



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.



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 tourism¹.

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



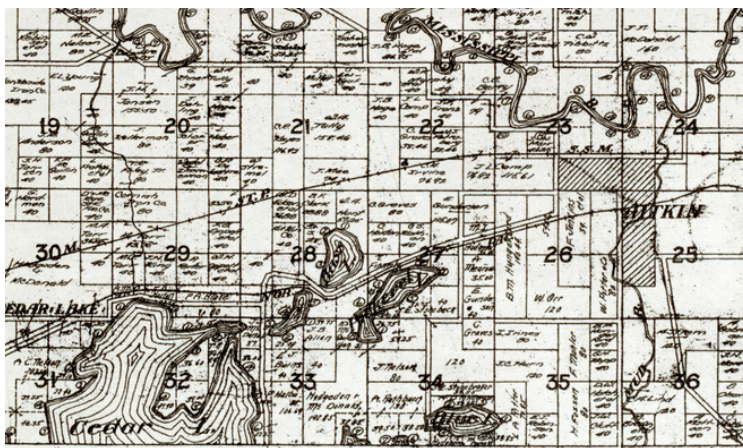
Line of Automobiles (1915), Aitkin County
Courtesy of the Minnesota Historical Society

Our Evolving Landscape

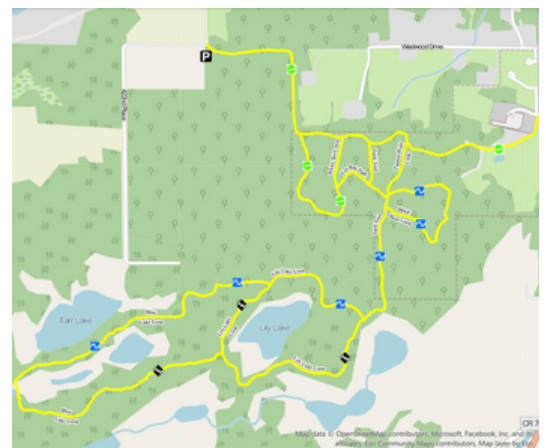
Today, Aitkin County faces a complex blend of challenges and opportunities that this strategic plan seeks to address. Economic contributors have shifted toward healthcare, education, and hospitality, while environmental challenges of being a “Mississippi River area” and aging infrastructure present ongoing 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 transition². 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. **Goals: (1) Track the number of new business or business expansions with a 10% increase year over year; (2) Annual tax base growth on new development year over year; (3) Track the number of businesses that move out of Aitkin County annually.**
- **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. **Goals: (1) The creation of tracking new housing development; (2) Success and utilization of the housing trust fund with 50% of funding expended by year two.**
- **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. **Goal: The review of a minimum 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. **Goals: (1) Increase ATV annual visits; (2) Completion of an economic impact study for Northwood’s ATV Trail System in 2025.**
- **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. **Goals: (1) 10% increase of student program participation each year; (2) Increase revenue growth to maintain financial solvency.**
- **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. **Goal: Present options to the Board of Commissioners on outcomes by December, 2025.**
- **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. **Goal: (1) Develop and pilot customer/community survey by December, 2026.**

- **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. **Goal:** Present investigation of senior volunteer network to the Aitkin County Board of Commissioners by December, 2025.
- **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. **Goal:** 10% increase annually in viewers, followers, and general social media engagement.



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. **Goals: (1)** Development of the dashboard in 2025; **(2)** Quarterly updates to the Board of Commissioners on progress of County initiatives.
- **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. **Goals: (1)** Holding two annual County-wide events; **(2)** Hold Department-led informational sessions quarterly.
- **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. **Goals: (1)** Weekly podcast distribution throughout the strategic plan timeline; **(2)** Continued distribution of the economic development newsletter throughout the strategic plan timeline; **(3)** Quarterly submission of articles to local newspapers by departments.

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. **Goals: (1)** Completion of recruiting video by December, 2026; **(2)** Attend at least one regional career fair per year; **(3)** Update Human Resources webpage by December, 2025.
- **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. **Goal:** Complete a GE Workout on the onboarding process.
- **Transform Reviews into Mentorship:** A gradual shift from traditional annual performance reviews to an ongoing mentorship and coaching approach, where supervisors and department heads actively collaborate with employees to align career goals with organizational objectives - strengthening leadership relationships and supporting career development. **Goals: (1)** Launch Career Coaching pilot in 2025; **(2)** If recommended by a majority of the Department Head Committee, expand career coaching to 5 or more departments in 2026, then to 8 or more departments in 2027.

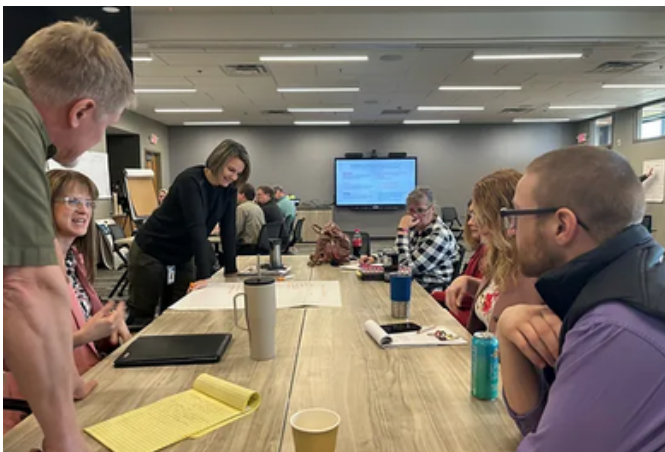
- **Empower Strength-Based Growth:** Recognize and align employees' roles with their inherent strengths through structured supervisor dialogues and team collaboration. Train employees in Gallup StrengthsFinder to foster a culture of fulfillment and personal value, with progress measured by workshop participation rates, and feedback on development. **Goals: (1)** 100% leadership team participation in Gallup Strengthfinder training by December, 2026; **(2)** Incrementally increase the number of employees who have completed Gallup Strengthfinder training and include in the onboarding process for new employees.
- **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. **Goals: (1)** Launch 2nd group of GE Workout training in 2025; 3rd group in 2026; **(2)** Respond to GE Workout requests within 5 days of submission; **(3)** Increase annual savings identified in GE Workouts year over year.
- **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. **Goals: (1)** Require Department Heads and Supervisors to attend a leadership training once every three years; **(2)** Offer at least one half-day (or longer) onsite leadership training program annually; **(3)** Complete survey of employees to determine if we are creating an innovative and supportive work culture.

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. Quarterly updates to the Board of Commissioners will provide a recap of progress.



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

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

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