

SPOTLIGHT ON MARSHA





Gallery Marshall features lively and eclectic streetscapes with colorful murals, a downtown park and memorial shaped by the community, and inviting pedestrian bridges that encourage walking. It also has some novel structures, like a concrete tower used for training emergency responders (left).



The southwest Minnesota regional center and GreenStep City is flourishing thanks to its focus on business and workforce development and investment in welcoming community spaces

**TEXT BY SHERI HANSEN
PHOTOS BY CHAD HOLDER**



What makes a midsize western Minnesota community surrounded by farms and two-lane roads not just survive but thrive in a modern economy? It takes a combination of anchor and emerging businesses, access to transit, deep and broad community involvement, leadership that embraces change, and a commitment to an environmentally and economically resilient future. Marshall, Minnesota, has all this going for it, and its energy

and prosperity are evident the moment one enters the community.

Located at the heart of Lyon County, Marshall has close to 14,000 residents and has been a vibrant regional center since its founding in 1872 (planning for its sesquicentennial is underway). Home to Southwest Minnesota State University (SMSU), Schwan's Company, and a wide variety of other businesses, it attracts talent from around the region and beyond.

1 The city redeveloped the site of an abandoned gas station in the heart of downtown into Veterans Memorial Park.

2 The compact memorial honoring local veterans creates an oasis with an array of plantings and seating options.



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“We need to be sure we are keeping in close touch with the needs of our residents and our business community before we undertake any development project, to keep our momentum going in the right direction.”

Mayor Bob Byrnes has served in his position since 1992 and has been a driving force behind many of the city’s initiatives, developments, and community activities. City Administrator Sharon Hanson has led city operations since 2017. Byrnes and Hanson sat down with *ENTER* to talk about what keeps Marshall going strong.

COMMUNITY CONNECTIONS

“Marshall continues to be a growing community, and we’re very proud of

that,” says Byrnes. “But many of the communities around us are not growing. We need to be sure we are keeping in close touch with the needs of our residents and our business community before we undertake any development project, to keep our momentum going in the right direction.”

Parks and other public spaces are significant areas of focus for city leadership. In 2008, the city purchased the site of an abandoned gas station on West Main Street and convened the

community to begin developing multi-phase plans for an inviting new park. Today, Veterans Memorial Park creates access to the river that runs through the heart of the town and connects residents with their history of military and community service.

“We think the park really shows what’s possible with a public space,” says Byrnes. “We brought together veterans, public servants, community residents, and students from the university to share ideas and create a concept for the

park. The result is something everyone is very proud of. It's a major asset."

The city is working to create additional public spaces for residents to enjoy. "We've heard in community surveys time and again that one of the best things about living in Marshall is our parks and recreation services," notes Hanson. "We're considering acquiring more vacant land to develop more parks and looking at ways to incorporate things like disc golf and pickleball into our public offerings."

GREENSTEP CITY

Minnesota GreenStep Cities is an assistance and recognition program that helps cities achieve their sustainability and quality-of-life goals. Focused on continuous improvement and encouraging civic innovation, the program promotes voluntary actions that are tailored to each city's circumstances. Marshall has been a

GreenStep City since 2012, embracing the program's goals of sustainable, resilient, climate-adaptive development.

"GreenStep has helped us shape our sustainability practices," says Byrnes. "It also dovetails perfectly with our commitment to creating the highest quality of life we can for all of our residents. We're committed to moving up to the very highest levels of performance as a GreenStep City in the next few years."

3-4 Main-Stay Cafe is a local favorite. Mayor Bob Byrnes notes the community's commitment to supporting local businesses during the pandemic, which helped keep Main Street strong.



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"We want our residents to be healthy and active," says Mayor Bob Byrnes. "Our focus is to provide the infrastructure for that, from parks and grocery stores to restaurants and recreation spaces throughout the city."



“Development doesn’t stop for us,” says City Administrator Sharon Hanson. “We’re doing business and economic development all over Marshall, from redeveloping empty parking lots to partnering with employers to create more jobs and facilities here in town.”

MAIN STREET

While businesses may come and go over time, Marshall’s city and civic leaders have been largely successful in maintaining a full downtown that includes businesses and vendors of many types. Dramatic art installations on the sides of buildings along Main Street enliven the streetscape with creativity and color, encouraging walking and instilling a sense of community.

Redevelopment and infill are other top priorities for Marshall. Because the city is financially strong, it often buys properties for redevelopment and engages the community in identifying businesses and community assets to

be developed. “We’re very proud of the way our Main Street businesses blend with our public buildings,” says Byrnes. “We’ve got a beautiful public library with an updated children’s wing, an aquatic center, and a fire station mixed right in with our business community.”

City Hall was updated in 2021. The original 1914 building, which housed both police and fire services, was redesigned in 1964 when emergency services moved to their own facilities. Over the next half-century, while the structure of the building remained sound and the Main Street location ideal, City Hall’s programmatic needs continued to evolve, until the building was no longer serving the city well.

“The Council Chambers weren’t accessible [to people with disabilities] in the prior layout, and the elevator to get to them was tiny. The council was meeting off-site, which was less than ideal,” Byrnes explains. “We worked with Engan Associates Architects to make City Hall more welcoming. We wanted the public to know that this is their space, too.”

“This update really took advantage of opportunities to bring in natural light,” says Hanson. “We added some space to create conference rooms and meeting spaces, and we opened things up to create that lighter feel. We also incorporated many energy-efficiency elements and used sustainable materials whenever possible to stay in line with our GreenStep commitments.”

MODERN BUSINESS COMMUNITY

Businesses including Runnings, Schwan’s, and Ralco have been part of the Marshall economic picture for decades. Runnings began as a small chain of local hardware stores and now operates more than 50 stores around the country. Schwan’s is a global food conglomerate. Ralco is an agricultural nutrition leader in the region.

“The new Runnings facilities in Marshall are hubs for automation and are bringing in the latest technology to support their businesses,” says Hanson. “They’ve added farm and fleet operations, which really diversifies the job opportunities available with the company. They’ve also been a key part of new commercial/industrial development in our city.”

“We’re incredibly proud to have the Schwan’s business-unit headquarters here in Marshall, especially now that the company has branched out and grown to be a global presence,” says Byrnes. “But the presence of other companies and industries that aren’t about food or



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5 City Hall was recently renovated by Engan Associates Architects to make the building more energy-efficient, accessible, and welcoming to all.

6 The MERIT Center serves as a regional hub for training first responders to manage everything from fires to wind turbine accidents.

7 Southwest Minnesota State University's midcentury Bellows Academic Center.

8 Colorfully expressive murals can be found all around Main Street in downtown Marshall.

“During the pandemic, when many universities struggled to draw students in, SMSU saw an increase in enrollment.”



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agriculture may surprise you. One of our largest employers is U.S. Bank's small capital leasing division. That's 500 jobs, driven largely by a workforce trained at our Southwest Minnesota State campus, right here in town.”

HUB FOR TRANSIT AND WORKFORCE DEVELOPMENT

With a wide variety of businesses engaged in manufacturing, agricultural equipment, and distribution, Marshall has long had to ensure robust transportation options. The city boasts a full commercial airport with one of the longest runways in Minnesota; that runway has been used by experimental aircraft to test takeoffs and landings on a longer airstrip not crowded by commercial air traffic. The town is also on the Burlington Northern Santa Fe (BNSF) Railway main line, an essential lifeline for agribusiness in Marshall and

the surrounding area.

Southwest Minnesota State University, a significant contributor to the Marshall workforce, is thriving. Under the leadership of Dr. Kumara Jayasuriya, the university has been focusing its energies on developing a workforce aligned with the nation's fastest growing fields. “During the pandemic, when many universities struggled to draw students in and maintain enrollment, SMSU saw an increase in enrollment,” says Byrnes. “There's a lot of momentum and energy about that campus, and it's very connected to our community. They have a Center for Entrepreneurship that is doing amazing things for students in the region.”

SMSU isn't the only regional training hub in the city. The Minnesota

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Emergency Response and Industrial Training (MERIT) Center serves as a training facility for police officers, firefighters, and other first responders. It features a driving track and facilities for fire and OSHA emergency response training to help first responders learn how to manage crises like ethanol spills and wind turbine accidents. The center is one of only a few of its kind in Minnesota.

“We’ve had a great relationship with our state legislators for a long time, and they continue to understand just how important the MERIT Center is in the region,” notes Byrnes. “We’ve just received additional bonding dollars to expand training offerings there, which will make it even more useful in this part of Minnesota.”

THE ROAD AHEAD

Marshall’s leaders continue to capitalize on the community’s positive

momentum with more projects on the horizon. The city is working on a plan to modernize its more than 50-year-old aquatic center. Independence Park will soon benefit from enhanced trails and stormwater features. New businesses are repurposing vacant spaces, and the city continues to acquire vacant properties for redevelopment based on needs identified in dialogue with residents.

“Marshall isn’t really a ‘best-kept secret.’ We’ve always been here, providing economic opportunities and a great place to raise a family,” says Byrnes. “We’re just glad to see that more people are realizing what we have to offer. We remain committed to building a great community that is welcoming to all.” 🍷



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