



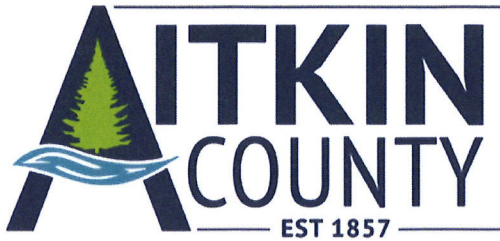
# Board of County Commissioners Agenda Request

**6B**  
Agenda Item #

**Requested Meeting Date:** January 28, 2025

**Title of Item:** 2025-2028 Strategic Plan Discussion

<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> REGULAR AGENDA  <input type="checkbox"/> CONSENT AGENDA	<b>Action Requested:</b> <input type="checkbox"/> Approve/Deny Motion <input type="checkbox"/> Adopt Resolution (attach draft) <input type="checkbox"/> Hold Public Hearing <i>*provide copy of hearing notice that was published</i>	<input type="checkbox"/> Direction Requested <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Discussion Item <input type="checkbox"/> Information Only
<b>Submitted by:</b> Jessica Seibert		<b>Department:</b> Administration
<b>Presenter (Name and Title):</b> Dr. Bill Brendel, CEO & Principal Consultant at Transformative Learning Institute		<b>Estimated Time Needed:</b> 30 min.
<b>Summary of Issue:</b> Dr. Bill Brendel will be discussing Aitkin County's 2025-2028 Strategic Plan. The Revitalization Team will also be present during the Board meeting to take part in the discussion.		
<b>Alternatives, Options, Effects on Others/Comments:</b>		
<b>Recommended Action/Motion:</b> Discussion Only.		
<b>Financial Impact:</b> <i>Is there a cost associated with this request?</i> <input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> No <i>What is the total cost, with tax and shipping? \$</i> <i>Is this budgeted?</i> <input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No <i>Please Explain:</i>		



# Strategic Plan

2025 - 2028



**County Administrator**

Jessica Seibert

**Board of Commissioners**

J. Mark Wedel (Chair), District 1

Laurie Westerlund, District 2

Travis Leiviska (Vice Chair), District 3

Bret Sample, District 4

Michael Kearney, District 5

# Mission and Vision

## Mission

To provide outstanding service in a fiscally responsible manner through innovation and collaboration with respect for all.

## Vision

We strive to be a county of safe, vibrant communities that place value on good stewardship of local resources.

Our values are to provide outstanding customer service through:



Collaboration



People-Focused



Innovation



Professionalism



Integrity

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# Executive Summary

Aitkin County's 2025 - 2028 Strategic Plan provides a roadmap to address today's challenges, seize emerging opportunities, and prepare for a stronger future. This plan, which is a product of extensive engagement and input from Commissioners and employees, focuses on delivering quality services and fostering sustainable economic development.

As we look to the future, Aitkin County faces both challenges and opportunities. We're working to attract new businesses and year-round residents while preserving our local heritage and close-knit community. With shifts in population and migration from cities, there are new possibilities for economic development and revitalization. Aitkin County's natural resources, tourism appeal, and traditions give us a solid foundation to grow responsibly and sustainably.

To serve the community effectively, we must address internal challenges such as departmental collaboration, adapting to new technologies, and managing workforce shifts from retirements and turnover. This plan prioritizes collaboration, innovation, and operational efficiency to create a supportive, motivating work environment that ultimately enhances our public service.

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Aitkin County Board of Commissioners (Left to right): Laurie Westerlund (District 2), Travis Leiviska (Vice Chair, District 3), Michael Kearney (District 5), Bret Sample (District 4), J. Mark Wedel (Chair, District 1)

To address these external and internal needs, our plan focuses on three main goals:

**1. Community Engagement & Economic Development**

Improving how we connect with the public by being proactive and bringing people together. Focusing on balancing economic growth with preserving traditions, maintaining public safety, sustaining an effective transportation system, and tackling community issues, while protecting our beautiful natural resources.

**2. Unified Approach to Effectiveness**

Building a trusting, smooth-running, flexible organization that sticks together, makes decisions based on solid data, and encourages open talks to quickly reach consensus. The goal is to make Aitkin County Government more efficient and responsive to achieve our mission.

**3. Talent Acquisition, Development & Well-being**

Streamline talent recruitment and retention to maximize efficiency and performance while reducing turnover and associated costs. Empower employees at all levels to continuously learn, grow, and innovate, fostering a supportive work environment that enhances trust, well-being, job satisfaction, and productivity, ultimately driving cost efficiency and exceptional service.

# Background

Aitkin County's Strategic Plan is rooted in a profound respect for the past and a vision for the future, drawing on a legacy of adaptability, resilience, and community strength. Established in 1857 and named after fur trader William Alexander Aitken, Aitkin County has been shaped by a series of transformative chapters—from its days as a critical hub for French-Canadian voyageurs navigating trade routes through what is now Savanna State Park, to a bustling center for logging, agriculture, and tourism<sup>1</sup>.

## Economic Transitions & Resilience

Over time, Aitkin County has weathered significant economic shifts. The decline of logging and the impact of the Great Depression transformed Aitkin into an agricultural community, once even earning the title of "Turkey Capital of the World." As small family farms began to fade in the late 20th century, the county evolved again, becoming a destination for tourists and retirees drawn by the scenic lakes and natural landscapes. By the 1990s, tourism had become a major economic driver, offering new opportunities for growth while preserving the county's close-knit community feel and heritage.



Long Lake Summer Home (1950s), Aitkin County  
Courtesy of the Minnesota Historical Society



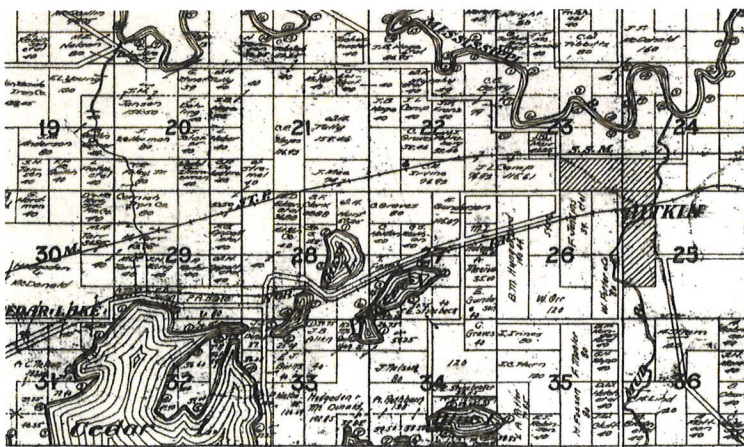
Line of Automobiles (1915), Aitkin County  
Courtesy of the Minnesota Historical Society

## Our Evolving Landscape

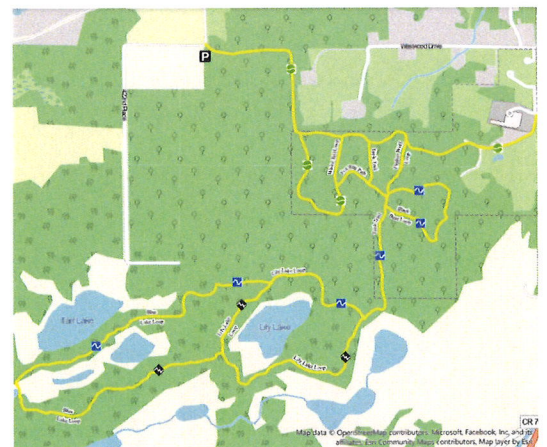
Today, Aitkin County faces a complex blend of challenges and opportunities that this strategic plan seeks to address. Economic contributors have shifted toward healthcare, education, and hospitality, while environmental challenges of being a “Mississippi River area” and aging infrastructure present ongoing environmental and logistical challenges. At the same time, Aitkin County’s natural resources, tourism appeal, and strong community values provide a powerful foundation for sustainable development. Embracing modern technology responsibly, strengthening community connections, and supporting both a younger workforce and retiring residents will be essential to fostering a vibrant, resilient future.

## Preserving Legacy while Building the Future

Aitkin County’s commitment to historic preservation—evident in landmarks like the Aitkin Library, Savanna Portage State Park, and Riverboat Trail System—underscores the value placed on heritage, while forward-looking initiatives strive to honor these traditions in the context of 21st-century needs. From a legacy of voyageurs to a future built on innovation, this strategic plan is a testament to Aitkin County’s enduring commitment to serving the public and evolving with the times. By embracing both our rich history and the demands of a changing world, Aitkin County is well-positioned to thrive as a place where community and progress go hand in hand.



Plat Map of Aitkin County (1916)  
Courtesy of the Minnesota Historical Society



No Achen XC-Ski/Hiking Trail (Tank Trails)  
Aitkin County Geographic Information Systems



# The Road Ahead: Key Challenges & Opportunities

Aitkin County's strategic plan begins with a clear-eyed look at the realities we face—both challenges and opportunities—so we can build a roadmap that responds to today's needs while preparing for tomorrow's possibilities. This section highlights the strengths, areas for growth, shared aspirations, and desired outcomes that set the direction for our strategic goals.

Our analysis has identified several key factors that helped to shape our plan. Externally, we know that Aitkin County is in a period of economic transition<sup>2</sup>. With population shifts as more people migrate from cities, we have an opportunity to attract new residents and businesses. However, this growth needs to be balanced with preserving our unique community values and natural heritage. Our plan therefore supports sustainable economic development that honors our local heritage and maintains Aitkin County's close-knit community feel.



## Critical Need for Operational Efficiency

Aitkin County is not unique in its need to modernize outdated processes. Departments within the county historically had been known to work in silos, missing valuable opportunities for collaboration and service improvement. To address this, our plan needs to foster a unified approach to effectiveness that encourages collaboration across departments, streamlining operations to better serve residents. This unified approach is essential for enhancing effectiveness and creating a more agile, responsive government.

## Community & Economic Aspirations

Our community is made up of people who value their neighbors, cherish their history, and want to see Aitkin County thrive. Residents and stakeholders have voiced a desire for more community engagement, economic growth, and access to local resources. To meet these needs, our plan must prioritize community engagement and economic development, with strategies that actively involve the public, attract new businesses, and promote Aitkin County's full tourism potential. By partnering with local organizations and embracing outreach efforts, we can build a stronger, more connected community.

## Workforce & Talent Needs

We also face a competitive talent landscape, with the retirement of experienced staff, turnover costs, and challenges in recruiting and retaining new talent. Our workforce is committed, resilient, and skilled, but they're also asking for greater work-life balance, flexibility, and professional growth opportunities. To support our staff, our plan needs to focus on talent acquisition, development and well-being, which includes accelerated onboarding, clear career pathways wherever possible, and resources for continuous learning and development. By investing in our people, we can build a motivated, engaged workforce that feels valued and ready to tackle the challenges of public service.

## Adapting to Technological Advances

Rapid advances in technology present both opportunities and challenges for the county. To navigate this, our plan needs to embrace technology responsibly, using it to enhance services without compromising community values or transparency. This will allow us to meet modern demands while staying grounded in our principles.

# Goals & Objectives

The following goals and objectives reflect the insights we gained from our community focus groups, surveys, external research, and employee feedback. Guided by input from across Aitkin County, they address both our current needs and future aspirations, helping us embrace growth, innovation, and resilience.

## Community Engagement & Economic Development

Improve how we connect with the public by being proactive and bringing people together. Focus on balancing economic growth with preserving traditions, maintaining public safety, sustaining an effective transportation system, and tackling community issues, while protecting our beautiful natural resources.

To achieve these goals, we will:

- **Foster Business Growth:** Advance an environment that supports business expansion, expecting all departments to take a unified approach by collaborating with internal and external partners to enhance it. Success will be measured periodically by tracking local business growth, increase in tax base, new partnerships, and economic impact.
- **Develop Senior and Workforce Housing:** Develop housing solutions to meet the needs of seniors and the workforce by collaborating with public and private stakeholders, identifying funding opportunities, and supporting sustainable development projects. Efforts will also include exploring the use of county-owned land to facilitate these initiatives. Success will be measured periodically by tracking the number of new housing units created, the availability of housing options, the success and execution of the Housing Trust Fund.
- **Optimize Land Use Ordinances:** Analyze current land use ordinances to identify areas where the county's requirements exceed state statutes. Encourage professional development for staff to support them in an ever changing environment. Increase accessible education for the community to set expectations and transparency. Success will be measured by the review of three current ordinances for refinement per year.

- **Drive Growth while Preserving Natural Resources:** Protect and promote the county’s vast natural resources and recreational advantages as key drivers for business expansion and tax base improvement. Encourage sustainable business growth that complements these resources by enhancing and increasing readership of the current Economic Development newsletter that showcases businesses and opportunities aligned with the county’s environmental and economic goals and community and organizational alignment to promote the Naturally Better marketing story. Success will be measured periodically by tracking the number of businesses highlighted, engagement with the newsletter, trail counters for ATV, economic impact study, and chamber collaboration.
- **Elevate Long Lake Conservation Center (LLCC):** Highlight the Long Lake Conservation Center (LLCC) as a premier resource for youth education and a destination for all Aitkin County residents to enjoy. Explore opportunities to generate revenue by expanding programs and services. Foster strategic alignment between the county and the LLCC nonprofit foundation to strengthen shared goals and maximize community impact. Success will be measured periodically by tracking program participation and revenue growth.
- **Explore Development of an EMS Taxing District:** Analyze and explore funding mechanisms for ambulance services and advocate to State and Federal agencies and Officials for higher reimbursement rates. Success will be represented by a recommendation to the Aitkin County Board of Commissioners.
- **Enhance Community Engagement & Responsiveness:** Encourage employees to actively participate in community organizations and boards as the county’s eyes and ears, gathering valuable insights and providing clarification to the public when needed. Launch a pilot customer service survey for both in-person and online interactions, designed to gather strategically categorized, constructive feedback. The survey will clarify its intended audience and purpose to ensure actionable insights. Success will be measured periodically by tracking employee participation in community roles, survey response rates, and responsiveness to feedback.

- **Empower Senior Engagement:** Investigate the creation of an independent Senior Volunteer Network to serve as welcome ambassadors for county departments, enhancing community connection and service accessibility. Explore the development of a senior wayfinding program to improve navigation of county services and resources. Success will be represented by a clear recommendation to the Aitkin County Board of Commissioners.
- **Promote Community Identity:** Launch social media campaigns to educate and share “Classic Aitkin” citizen stories and information to foster communication and trust. Explore additional options like one combined Facebook and/or YouTube page as well as podcasts, videos, and other digital tools to celebrate Aitkin County’s rich legacy, family-oriented culture and how that promotes that we are naturally better. Social media engagement metrics (e.g. clicks, comments, likes, follows) and survey responses will help us assess success on an ongoing basis.



Aitkin County Strategic Focus Groups Identifying Community Needs (2024)

## Unified Approach to Effectiveness

Build a trusting, smooth-running, flexible organization that sticks together, makes decisions based on solid data, and encourages open talks to quickly reach consensus. The goal is to make Aitkin County Government more efficient and responsive to achieve our mission.

To achieve these goals, we will:

- **Develop Strategic Dashboard:** Create a Strategic Dashboard to support strategic discussions at Department Head and Board meetings. The dashboard will focus on key performance metrics that drive strategic thinking, promote continuous improvement, and guide efforts to reduce the government footprint while enhancing the standard of living and peace of mind for citizens and business owners. Success will be measured periodically by tracking the utilization of the dashboard, the integration of data into decision-making, and progress in achieving targeted improvements in efficiency and community well-being.
- **Foster Interdepartmental Learning & Cohesion:** Organize and promote activities that encourage staff to build relationships and learn about other departments through group educational workshops and engaging events, such as a chili cook-off. These initiatives aim to strengthen team connections, foster a collaborative culture, and facilitate knowledge sharing across departments. Success will be measured periodically by tracking participation rates, staff feedback on the activities, and examples of improved collaboration resulting from these efforts.
- **Showcase County Value & Resources:** Develop and distribute brief videos, podcasts, and articles to educate both the public and county employees about Aitkin County Government, highlighting its value and available resources. These materials will also encourage public feedback, helping the county better adapt to residents' evolving needs. Success will be measured periodically by tracking engagement metrics such as views, listens, and reads, as well as volume.

## Talent Acquisition, Development, and Well-being

Streamline talent recruitment and retention to maximize efficiency and performance while reducing turnover and associated costs. Empower employees at all levels to continuously learn, grow, and innovate, fostering a supportive work environment that enhances trust, well-being, job satisfaction, and productivity, ultimately driving cost efficiency and exceptional service.

To achieve these goals, we will:

- **Showcase the Aitkin County Advantage:** Highlight what makes Aitkin County unique and "Naturally Better" in recruiting and onboarding by featuring resources such as the strategic plan, success stories, well-being initiatives, and career-focused coaching. Feature these advantages on the recruitment website and in materials shared with potential candidates, measuring success through recruitment website traffic, supervisor one-on-ones, and feedback from orientation sessions. Success will be measured by an increased talent pool.
- **Modernize Onboarding for Efficiency:** Replace lengthy onboarding sessions with bite-sized, paced learning modules to enable employees to contribute while learning on the job. Organize group sessions for new hires to connect with leadership, fostering a shared understanding of Aitkin County's culture and vision, and measuring success through time-to-productivity, onboarding engagement levels, and new hire feedback.
- **Transform Reviews into Mentorship:** Replace annual performance reviews with an ongoing mentorship system where senior leaders collaborate with employees to align career aspirations with strategic opportunities, strengthening staff-leadership relationships and development.
- **Empower Strength-Based Growth:** Recognize and align employees' roles with their inherent strengths through structured supervisor dialogues and team collaboration. Train employees in Gallup StrengthsFinder to foster a culture of fulfillment and personal value, with progress measured by workshop participation rates, and feedback on development.
- **Support Employee-Driven Process Innovation:** Expand opportunities for employees to propose, discuss, and implement process improvements that enhance efficiency and reduce bureaucracy. Launch a second wave of GE Workout Development to further engage employees in meaningful changes, tracking success through employee-led initiatives, reductions in inefficiencies, and feedback on participation.
- **Prioritize Leadership Development:** Balance investments in leadership development with technical training to ensure leaders are equipped to foster innovation, collaboration, and a supportive work culture. Progress will be assessed through participation in development programs, and improvements in team performance.

# Strategic Performance Evaluation

Rooted in our commitment to professionalism, innovation, and accountability, this framework combines quantitative and qualitative measures, delivering a comprehensive view of our successes and areas for growth. As this strategic plan is an evolving document that will improve with time, data collection will occur consistently across departments, using methods that ensure accuracy and transparency, so that progress is assessed in a timely and informed manner.

## Measuring & Informing Progress

Each strategic goal is tied to specific performance metrics designed to measure meaningful progress. For goals that emphasize innovation, metrics will focus on the number of new initiatives launched, improvements in processes, and engagement levels with new systems. For goals related to professionalism, we will track metrics such as service quality, employee training rates, and feedback from residents on their experiences. Each metric was carefully chosen to align directly with our strategic goals, providing clear and measurable criteria for evaluating success.



Aitkin County Employee Strategic Planning Session (2024)



Aitkin County Department Head Strategic Planning Session (2024)



## Balanced Measures

A balanced approach will guide our evaluation, stewardship, operational effectiveness, resident satisfaction, and workforce development. This approach aligns with our values, supporting a culture of continuous improvement that not only measures outcomes but also encourages growth and responsiveness within each area of the county's operations. This balanced perspective enables us to celebrate achievements while recognizing opportunities for future improvement.

Strategic performance reviews will be conducted on a regular schedule, with evaluations occurring at different intervals depending on the goal. An annual Board review of progress will be conducted and based on evaluations and review, adjustments to the strategic plan will be made as needed to ensure our efforts stay relevant and effective, adapting to the needs of our community as they evolve.

# Strategic Partners & Contributors

Aitkin County extends its sincere gratitude to the hundreds of stakeholders who contributed their valuable insights, stories, and ideas to this strategic plan. Each group brought unique perspectives that enriched our understanding of community needs and opportunities.

## Board of Commissioners

Aitkin County's Board of Commissioners provided critical political and policy insight to guide strategic alignment with community priorities.

J. Mark Wedel (Chair), District 1  
Laurie Westerlund, District 2  
Travis Leiviska (Vice Chair), District 3  
Bret Sample, District 4  
Michael Kearney, District 5

## County Administrator

Aitkin County Administrator, Jessica Seibert, offered strategic guidance and oversight, integrating insights from all stakeholders to ensure a cohesive and actionable plan aligned with Aitkin County's mission and long-term vision.

## Public Focus Group Participants

Our public focus group participants provided critical insights into community needs, priorities, and aspirations, ensuring that the plan reflects the voices and values of Aitkin County residents.

Amy Dotzler, Aitkin Police Department  
Amy Wyant, Aitkin County CARE, Inc.  
Andrea Griffith, Aitkin County DAC  
Craig LeBlanc, Logan Town Board  
Dan Stifter, Aitkin Public Schools  
Dennise Sonnee, Planning Commission  
Harold Harms, Seavey Township  
Heidi Olesen, Waukenabo Township  
Janet Hatfield, Macville Township  
Janet Smude, Aitkin County SWCD  
Jessica Johnson, Talon Metals  
Jon Bjorkquist, Jacobson Community Center

Kat Robb, Aitkin Independent Age  
Lon Nicko, City of Aitkin Public Works  
Mikki Brodhead, Lee Township  
Patrick Murphy, Growth Innovations  
Shannon Parenteau, Waukenabo Township  
Stacy Cluff, Mille Lacs Energy Cooperative  
Stanley Gustafson, Growth Innovations  
Stephanie Mollet, Aitkin Area Chamber  
Tami Jacobs, Growth Innovations  
Thomas Meyer, Shamrock Township  
Veronica Lundquist, Aitkin SWCD

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## Department Heads and Elected Officials

Aitkin County department heads and elected officials shared strategic knowledge and operational expertise to ensure effective and cohesive planning.

## Revitalization Team

Emerging leaders representing all corners of Aitkin County's workforce conducted both internal and external research, offered fresh ideas, and shared innovative approaches to help shape Aitkin County's future.

Ben Mowers, Assessor's Office  
Brenda Butterfield, Health & Human Services  
Chelsea Cummings, Corrections & Probation  
Jacob Leonhardt, Corrections & Probation  
James Johnson, Health & Human Services  
Jane Arnold, Health & Human Services  
Jessie Schultz, Health & Human Services  
Jody Grund, Environmental Services  
Jon Moen, Health & Human Services  
Kim Larson, Health & Human Services  
Mark Jeffers, Economic Development  
Mary Hakes, Recorder's Office

Pam Bruss, Sheriff's Office  
Randy Quale, Land Department  
Reina Irvine, Health & Human Services  
Sarah Johnson, Health & Human Services  
Sarah Olsen, Highway Department  
Shannon Parenteau, Assessor's Office  
Sondra Swanson, Attorney's Office  
Stacy Westerlund, Assessor's Office  
Toni Lane, Health & Human Services  
Vlad Orekhov, Information Technology  
Wendie Bright, Auditor's Office

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## Aitkin County Employee Contributors

Aitkin County employees provided first-hand knowledge of daily operations and community interactions, grounding the plan in real-world experience.

Andrea Bloom  
Becky Steele  
Beth Roettele  
Brea Hamdorf  
Carol Johnson  
Christine Springer  
Connor Plagge  
Dena Miner  
Erin Melz  
Heidi Lenk  
Janet Hatfield  
Jen Moen  
Jim Bright

Kay Olson  
Kelsey Kramer  
Kimberly Hinsz  
Kris Palmer  
Lana Delmore  
Lisa Roggenkamp Rakotz  
Lori Chenevert  
Nicole Visnovec  
Paula Arimborgo  
Penny Harms  
Rebeca Person  
Stephen Moreland

# Appendix

## Internal Research

1. Aitkin County Human Resources Workforce Retirement Analysis.
2. Analysis of Aitkin County Workforce Challenges, Motivations & Strengths (Aug 22, 2023).
3. Aitkin County Commissioner Strategic Working Session (November 6, 2023).
4. Strategic Planning SOAR Analysis with Aitkin County Department Heads (January 3, 2024).
5. Strategic Planning SOAR Analysis with Revitalization Team (Jan 16, 2024).
6. Strategic Imperatives Planning with Aitkin County Commissioners (April 4, 2024).
7. Aitkin County Strategic Planning Summit with Internal Stakeholders (May 21, 2024).
8. Aitkin County Strategic Sentiment Survey (May, 21, 2024).
9. Aitkin County Strategic Planning Public Focus Group Report (October 23, 2024).
10. GE Workout Findings & Recommendations for Aitkin County Performance Appraisal Process.

## External Research

1. Minnesota Historical Records Survey. (1942). Inventory of the county archives of Minnesota, no. 1, Aitkin County (Aitkin). The Survey.
2. Census Reporter (2024). Aitkin County, MN Retrieved Nov. 14, 2024 from: <https://censusreporter.org/profiles/05000US27001-aitkin-county-mn/>
3. Study Finds Weak Employee Engagement (2017). National Association of Counties. Retrieved Nov. 14th from: <https://www.naco.org/articles/study-finds-weak-employee-engagement>
4. Harnessing the Engagement of Your Employees (2017). National Association of Counties. Retrieved: Nov 14th, 2024 from: <https://www.naco.org/resources/harnessing-engagement-your-employees-0>



Aitkin County Government Center  
307 2nd Street Northwest  
Aitkin, MN 56431

## *Naturally Better.*

Aitkin County is the intersection of adventure and business opportunity in the heart of Minnesota. With just over one million acres of grassland, boreal forests, lakes, and rivers teeming with wildlife, some of the darkest skies in Minnesota, and more Mississippi River miles than the entire state of Kentucky—you'll never run out of great outdoors to explore.



### **Coffee with the County**

Bite-sized weekly podcast with updates and insights about the county, departments, and employees. Tune in at [www.co.aitkin.mn.us/podcast](http://www.co.aitkin.mn.us/podcast)