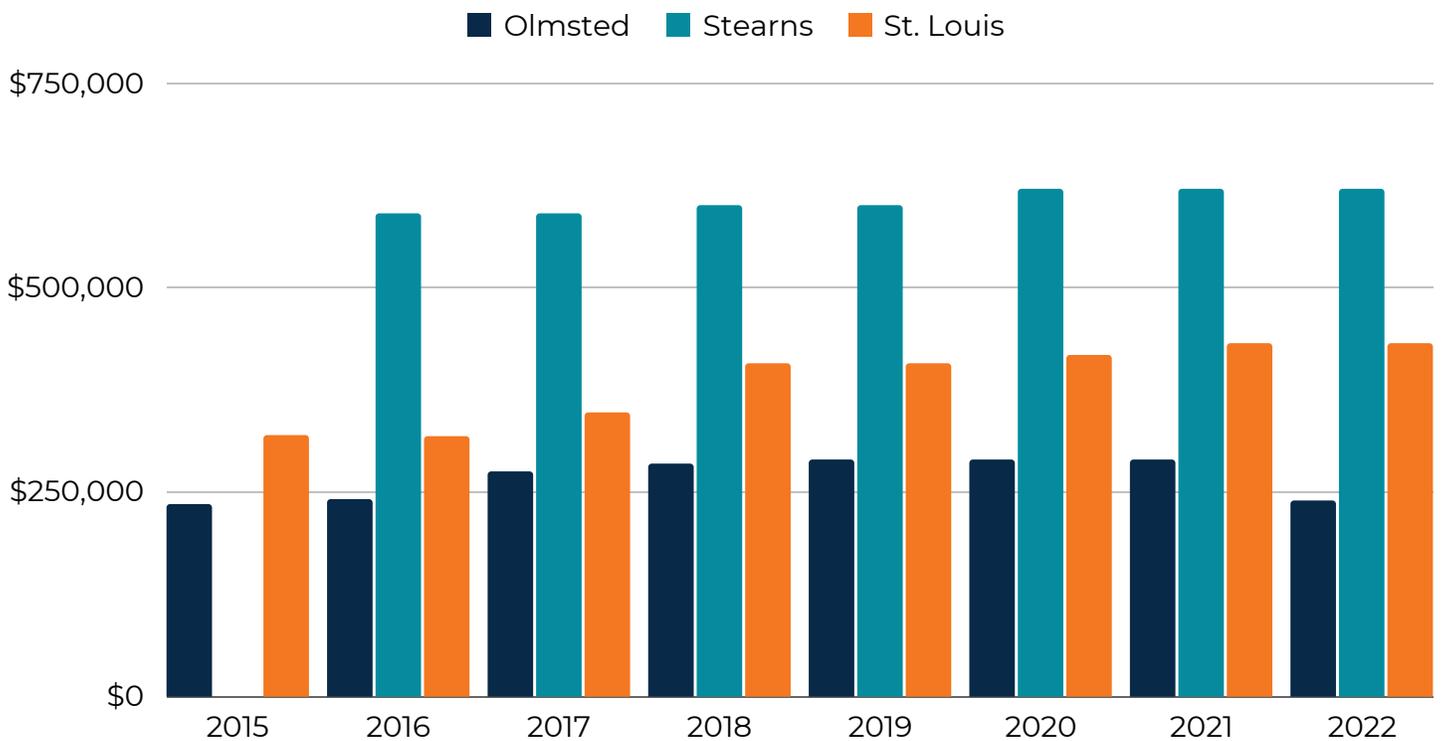
Source: <https://ce.naco.org/?find=true>

As described above and illustrated in Figures 1-3, Olmsted County's population is growing faster than the comparable counties, and the same is true regarding economic growth. Yet, Figure 4 (below) shows that Olmsted County Government allocations to HCOG are well below that of Stearns and Saint Louis Counties, 214% and 149% less, respectively. In 2022, if the proposed cuts are made, the gap between Olmsted County's contributions compared to Stearns and Saint Louis counties increases to 259% and 180%, respectively.

See Figure 4.

Figure 4

HISTORICAL SOCIETY FUNDING, 2015-2022 COMPARISON



Year	Olmsted	Stearns	St. Louis
2015	\$234,151	no data	\$317,998
2016	\$241,176	\$590,000	\$317,998
2017	\$275,000	\$590,000	\$346,998
2018	\$284,515	\$600,000	\$406,998
2019	\$289,515	\$600,000	\$406,998
2020	\$289,515	\$620,000	\$417,173
2021	\$289,515	\$620,000	\$431,498
2022	\$239,515	\$620,000	\$431,498

So, in summary, as our county population grows and as the county economy expands, the History Center's capacity to serve will, as a result of these cuts, shrink. Moreover, Olmsted County's projected growth will almost certainly create historical change to our county: Our population will continue to become more diverse. Farmsteads and agricultural fields will continue to be replaced by housing and commercial developments. Boundaries for township (the building blocks of the county) will shrink. Who will be preserving, for the benefit of the public, the artifacts and archival material which document these changes?

County governments in Minnesota support their respective historical societies in many ways. In addition to an annual appropriation, Saint Louis County (with Duluth as the county seat) also owns and maintains the building that houses their historical society. Carver County provides a smaller allocation but owns and maintains their historical society building, as well as provides IT equipment and internet access. Other county governments provide project funding and capital improvement funds. Olmsted County provides the History Center with an annual appropriation only.

To be clear, county governments are under no statutory obligation to provide anything to their county historical society. But since 1929 the Minnesota legislature has approved statutes specifically allowing county governments to provide material support for their county historical societies. Perhaps they did so because they witnessed so much change (e.g., war, a pandemic, battles over voting rights, technological advancement). In debating the issue of county government support for county historical societies at the 1928 annual meeting of the Minnesota Historical Society, state senator Victor Lawson of Willmar declared "If history is worth making, it is worth preserving."



Our first museum in the public library basement, 1941. Come 2026 we'll be celebrating 100 years of collecting and sharing Olmsted County's history!

How the History Center Serves a Growing Population and Changing Demographic

HCOC is unique among cultural organizations in the county because of the variety of constituents we serve, the scope of our services, and our accessibility, and dependability. We provide in-person services to tourists both at the History Center and particularly at Mayowood. Our core services, however, are preservation and education for the entire county. HCOC is the only entity in Olmsted County whose mission is to be the public memory for a rapidly changing county.

HCOC and the Tourist

As with many other attractions in Olmsted County, Mayo Clinic patients and their visiting friends and family account for a large number of our visitors, particularly at Mayowood. Perhaps even more than the typical leisure tourist, this segment wants to avoid hassles and unpleasant surprises. The History Center is an asset for satisfying these travelers in that it:

- Is open to the public on a regular, dependable schedule
- Provides in-person, one-on-one service staffed by professionals
- Is easy to find, offers plenty of parking; is accessible to all ages and is affordable

While the county offers a lot of amenities, particularly in the way of parks, how does it compare to Stearns and Saint Louis counties when it comes to museums that are fully staffed and open to the public on a regular basis?

HCOC and Olmsted County Residents

In a growing county, with an increasingly diverse, dynamic population, the History Center is an active, energetic part of Olmsted County's civic infrastructure.

Long-time residents know that HCOC is a reliable custodian of thousands of historical records and artifacts, caring for them in perpetuity (we have been part of the community for nearly 100 years). Not only does HCOC collect, catalogue, and preserve many records, we also provide reliable public access to our collections, with in-person, hands-on assistance from a certified archivist, collections manager, and curator. Who do we serve on a daily basis?

- Individuals (genealogists, neighborhood historians, students, farmers, teachers)
- Civic Groups (e.g., Rotary Club, Chamber of Commerce, Gay/Lesbian Community Services, American Association of University Women, Zumbro Watershed Partnership)
- Businesses (receiving and providing public access to e.g., Waters Conley, Olmsted County Bank and Trust, Reid Murdoch/Libby's/Seneca, IBM, Mayo Clinic)
- Government (receiving and providing public access to e.g., flood control project records, probate records, township, and county records—with personal, one-on-one service)

“ Museums and libraries are the vaults that hold our knowledge and history. They educate us on the discoveries and blunders of our past. ”
- Vice Admiral Vivek H. Murthy, MD, MBA, Surgeon General of the United States.

Strengthening Civic Engagement, Weaving Together Community

It is often said that America is a nation of civic beliefs, not founded on a basis of race, creed, or aristocracy. (In fact, John Hancock wrote that very sentiment in a letter to General George Washington in 1776.) Yet, as fundamental as that belief is to our identity, few of us today are happy with the level of civic literacy or quality of civic engagement or discourse—and we haven't been for years. How are we (i.e. the public) investing in a citizenry that is informed and prepared to engage in civic and civil discourse that lives up to our national identity? And where do we find lessons on such topics? Consider nearly any issue that is making news today: public health, immigration, the legacy of chattel slavery, political parties and electoral politics, voting, war, flooding, urban development, food supply. Archival material and museum artifacts and the work of local and public historians provides, at a minimum, clues to better managing and having more informed debates about these challenges, at the national, state, and local levels.

Enough county officials were concerned about the issue of civic literacy to invite Louise Dube, executive director of iCivics, a nonprofit that champions and re-imagines civic education, to the National Association of County's 2021 Virtual Legislative Conference. In explaining recommendations on how to teach American history and civics in an in-depth, integrated manner, she stated:

“ That is the kind of thing we want students to do is to look at the history, look at the perspectives that it's taking and then become ready to help us lead our counties in the future. ”

HCOC does not just collect, preserve, and passively provide access, we actively invite all segments of the community to examine, explore, and add their history to our county's rich tapestry. For a county with so many business transplants, immigrants, and refugees, creating attachment to community is vital. Cultural heritage organizations like HCOC are a key component in cultivating a shared understanding among our county's diverse population. Citing a 2010 Knight Foundation report regarding community attachment, Partners for Livable Communities concluded:

“ Interpreting the past creates attachment to the present... Effectively highlighting the culture and heritage of a place cultivates attachment to that place, and thus makes people want to settle in that area and lay their roots down. ”

How does the History Center help create attachment in Olmsted County? We engage with residents as individuals and groups through myriad channels and forums. A key part of our work involves exploring timely historical topics through community engagement, highlighting common ground between the past and the present; between rural and urban; between long-time residents and newcomers. Specific examples include:

- Our Homegrown History Zoom talks provide convenient, affordable virtual programs on such topics as voting rights, the local history of water treatment, pandemics and public health, local architecture, immigration, farming, and local biographies.
- Thousands engage with our social media posts at no cost to them though HCOC invests hundreds of hours of staff and volunteer time selecting, curating, and scheduling posts of photos and documents that we preserve and protect in our archives.
- Long-time residents as well as those returning to Olmsted County reconnect by researching family, farm, business or neighborhood history—assisted by our archivist.
- Our events and tours highlight historic places, e.g., the Hootenanny at the Historic Stoppel Farmstead, tours at Mayowood, and the Cemetery Walk at Oakwood.
- We partner with businesses, civic and arts groups, unions, and community interest groups to co-create exhibits and programs, for example:
 - League of Women Voters for the exhibit, “The Onward March of Suffrage”
 - Kalmar Township Board and Byron Area Historical Society for the exhibit, “Get to Know a Township” currently featuring Kalmar and previously, Farmington
 - Rochester Symphony for their centennial season (2019)
 - African American residents for the exhibits “Community Connections: African Americans in Rochester” and “The Green Book: Traveling While Black”
 - LGBTQ residents for the exhibit “Rochester's Pride: The Beginning of Pridefest”
 - North Central States Regional Council of Carpenters for the exhibit, “Constructing the City's Future”
 - The Village Community Garden and Learning Center in matching immigrant and refugee gardeners with HCOC garden plots at no charge
 - Rochester Cambodian Association exhibit (2022) and Flavor Fest event
 - IMAA and other immigrant organizations and individuals for the exhibit “An Immigration Journey: Immigrants Finding Their Way, 1850s to Today” (2022)

Impact of Cuts to HCOC County Allocation

In comparison to our better-funded peers in Stearns and Saint Louis counties, we believe HCOC measures up well. Despite numerous leadership changes at HCOC in the past and the pandemic, HCOC is now positively impacting community attachment. Cuts will erode those gains at a critical time—not just for the History Center but for the broader community, as our fast growing county becomes increasingly diverse and the need for sharing our common history grows.

While our dedication to Olmsted County's public history compels us to make every effort to continue to meet the community's need, the contemplated cuts may require us to:

- Raise admission and service and membership fees
- Reduce staffing by an additional full-time position
- Reduce hours of operation
- Reduce expenses for preservation of assets not related to collections or National Register Properties

Our staffing pattern is extremely frugal. Even prior to the pandemic, in 2019 we reduced our staffing by 2.5 full-time equivalents (FTE) to our lowest staffing level in over 15 years. Today, we have seven FTEs and all full-time staff perform multiple jobs: the collections manager also maintains equipment and grounds; the archivist also does marketing; the curator also does education, etc.).

Do you agree that the History Center has made a difference either with you personally or in the community? If so, please share your perspective with our elected county officials. Find their contact information at <https://www.olmstedcounty.gov/government/county-boards-commissions/board-of-commissioners>.