

<https://www.wsj.com/us-news/climate-environment/a-conservative-farm-town-went-green-without-really-trying-e4a52fc1>

## A Conservative Farm Town Went Green Without Really Trying

By Edward Humes | Photographs by Tim Gruber for WSJ

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The farm town of the future is visible long before you reach the city limits, thanks to a pair of wind turbines rising as high as the Statue of Liberty above the flat terrain. They pump cheap electricity into the local grid, providing the energy to make carbon-neutral fertilizer. Closer in, cows graze next to solar panels that provide them with shade. A county-wide compost operation disposes of food and agricultural waste, electric buses take kids to school, the public library relies on geothermal heating and even a city-owned liquor store has rooftop solar panels. (The shop motto: “We chill your beer with the sun.”)

Where is this environmental Nirvana that’s checking off so many boxes on the climate warrior’s wish list? Denmark? Germany? Northern California? No, it’s Morris, Minn., population 5,206, a conservative prairie community in a conservative rural county that favored Donald Trump by 22 points in the 2020 presidential election.

It’s fair to say that environmental and climate concerns have never been front of mind when it comes to votes and policies in Morris. But residents will talk all day long about rural self-sufficiency, high energy and fuel costs, saving tax dollars and eliminating costly inefficiency and waste. When Troy Goodnough, the director of sustainability at the local campus of the University of Minnesota, arrived more than 15 years ago and asked how he could help address those economic concerns, a partnership emerged that has made Morris one of the most sustainable farm towns in America—even though that was never the town’s goal.



Troy Goodnough, the campus’s sustainability director, bet that the cost-saving goals of farmers could lead them to choices that also were good for the environment.

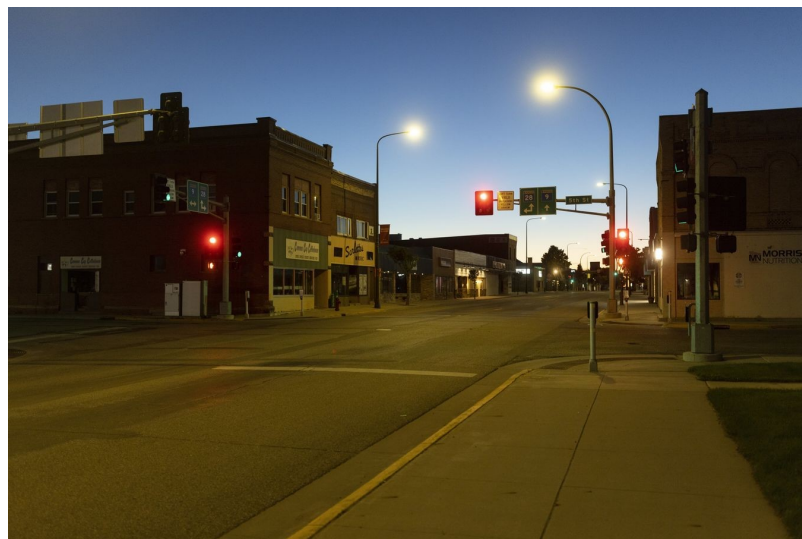
Goodnough’s bet was that the common-sense, cost-saving goals the farmers prized could lead them to choices that also happened to be good for the environment. But could it really be as simple as changing the terms of that conversation? Yes,

says Blaine Hill, the recently retired city manager who helped make it happen. “We never made it about climate. We just did it because it makes sense. And the more we did, the more we wanted to do.”

The result has been dubbed “the Morris Model” by its participants: the town, the school district, Stevens County and the campus of 1,500 students. They are making their data and blueprints available to other communities interested in trying something similar. Thirteen other towns in Minnesota are at various stages of adapting Morris Model projects. The one furthest along is spearheaded by the city of Fergus Falls, with the help of a regional planning nonprofit. They are organizing 10 other rural towns into a “solar cohort” to increase purchasing power and simplify the complex grant process to get state and federal aid for these efforts.

What aspect of the Morris Model most helped Blaine Hill sell the idea to mayors and other town officials? It was the solar-powered Morris liquor store. “Morris broke the ice,” says Fergus Falls mayor Benjamin Schierer. “Now we’re working with towns as small as 150 people who happen to have a municipal liquor store, and we can show them how to put a 40-kilowatt solar system on it and that the community can benefit. The big idea we can grab from the Morris Model is: Once you open that door, the possibilities are endless.”

The Morris Model started small, with garbage. For generations, farm and food waste had gone to the dump. In 2012, a group of students at the university launched a for-profit compost operation so successful that it soon expanded beyond the campus to accept drop-offs county-wide. Eventually the students donated the whole operation to a grateful Stevens County. From the farmers’ perspective, those “kids next door” helped them turn trash into cash.



Downtown Morris benefits from solar panels on fields around town and LED streetlights that save \$80,000 a year.

Goodnough sensed an opening. The Morris city government had a tight budget, and its high electric bills were a sore spot. The university, meanwhile, had just realized substantial savings by converting old lighting on campus to modern LEDs. Goodnough offered to help the city do the same, including help with tapping into Department of Energy funds to offset the upfront costs. The conversion ended up saving the city \$80,000 a year—a significant windfall for a small town. Soon, the Morris town elders came to the university to ask, “What’s next?”

The idea of energy independence captured the town’s imagination, sparked more when Goodnough arranged for student and community leaders to visit a German farm community, Saerbeck. The town had gone far beyond energy independence to make many times the energy it needs for itself with solar power, wind and biogas, selling the bulk of the renewable power for a profit.

Hill, the Morris city manager at the time, bonded with the German town manager, a self-described pragmatic conservative like himself, who said he wanted a legacy of a self-sufficient farm community for his grandkids. Hearing that from someone other than a college student or a professor was Hill’s “aha” moment, he says: Minnesota’s wind resources were as good as

Germany's, he reasoned, and Morris had more sunny days than Saerbeck. Why leave all that on the table?

Local precedent helped pave the way: The two wind turbines on the college campus had already demonstrated their value to the region. They make four times the power the campus needs, with the rest of that cheap electricity flowing into the local grid, where commercial utility rates are about a third the national average.



Morris's public library relies on geothermal heating.

Wind also powers a federally funded pilot project to make “green ammonia,” fertilizer made without fossil fuels by using wind energy to generate the heat and pressure needed to mix nitrogen and hydrogen into the ammonia compound. A small demonstration system is being replaced by a \$12-million experimental factory scheduled to come online in September and churn out one metric ton a day. Having access to a local, inexpensive source of fertilizer is a game changer for farmers.

By 2018, the Morris Model had 100 projects under way. It set out to end the landfilling of waste by 2025 and to produce 80% of the county's energy and reduce energy consumption by 30% by 2030. The town hired one of Goodnough's protégés to be its first sustainability director and another to drive the town's electric bus and run the compost program.

Similar ideas can be seen in community-university collaborations in North Carolina intended to build up defenses against extreme weather and in Miami's efforts to cope with rising sea levels. They're also visible in a program to revitalize downtown Fresno in the heart of California's most vital agricultural region, the Central Valley.

The common thread in these projects is that they have been promoted as a way to cut waste and costs and to create local independence—which has helped them win support in states both red and blue. “If it can happen here, it can happen anywhere,” says Goodnough of rural Morris. Schierer, the Fergus Falls mayor down the road, agrees about the effect of their neighbor's example: “That's what made it safe for us to go there.”

### Corrections & Amplifications

Benjamin Schierer is the mayor of Fergus Falls, Minn. One reference to him in an earlier version of this article misidentified the town as Fresno Falls. (Corrected on July 3.)

*Edward Humes's most recent book is “Total Garbage: How We Can Fix Our Waste and Heal Our World,” published in April by Avery.*



A deer in a field outside of Morris.

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