The deadline looms: 7 PM. In less than half an hour about 200 community residents will take seats in the Big Lake High School multi-purpose room and watch their community vision unfold before their eyes. Before then, the presentation boards need to be finished. So, in the art room, amidst the last remnants of a hastily consumed dinner and a maelstrom of Prismacolors and Crayolas, 16 designers are getting frantic. Trail master plans are completed and labeled, lakeshore mitigation graphics are being colored, community goals have been written and illustrated, and regional context maps are getting their finishing touches.

It is the downtown commercial core everyone in Big Lake is worried about. And that, in a less literal sense, is how this story begins.

Big Lake, Minnesota, started out as a resort community, located the perfect distance (in the early 1900s) from the Twin Cities. It was close enough to be a great weekend spot but too far away to become a bedroom community. Today, however, it seems much closer to the city. Suburban development is happening in the surrounding township, and the downtown has been all but shuttered by better shopping opportunities at the suburban fringe, a mere 20 miles away.

Big Lake was worried about its downtown commercial core, so the Minnesota Design Team (MDT) was enlisted to help. This happily ad hoc group of landscape architects, architects, planners, engineers, and other community design professionals has been assisting Minnesota communities for 20 years by facilitating two-day on-site charrettes, designed to explore local desires and translate those desires into a tangible vision.

Communities apply for MDT visits, and are selected based on community-wide letters of support, evidence of community preparedness, and demonstrated need. The MDT Steering Committee then enlists two or three volunteers to act as co leaders for the visit. It is their duty to organize a design team, drawing from a pool of hundreds of professionals. The co leaders meet periodically with a city steering committee to check on the progress of the visit planning and offer recommendations for events, speakers, and general logistics. They are, however, merely training wheels. They give a little help to the city where needed, but community volunteers are ultimately responsible for the visit preparations. These volunteers must secure meeting rooms, set up home stays for the team members, organize a community tour, invite informational speakers, and ensure there will be food for the hungry designers – not that they will take much time to eat it.

Herein lies the key to the MDT process. In the midst of organizing, scheduling, and delegating, the community gets fired up. People learn how to work together, how to work with elected and appointed officials, and how to collaborate with local institutions and nonprofits. They revisit their hometown and discover their hidden capacities. They revisit their hometown and discover their hidden capacities. They begin to refine their vision – even before MDT sets foot in town.

It has been called “hotdish design,” and the nickname fits. The careful blending of ideas and people that MDT facilitates is an unintentional homage to the Minnesota tradition of throwing a mix of ingredients together in a casserole, putting everyone’s concoctions together on one long table, then sitting down together in school gyms, church halls, and community centers. This sets it apart from the older and equally effective but different Regional/Urban Design Assistance Teams (RUDATs) organized by the American Institute of Architects. The RUDAT team members are usually a panel of recognized experts who spend five days in town. RUDATs are typically much more formal than MDTs, according to W. Arthur Mehrhoff, the author of *Community Design* and Director of the Heritage Preservation Program at Saint Cloud State University in Minnesota. “Community members have been surprised we don’t wear bowties,” he notes. An MDT veteran, Mehrhoff describes the MDT process as using “lots of applied

anthropology ... not that we call it that." The team members' temporary residence at community members' homes ("use of informants" in applied-anthropology-speak) is an effective tool for learning about the community, and one the RUDATs do not employ. He believes that to effectively design for a community, it is important to know the place "in a very deep way." Depth has to happen quickly in two days, but living with community members, designing in the local school, and eating indigenous hotdish helps.

On the first day in Big Lake, the team members listened; on the second, they designed. Friday morning was filled with presentations by community members and statewide experts. Lunch saw the team split up to meet and eat with smaller community groups: high school students, seniors, and business leaders. The afternoon was occupied by a bus tour, complete with the obligatory stop at the local ice cream shop.

At the conclusion of the first day of the visit, the Big Lake community as a whole gathered for supper and discussion. In this key component of the MDT process – the "dot-mocracy" – the team takes an important look at the desires and perceptions of the greater population. Based on its current understanding of the community, MDT poses several key questions to the gathered throng, to which responses are written anonymously. The responses are shuffled among small groups, recorded, and plastered to the walls on large sheets, where the attendees vote – with colored dots – for the responses that resonate with them the most. This approach is not novel, but for many residents, this simple gesture of privacy is empowering. For the team, the graphic representation of community desires leads directly to the next day's design work.

Armed with as much information as can be gained in one day, the Big Lake team reconvened Saturday morning, and the work began. Boxes filled with markers, pencils, and sundry low-tech supplies jostled for space with 30-by-40-inch title blocks and base maps. Windows were used for tracing. Some team members made quick runs out into the community to check sites. And through it all, despite the seeming chaos, a final presentation was in the works. The team, under the watchful eyes of the co leaders, was working toward a specific set of boards and addressing a specific set of issues. Smaller focus groups illustrated current development patterns, tackled trail networks, made difficult recommendations about the Highway 10 bypass, and created a vision for a redeveloped downtown – all by hand, all without phone calls and construction crises.

"Its fun helping the town, but it's a whole lot of fun being around smart people," is a common sentiment about fellow designers captured by James R. Dean, a photographer and architect who is a veteran of 12 visits. Philanthropy is a centerpiece of MDT's mission (team members are asked not to introduce themselves by their firm name or distribute business cards during the visit), but the excitement and purity of the visit itself keep bringing the participants back. Landscape architects, like other designers, wax wistful about those aggressive school days, crammed in a studio with like minded co-conspirators, free from the distractions of marketing and budgets. The MDT lets designers get out of the office for two days of old school design studio. This is a simultaneously exhausting and refreshing experience. It is also a continual draw for landscape architects, who are present on every team and serve as leaders on many. They are drawn to the "spirit of the team brought together in such a haphazard fashion," according to one recent coleader, and to the camaraderie that flows within the team as a result.

Visits can, however, lead to future projects for landscape architects. While interacting with the design professionals, the community begins to recognize the value of landscape architecture and other design disciplines. The MDT teaches small cities and towns the ideas of conceptual design, community identity, streetscape, adaptive reuse, master planning, and other "words of art" of the profession. This instills in

those cities the desire to look to design professionals in the future, long after MDT has packed up and left. In the best cases, the camaraderie and the prospect of ongoing work go hand in hand.

Though he has been a landscape architect for 25 years, Michael Schroeder talks like a college student when asked about his experience as an MDT member at Taylors Falls in 1990. Schroeder experienced profound social and creative rewards during the weekend, and the community has been bringing him back over the years as a professional resource. Taylors Falls took the MDT drawings and ran with them, literally. Those laminated butcher-paper masterpieces have been trotted out to community gatherings, meetings with state departments, workshops with outside consultants, and local festivals. In 1994 the community worked collaboratively with the Department of Transportation to complete a pedestrian walkway under the Saint Croix River bridge, which had previously separated the community from the adjacent Interstate State Park. Soon after, a beautification project installed new sidewalks, streetlights, and planters downtown. In 2000, the City worked with Schroeder, then of Hoisington Koegler Group, Inc., to complete the Taylors Falls Strategic Guide. The primary goal of this document is to revisit – 10 years later – the vision of the community that was first articulated during the MDT visit and to refocus the disparate improvement activities back to common goals. As a result, the city is currently working to secure funding for a downtown riverwalk and to establish downtown design guidelines.

Most recently, Schroeder was in Taylors Falls to facilitate a design workshop with the Minnesota Departments of Transportation and of Natural Resources. The purpose was to discuss parking at the state park and the difficult circulation patterns at the City's main entrance. Schroeder describes that meeting as a group of people talking over a drawing board. "The lessons they learned about public engagement from MDT have been institutionalized," he says of the now typical design collaborations that take place in Taylors Falls. In fact, there are more people coming out for meetings now than did for the MDT visit, due to a process that is public, open, and voluntary.

Taylors Falls is not the only MDT success story. Little Falls, on the Mississippi River 100 miles upstream from Minneapolis, welcomed MDT in 1991 and has since rebuilt a key park in the center of the community, restored a pair of lumber baron mansions as a conference center, contracted with a landscape architect to complete a set of specific buildable strategies for downtown beautification, and received National Historic District designation for its commercial core. Paynesville (MDT class of 1990) built a senior center with the help of over 4,000 volunteer hours, while its ambitious group of young people, the RiverGuard was cleaning up the river and beginning work on a trail system. Avon (class of 1996) built a downtown trailhead to serve the Lake Wobegon Trail. South Saint Paul (class of 1987) has opened its Mississippi River waterfront to public use and contracted with a local landscape architecture firm to design its downtown streetscape, which will be built this summer.

The idea is also catching on in other states. Scott Loveridge was an MDT Steering Committee member before relocating to West Virginia. There, in 1997, he created a program, with university assistance, that follows the MDT format almost exactly. The West Virginia Community Design Team (WVCDT) has visited 21 communities already. WVCDT, like the MDT, enlists a variety of professionals for weekend charrettes, but their teams are more likely to include social scientists, business leaders, and health care professionals along with landscape architects and other designers. After each visit, WVCDT compiles a report to accompany the boards produced during the weekend. This added textual tool is especially useful in dealing with the unique age disparity and health care availability issues with which West Virginia deals. Most WVCDT communities are just beginning to consider implementation of their visions, but the charrette teams' boards, distributed to the city after the visit, often hang prominently for public view and inspiration.

MDT also distributes the charrette boards to the communities as an implementation tool, and usually returns to a community six months after a visit to touch base and answer any general implementation questions. In general, however, the degree to which a community is willing or able to implement MDT's suggestions is entirely up to them. Though this is exactly how MDT wants it, some communities in the past have failed to effectively navigate the often daunting bureaucracy of funding and public agencies that stand between them and improvements. To rectify this problem, MDT has begun to partner with state agencies and other nonprofits that have the staff and resources to continue to assist MDT communities. "The design team should leave behind infrastructure," suggests Janette Monear, Director of Outreach Programs for Tree Trust, a Minnesota nonprofit devoted to sustaining urban forests. Tree Trust has recently partnered with MDT to work with communities – after the charrette weekends – to help build the immediate successes that are so crucial to keeping a vision alive. After a 2001 visit, Monear and her organization assisted Hendricks in securing a state grant, planting hundreds of trees at community gateways, and continuing to refine trail concepts set forth during the MDT weekend. Since an MDT visit to Rockford in 2000, Tree Trust has been working with local at-risk youth and a landscape architect to implement a small pocket park. This multi-organization approach to implementation does a better job of helping MDT communities stay the course, while preserving the weekend charrette that keeps all the designers coming back. Organizations such as Tree Trust, the Minnesota Project, and the State Office of Environmental Assistance help the MDT help the communities long after the charrette has left town.

Before leaving town, the Big Lake team presented its interpretation of the community's vision. The exhausted designers gathered in the multi-purpose room along with 150 or so people from the community. They then presented the 20 boards that reiterated the lessons learned from the community and sketched the possible future. The presentation, in its broadest sense, turned those 150 or so people from resources into activists. On Thursday night, the members of the Big Lake design team learned from these people: saw the town through them, listened to their oral histories, and developed visions of the future based on their teachings. On Saturday night, the design team handed back the reins.

The first thing those teachers-cum-activists did after the MDT left Big Lake was change the name of the Community Improvement Committee. That energetic group of locals that brought the MDT to town, fed them, housed them, provided the framework for their designs, and essentially communicated the vision for the community is now appropriately called the Big Lake Design Team.

"MDT really gave some tremendous effort," states Jim Thares, the community economic development director. He is a member of the Big Lake Design Team, itself now charged with tremendous effort. This group has immediately moved forward from the MDT visit by hiring a landscape architecture firm to create a more-detailed downtown master plan. The consultant is using the MDT drawings as a basis for the plan, which should be expected in an MDT community.

Thares, however, sees an even greater impact of the visit. Two mixed-use development proposals are in the review process in Big Lake: one within the downtown area, one on the outskirts. The city is not only pushing for higher quality architecture and site planning in both projects, but is working with the developers to ensure that the mix of uses, particularly for the downtown development, complements the community's desired downtown character. Thares believes that the city educated itself as to what to expect from consultants and developers. He says Big Lake "should not look like one of a thousand places in the country."

The big idea behind the Minnesota Design Team is simple: run a weekend design studio on site in a rural city and leave that community with a visual interpretation of their hiding-just-beneath-the-surface vision. And get them to provide the meals. Sometimes, the visions get built. Sometimes landscape architects are

hired to refine and help build those visions. Always, there is education. Many communities that the MDT visits simply do not know what a landscape architect is. Many do not know the impact design can have. The MDT leads by example. Fifteen to twenty designers volunteer to get out of the office and design for one fast-paced weekend. And the results can be quite tasty.