

Great North Alliance

Overview

In mid-1999, interviews with 80 regional executives led to a discussion among Twin Cities civic leaders about a strategy for regional prosperity. The Great North Alliance stemmed from that discussion. Its mission is to boost the community vitality and competitiveness of the Minneapolis-Saint Paul region through objective benchmarking, community visioning, and convening around strategic issues.

The Great North Alliance has yet to get its message out to a broad audience, and its profile remains low. Great North targets CEO-level leaders from business, labor, government and non-profits as its members. It has forged a leadership alliance to develop a 30-year view on critical issues for boosting the region's competitiveness. Because of its use of benchmarking, Board member Curt Johnson calls the Great North Alliance a "measuring stick with a conscience."

Regional Priorities

The Great North Alliance's primary benchmarking tool is the annual Great North Opportunity Forecast, which compares the Twin Cities against 11 other regions on a variety of indicators assessing community infrastructure, innovation capacity, market flow of resources and community performance. The Opportunity Forecast is meant to be a starting point for a regional dialogue toward a vision and strategy for sustaining community vitality and regional competitiveness.

The Great North Alliance recognizes that the Twin Cities region is prospering, but takes a 30-year view to strengthen regional economic development and civic governance. For example, Great North Chief Executive Douglas Petty says regional economic development should focus on raising productivity rather than subsidizing real estate.

Great North has been working on convening stakeholders on important issues such as traffic and transportation, environmental stability, the education gap, business vitality and workforce and business development. Great North currently sees its role

ORGANIZATIONAL SNAPSHOT

Type of Organization

Multi-sector: Led by clear partnership of business, government, civic and community leaders

Unit of Membership

Individual

Number of Members

2003: 27

1998: N/A

Membership by Company Size

Small Companies: 22%

Mid-sized Companies: 30%

Large Companies: 48%

Dues Determined by

Number of company employees, company revenue, industry and sector

Annual Dues Paid by

Largest Member Companies: \$25,000

Smallest Member Companies: \$1,000 or less; "Advisory" members pay \$100

Annual Operating Budget

2003: Less than \$500,000

1998: N/A

Staff Members (FTE)

2003: 1

1998: N/A

Board Members

2003: 22

Regional Priorities

Benchmarking, Community Visioning, Long-Term View, Convening around Regional Issues

as bringing the stakeholders together so that the stakeholders themselves can make things happen.

Structure and Operations

A challenge for the Great North Alliance is to raise its profile in a region with many other business-civic organizations. It has established itself as a credible research group, but has yet to move beyond that. Mr. Petty says the group must overcome the suspicion among some businesses that it has an agenda other than boosting the region. “The chambers don’t really understand what Great North is doing. They think there is an agenda,” said Petty. The role that Great North hopes to play is something like that of the Hampton Roads Partnership or North Texas Commission — a researcher, a convener of leaders and a visionary for issues of regional competitiveness and quality of life.

The Great North Alliance has 27 members, about half of which are large companies. It is led by a 22-member, multi-sector Board of business, government, civic and community leaders. Its annual budget is less than \$500,000, and member dues are based on number of employees, company revenue and industry sector. Dues range from \$25,000 for the largest member companies to \$100 for “advisory” members.

Great North plans to continue collecting dues from members but is considering 501(c)3 status, which would make it eligible for donations and foundation monies. It has one full-time staff member.