

Moose Lake poised for growth in retail and housing

by Kathleen Mandy

There is something special about Moose Lake, Minnesota -- a sentiment that permeates this energetic and thriving community. Located at the gateway to Minnesota's scenic Arrowhead Region, Moose Lake is a year-round vacation destination that draws thousands of visitors in search of rest and recreation. Yet to the more than 2,500 people who claim this Northwoods oasis as home, Moose Lake offers a familiar environment, economic stability, and potential for growth.

Moose Lake is nestled along old Highway 61 in southern Carlton County, adjacent to Interstate 35 at the junction of state Highways 73 and 27. The city enjoys a steadfast base for employment opportunities that is ever-increasing, including the Minnesota Department of Corrections and Department of Human Services that is expanding and currently employs nearly 1,000 people. The Moose Lake School District employs over 110 staff and auxiliary personnel for the 800 elementary and high school students it serves.

Moose Lake is home to the distinguished Mercy Hospital and Health Care Center and the Gateway Family Health Clinic. The facilities supply jobs for about 500 people who provide quality health care to some 12,000 families and visitors of northern Pine and southern Carlton Counties.

The 125 retail businesses, specialty shops, and financial and professional services currently located in the Moose Lake area pull a steady stream of traffic from patrons and visitors in the 14 nearby communities. "There are seven ways

to get into town," notes city administrator David Talbot, Jr.

While the townships adjoining Moose Lake inflate the community's population to nearly 5,000, its potential trade area from towns as far north as Cromwell and as far south as Sandstone reaches over 10,000 in population. "There's a huge customer base, and new customers are coming all the time," said Pat Oman, Carlton County's Economic Development director.

Even in these strapped economic times Oman maintains that retail is growing and increasing in the area. "Moose Lake is poised for growth," says Oman. Its distance from the metro areas, 40 miles south of Duluth and 90 miles north of Minneapolis and St. Paul, makes Moose Lake, Carlton County's second largest city, an appealing site for recreational enthusiasts and commercial developers alike.

Oman is encouraged by Moose Lake's high traffic volume. The number of drivers heading into the downtown business district reaches over 8,500 daily, yet traffic numbers along Moose Lake's Highway 73 entrance off Interstate 35 increase to 20,000. And nearly 2,000 more access the city along the Highway 10 entrance. It is at this Highway 73 and Highway 10 crossroads where the city's current development, Moose Lake Retail Park, is positioned for growth.

Carlton County Economic Development is working in tandem with the City of Moose Lake and the Moose Lake School District in developing the 60 acres of school-owned land set aside for the retail park. "There have been a number of retail companies and site selectors that have shown interest in that property," Oman said. Companies in the urban

cities to the north, Cloquet and Duluth, are looking at the potential for satellite stores at the site.

Moose Lake is expecting to build a business tax base and increase job opportunities for the health of the community. "We are in a unique place right here off the freeway between Duluth and the Twin Cities," said Mayor Ted Shaw. "We have all that land along Highway 73, so we have a perfect area for growth," he said.

With an increased job market comes a population increase, which translates to a healthy student population for the Moose Lake School District. Superintendent Tim Caroline states, "The whole intent is that this retail development will attract people to the community and with that hopefully more students to the area."

When the school district initially purchased the land along Highway 73, Caroline said, "The intent was that we would eventually build a new school out there." While hopes for a new school loom on the horizon, Caroline acknowledges that developing the land for retail expansion is the priority. "Whatever goes up in the commercial park will help broaden the tax base, which is a positive for the taxpayers of the school district," he said.

Oman anticipates that the school will make a return on its investment. He plans to develop the land in three phases early next year, beginning with 20 acres, highly visible from Interstate 35, that are set aside for small to medium size retail stores.

Regional retailer, ALCO, asserted its vote of confidence in the Moose Lake project when it opened a store at the complex last year. "We certainly felt it

was right for our type of business," said Phil Hixon, senior vice-president of operations. "We're pleased with our performance in this store," he said.

Carlton County hopes to entice potential stores and restaurants to the Moose Lake area by offering attractive regional and state funding mechanisms, including a county revolving loan fund, tax increment financing, and a Minnesota Community Capital Fund. Oman expects that local lenders will assist in financing options as well and asserts, "We don't want to take the place of local financial institutions."

In addition to pursuing the Moose Lake Retail Park, growth activity in the downtown area is currently underway. "Housing opportunity and expansion is happening throughout Moose Lake," said city administrator Talbot. From single family to multi-family housing, Moose Lake is prepared to accommodate a real and expected influx of newcomers in search of employment and a place to call home.

While economic growth in Moose Lake is a certainty, it is but one component to the allure of Minnesota's Arrowhead Region. The scenic, all-terrain area

offers an abundance of recreational activities for all seasons, with access for cross country skiing, boating, biking, snowmobiling, hunting, nature viewing, hiking, and four-wheeling.

Moose Lake is situated amid a plethora of recreational and historical sites, including state forests, waterways and lakes, state and local parks, and a host of campgrounds and resorts. It is places like the Nemadji State Forest, the Mineral and Agate Interpretative Center in Moose Lake, and the Depot and Fires of 1918 Museum that continually draw visitors from around the state.

Moose Lake is the half-way point along the multiple-use Willard Munger State Trail, the longest paved trail in the country that runs 74 miles from Hinckley to Duluth. The city is home to the celebrated Agate Days Gems and Minerals Show, as well as the Autumn Wind Studio Tour that captivates noted artists and art enthusiasts from afar.

Moose Lake offers all the amenities of a big city, but with the warm appeal of a small town atmosphere. Its volunteer fire department, staffed police force, community and civic center, day cares and assisted living services provide the com-

munity with a sense of safety and caring.

It is the scenic attractions, goodwill atmosphere, and thriving economy that makes Moose Lake, Minnesota a special place -- a unique community that keeps visitors returning and attracts new permanent dwellers each year. As Dean Paulson, executive director of the Moose Lake Chamber of Commerce, attests, "Come and visit us. You won't want to leave."