

The Fergus Falls Daily Journal

People line up to move Fergus Falls forward

By [Ryan Howard](#) ([Contact](#)) | The Daily Journal

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About 200 excited people gathered in M State's Legacy Hall at 7:30 Thursday morning to officially kick off Forward Fergus Falls. They were treated to a number of short speeches by various city, business and educational leaders from Fergus Falls. Each speech (most lasted about three minutes) briefly encapsulated one of the several goals, or destiny drivers, the Forward Fergus Falls group has set for the city. After the event, residents were urged to help make Fergus Falls a better place by getting involved with whichever of the drivers they were most interested in.

The event was emceed by Fergus Falls School District Superintendent Jerry Ness. Ness fed off the crowd's excitement, making the proceedings fun for the crowd while explaining all of the initiatives the city wants to move forward.

Ness explained that last year, the group surveyed about 1,500 Fergus Falls residents about the state of the community. What the group found was encouragingly positive, but it definitely left room for growth. Based on the results of the survey, the original members of the group (referred to as "stewards") worked to come up with the initial list of destiny drivers.

Two words used most frequently in the survey to describe Fergus Falls were "conservative" and "beautiful." Many of the drivers were focused on building off of those two ideas -- or, as some speakers put it, building new opportunities from the community's "anchors."

The group split up the 15 destiny drivers into three broad categories: sustaining a healthy economy, fostering a livable community, and working to create an "everybody in, nobody out" mentality in the city.

A highlight of the healthy economy speakers was Service Food Owner Gary Spies, who talked about the goal of creating and supporting 100 jobs each year for the next five years. The crowd cheered when it was announced that 300 jobs have already been created in the city in 2010.

Spies said the only way to create that many jobs every year is with cooperation of the whole city. He talked about the "unbelievable experience" of watching money for the cancer care and research center flow in since 2008, and he said he knows that if that amount of support can come in from people for the center, it can come in from people to help create jobs. He also said citizens should appreciate the large employers in the city, as they supply many jobs to the community.

During the “Everybody In” presentations, Ness and Hillcrest Academy Principal Jeff Isaac spoke on how Hillcrest and the Fergus Falls school district want to cooperate to raise the percentage of Fergus Falls high school graduates who attain post-secondary education to 92 percent. They’re already pretty close, as 85 percent of public school students go on, and 97 percent of Hillcrest grads do.

Isaac added that there are many post-secondary options for today’s graduate, including many that do not involve four-year colleges. The schools, he said, should have a goal of presenting kids with “as many opportunities after high school as possible.”

First up in the livable community presenters was Dan Zierden, the manager of Cullen’s Home Center. He spoke with excitement about expanding the reach and quality of the Fergus Falls River Walk. “We have an unbelievable resource running through town,” he said. “It has so much potential.”

After the talks were done, as many people went waited in line at a sign-up table to get involved in the drivers of their choice, Ness said he was “very pleasantly surprised” at the turnout. He was very optimistic about the future of Forward Fergus Falls.

“This is great town,” he said, adding that, with the help of citizens on projects they care about, it will stay great for a long time.

Healthy economy speakers and their topics were Gary Spies, create and support 100 jobs or more each year for the next five years; Dave Bickett, market Fergus Falls as a telecommuting-ready community; Harold Stanislawski, establish at least two bio-related businesses in the next five years; Dave Umlauf, establish a \$1 million Angel Venture Fund by 2012; and Larry Schulz, establish an Orthopedic Center of Excellence.

Livable community speakers and their topics were Dan Zierden, support and expand the River Walk revival efforts; JoEllen Thacker and Ron Spangler, establish baseline usage for bike trails, snowmobile trails and recreational facilities; Rebecca Petersen, focus on organizing, promoting and increasing participation for 10 annual weekend-long signature events through arts, history and the cultural heritage of the area by 2012; and Tom Rufer, kick off one community-wide “Being Green” project in 2011.

“Everybody In” speakers and their topics were Mary Matteson, created a Youth Summit to facilitate youth leadership participation by 2010; Jerry Ness and Jeff Isaac, attain 92 percent of high school graduates moving on to post-secondary education; Anna Wasescha, a 10 percent increase or more in enrollments at M State - Fergus Falls over the next five years; Lori Larson, send two additional groups of community leaders to the Blandin Leadership Training Program by 2014; and Cindy Skalsky, create and implement a community-wide diversity program, celebrating cultural diversity and understanding.

For more information about how to get involved with Forward Fergus Falls, check out the group’s Web site at www.forwardfergusfalls.org, or contact one of the speakers.

