

OPINION

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LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

A "No Plastic" Poem

We've talked about plastic year after year -
 The pollution it causes - the creatures that die -
 The oceans and rivers all filled up with trash -
 A problem that none of us dares to deny.

We thought that a poem would be sort of fun
 To remind lots of people of some of the ways
 You can help keep our planet from being a mess -
 They just take a moment on our busiest days.

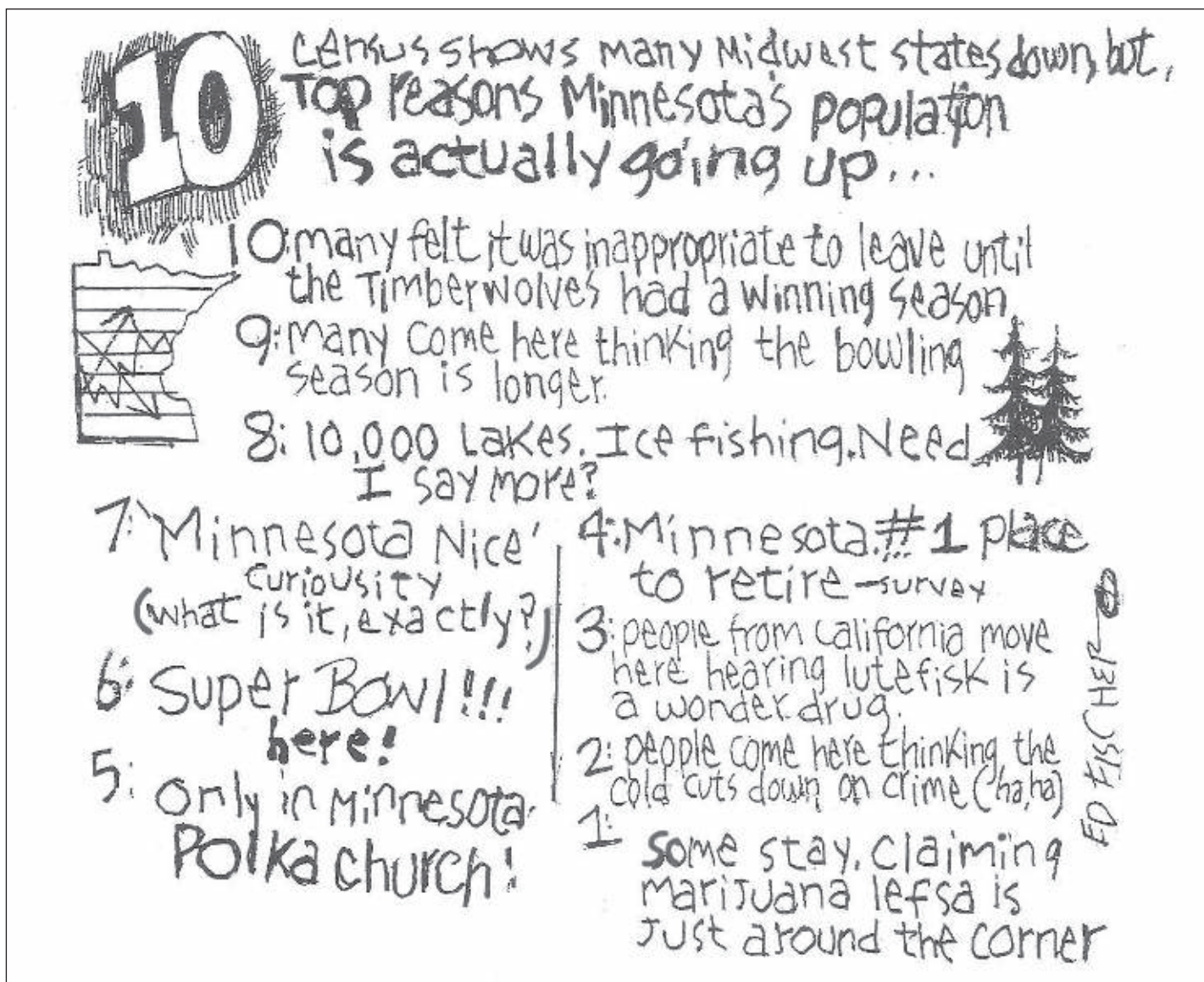
Please remember the bags stashed in your cars -
 We love seeing them carried in shops and in stores.
 So keep them in view however is best -
 In your cars, your backpacks, or hung on your doors.

Say "No" to the straws that most do not need.
 Mom taught us to drink from the rim of a cup -
 From the edge of a glass without any straws
 We were able to easily drink our milk up.

And those bottles of water that cost us a bunch -
 Don't waste your money - they're a corporate trap.
 Just use your own bottle day after day
 And fill to the brim from your very own tap.

Our thanks to all who have done the right thing.
 We see you in stores and shops at the mall -
 We see that you care for the land and the sea
 And for all of God's creatures, great and small.

**Pat Helmsberger
 Barb Veit
 Co-chairs BYOBag
 Committee
 Grand Rapids Area Earth
 Circle**



COMMENTARY

When discussing diversity and inclusion, include people with disabilities

BY PETER MCDERMOTT

Minnesota has come a long way when it comes to diversity and inclusion in the workplace. We've learned that our differences are assets, and diversity of thought, experience and identity translates into meaningful work, success and growth, no matter the industry. Companies and their leaders have made commitments to diversity and inclusion, setting goals and benchmarks for success – but most of those commitments are missing a huge piece of the puzzle. People with disabilities are continually left out of the diversity and inclusion conversation in the business community, and it shows. Here in Minnesota, individuals with disabilities are 2.6 times more likely to be unemployed than the general population, among people ages 18-64, according

to a 2017 report from the Minnesota State Demographic Center. This is a crisis that can be solved. At MDI, we operate on a social enterprise model, successfully hiring and training people with disabilities who make up nearly 45 percent of our 450 employees. Our operations in plastics manufacturing and assembly services are second to none, providing high-quality and efficient services to everyone from food distributors to medical device companies to the U.S. Postal Service, Fedex, USP and Amazon. People with disabilities bring unique skills and talents to the table that make our organization great, and it doesn't take much to create an inclusive environment for them. Support, limited accommodations and focusing on their abilities – instead of disabilities – are the key ingredients to creating an inclusive and productive

culture for people with disabilities. Businesses cannot be truly diverse if people with disabilities are continually ignored on leadership agendas and in diversity, equity and inclusion statements. In honor of October's National Disability Employment Awareness month, we are calling on all of Minnesota's incredible organizations, both large and small, to reexamine or rewrite their diversity and inclusion statements to intentionally include people with disabilities. We know that our differences make us stronger – but it takes inclusion to make them matter. Unified work brings us one step closer to realizing it. *Peter McDermott is the president and CEO of MDI with facilities in St. Paul, Hibbing and Cohasset.*

LGA increase provides critical boost to cities, but difficult budget decisions remain

BY AUDREY NELSEN

As the Minnesota Legislature wrapped up its special session last May, one state lawmaker spoke out about the increases in Local Government Aid and County Program Aid in the 2019 tax bill. Cities, she said, "should be fat and happy for a long time" thanks to the \$30 million boost in LGA. Now that cities are in the midst of important budget discussions, I keep thinking back to that comment and how it trivializes the challenges cities face in prioritizing the needs of our residents and communities. Let me be clear — city leaders are extremely grateful for the LGA increase. Organizations like the Coalition of Greater Minnesota Cities (CGMC) advocated for years to get LGA funding back to its 2002 high-water mark. Thanks to support from Gov. Walz and numerous legislators, program funding will finally be fully restored by 2021. Still, I bristle at the notion that cities should now be "fat and happy." The \$30 million in new LGA funding is distributed between 760 cities. The median increase that a city will receive in 2020 is 4.2%. That is a welcome bump, but it is important to note that inflation alone is forecast to rise by 3.1% from this year to next. To put it in household terms, the LGA increase passed by the Legislature is akin to getting a raise

at your job at the same time as your landlord ups the rent. The raise certainly makes the rent increase easier to swallow, but it does little to help you get ahead. The way a city chooses to use its LGA depends on a number of factors such as the state of its infrastructure, equipment and staffing needs, and rising costs. In an unscientific poll taken at a CGMC gathering this summer, about one-third of city officials said they plan to use the 2020 LGA increase to reduce or hold down their levy, while nearly two-thirds said the increase barely keeps up with rising costs. My city, Willmar, is poised to get a \$272,000 boost in LGA in 2020. However, the cost of health insurance for city employees is going up 30%, nearly \$500,000. This added expense alone far exceeds any additional LGA that Willmar will receive. Here are examples of how other cities in Greater Minnesota plan to use their additional LGA:

- Fergus Falls plans to use much of its \$85,386 increase on street repairs and other infrastructure improvements.
- Bemidji is using its \$161,560 increase to keep its levy increase at 3% instead of nearly 6%.
- Winona plans to use the majority of its \$160,620 increase to help hire additional firefighters.
- Little Falls plans to use its \$136,790 boost to help offset salary increases for city employees and an increase in health insurance costs.

- Eveleth will use part of its \$140,869 increase to hire a patrol officer, which will help the city continue to provide police services to a neighboring township while addressing the challenges of the opioid crisis.

As prices for everything from concrete to electricity to health insurance premiums continue to rise, city officials are still forced to make difficult choices when setting city budgets. We are not aiming to pave the streets in gold, but we do want fewer potholes. The truth is that other than LGA and property taxes, cities have few ways to get revenue to provide the services and amenities on which our residents depend. One way to help ensure that the quality of city services is not determined by zip code would be to peg LGA to inflation, as Gov. Walz has suggested. This is something municipal organizations like the CGMC have supported the past and which deserves renewed attention by the Legislature. City officials are pleased with the increase in LGA, but city coffers are certainly not busting at the seams. As cities set their 2020 budgets, difficult decisions will have to be made. The modest boost in LGA helps provide a cushion, but cities remain far from "fat and happy." *Audrey Nelsen is a member of the Willmar City Council and president of the Coalition of Greater Minnesota Cities.*

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