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FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

The Heartbeat of a Small Town Business Community

The Benson Chamber of Commerce is interested in a better understanding of the needs and assets of the local business community. Recently, the group created a working team to discuss how to provide better services for its members. As American Express states, "Membership Has Its Privileges." It was determined that the Chamber would survey business owners in an attempt to better understand issues confronting area businesses and improve response to business needs in the community.

To accomplish this, the Center for Small Towns at the University of Minnesota, Morris was brought into the project. Neil Linscheid, a UMM senior from St. Paul majoring in Political Science, and Ben Winchester, staff at the Center, were hired by Chamber to develop and implement a survey to find out more about the business community. It was agreed that the survey should continue over time, allowing a "heartbeat" of the business community to be monitored. This type of time-series analysis brought to mind the Consumer Confidence Index that determines the level of optimism that may exist in the attitude of the consumer population. Why couldn't one be created that measures Business Confidence? As a result, a section was written to measure such a concept, which was termed the *Business Barometer*.

Additionally, business fiscal requirements and overall satisfaction with the support services that are available in the community were also measured. "This allows the Chamber to address the concerns and challenges facing the Benson business community in a timely fashion," says Ben Winchester. The result of the summary was presented to the Chamber board on November 17th, 2004. Heather LeClair, Manager of the Benson Area Chamber of Commerce, quotes "This survey was very important in helping the Chamber identify the needs of the business owners. The Chamber has been working very hard in giving benefits to its Chamber members and the survey can help us identify what is wanted by our businesses."

The results showed that there has been a strong business community in Benson, with over half of the businesses starting before 1970. These businesses have continued under new management and ownership, building off the entrepreneurial base that exists in the area. Generally it appears that the business community is overwhelmingly optimistic (score of 86) and expects sales to increase in the next year (score of 78). The overall Business Barometer score was 75, which is difficult to interpret, as this is only the first year, and there is nothing to compare it to. Joint advertising, tourism development, and health care topped the list of needs by the businesses. LeClair states "One of the questions asked was what types of benefits would you like to have offered by the Chamber of Commerce and one of the top answers was tourist development. I think this is very exciting! We currently have a tourism group that

meets weekly and has created and printed some new brochures on Benson. We need to promote our town, in order for others to know about us.” This survey will be given every year and the barometer score can then be compared with this baseline figure.

The Center for Small Towns is a community outreach program housed at the University of Minnesota, Morris and serves as a point-of-entry to the resources of the University of Minnesota. Small towns, local units of government, K-12 schools, non-profit organizations, and other University units are able to utilize the Center's resources as they work on rural issues or make contributions to rural society. Their Mission is to focus the University's attention and marshal its resources toward assisting Minnesota's small towns with locally identified issues by creating applied learning opportunities for faculty and students. This project was also completed in partnership with the University of Minnesota Extension Service.

Contributed by Jessica Beyer '02, community program assistant at the Center for Small Towns