

EAST RANGE JOINT POWERS BOARD

Our Partnership at Work

A summary of Northspan's role, activity, and impact across the East Range

How Northspan Decides What to Do. Northspan's work with ERJPB is driven by a strategic plan, the most recent of which was created in 2023 as a 3-year plan to guide the board. Since then, we have sought to methodically check off the items listed in this plan. We are always available to discuss things that are not listed in the plan as they arise, and have done so when communities have brought them to us.

8 YEARS OF SERVICE	55 BUSINESS VISITS	4× LOAN FUND GROWN	\$1.2M BROADBAND PROJECT
\$327K LOANS DEPLOYED	15 LOANS & GRANTS	<\$70K AVG. NORTHSPAN COST	\$15K PER COMMUNITY / YR

WHAT'S INSIDE

- | | |
|----------------------------|--------------------------------------|
| 01 Business Visits | 08 Additional Business Supports |
| 02 Loan Fund | 09 Administrative Work |
| 03 Broadband | 10 What We Have Not Done |
| 04 Housing | 11 Realities of Economic Development |
| 05 Grant Support | 12 The Future Is Regional |
| 06 Administrators Meetings | 13 Holding the Line |
| 07 Regional Marketing | |

01 Business Visits

Northspan has conducted intensive business visit rounds with the East Range in 2019, 2022-2023, and 2025, collectively totaling 55 visits. This model allows us to measure challenges across time and gather aggregated feedback we have used to create meaningful changes, such as a relaunch of the loan fund to address specific needs. We have checked with communities to see which businesses would benefit from visits; each time, we have visited multiple businesses in each community. Feedback from these visits has been shared with the Minnesota Chamber of Commerce to inform overall business policy. Over half of the loans issued through the ERJPB loan fund have stemmed from the connections made through these visits. We are always available to meet with businesses on an as-needed basis.

Specific recommendations that have come out of the visits include:

RECOMMENDATION	STATUS
Put the ERJPB loan fund back to work	Done
Explore a unified business presence	Made its way into Marketing Committee plan; a long-term goal as we explore the viability of an East Range chamber
Explore ways to support business marketing efforts	Led to the creation of a shop local campaign and related materials; ongoing
Develop an incubator space for lease	Has not risen up as a local priority since; remains a possibility
Enhance interconnectedness of tourism efforts	Successful piece of the Marketing Committee, with deeper engagement with Discover the Range and Giants Ridge
Continue East Range Broadband Advocacy Efforts	Continued through successful expansions in the area

02 Loan Fund

The loan fund had been dormant and had not made a loan in years when Northspan took over its administration. Since then, we have twice recapitalized the program, more than quadrupling the pot of available money.

Provided Covid-19 relief grants to six businesses in Aurora and two in Hoyt Lakes

BUSINESS	GRANT
Cutting Edge Hair Salon	\$2,500 Grant
Golden Paws Dog Training	\$1,500 Grant
Haven Bar and Grill	\$2,500 Grant
Hoyt Lakes VFW	\$2,500 Grant
Northern Lights Yoga	\$2,500 Grant
Rasmusson Romper Room (child care)	\$2,500 Grant
Rudy's Bar and Grill	\$2,500 Grant
The Hive	\$2,500 Grant

As of June 2026, two additional applications are in and approximately \$63,000 remains in the fund.

Provided seven loans, including at least one in each community:

BUSINESS	COMMUNITY	AMOUNT	PURPOSE
Aurora Chiropractic	Aurora	\$25,000	building improvements
Classic Woodworks North	Biwabik	\$45,000	new equipment
Golden Paws Dog Training	Town of White	\$50,000	new building and relocation to Town of White
Norma Jean Jofs, LLC	Aurora	\$86,800	new roof for laundromat
Range Lumber Company	Aurora	\$50,000	building improvements
Red Top Construction	Aurora	\$20,000	expansion into new service line
Revolv (fka Stern Assembly)	Hoyt Lakes	\$50,000	new equipment

03 Broadband

In 2020, Northspan took on leadership of a regional broadband assessment and effort to position the region for new broadband investment. This project led to immediate projects on the East Range, including a \$1.2 million project to connect Scenic Acres in the Town of White, which included over \$800,000 in state grant funding and additional IRRR dollars. These efforts also included numerous regional broadband projects, including an expansion in neighboring Biwabik Township.

04 Housing

Housing has been an emerging priority on the East Range. Northspan activity has included:

- Supported one area homeowner through the Seller Readiness Rehabilitation Program, which remains available with a balance of \$30,000.
- Guided an area cohort through the Minnesota Housing Partnership's Housing Institute program to build local capacity.
- Completed a housing study in 2023 that the East Range can use to explain market demand to developers.
- Connected East Range communities with North Shore Development Company services to guide them through concrete steps to improve their project readiness.

05 Grant Support

Northspan has been available throughout the eight years to assist individual communities with grant applications, including successful grants in Hoyt Lakes for the installation of the electronic sign at the entrance to town (IRRR Culture and Tourism, \$20,000) and park upgrades (IRRR Streetscapes, \$50,000). We remain available to support communities when they need added capacity.

COMMUNITY	PROJECT	SOURCE	AMOUNT
Hoyt Lakes	Electronic sign at the entrance to town	IRRR Culture and Tourism	\$20,000
Hoyt Lakes	Park upgrades	IRRR Streetscapes	\$50,000

06 Administrators Meetings

The city/town clerks/administrators on the East Range wear many hats and drive much of local government activity on the East Range. They also face many shared challenges, and a space to share information has proven valuable. To this end, Northspan has convened quarterly administrators meetings for several years, creating a shared space for action.

07 Regional Marketing

- Creation of a marketing committee that has created a unified brand and marketing materials for the East Range
- Established a marketing-specific strategic plan that aligns the communities with Giants Ridge
- Expanded cooperation with Discover the Range and related organizations like Hello Range
- Created eastrange.org to help market the region
- Integrated East Range events calendars with the Discover the Range calendar
- Created paper and digital maps for East Range trail systems

08 Additional Business Supports

- Supported seven East Range businesses and entrepreneurs through our DAWN programming, which we give at no charge to ERJPB. This work has included business concept development, business plan refinement, participation in educational cohorts, and preparation to pursue additional funding.
- Successfully advocated for a business's interests before the Biwabik City Council.
- Workshopped several child care concepts, including close work with interested operators and explorations on partnerships with Mesabi East, and creation of a Community Solutions Action Plan.

09 Administrative Work

- Created an ERJPB website, which had not previously existed
- Created strategic plans to clearly direct ERJPB work
- Quarterly production of an East Range newsletter ([past articles here](#))
- Researched options to diversify and invest ERJPB finances, leading to the creation of a higher-interest account for ERJPB's savings

10 What We Have Not Done

At no point has the Joint Powers Board directed Northspan to actively try to recruit businesses to the East Range. Successful recruitment work on any scale generally requires substantial incentives such as TIF, tax abatement, or other financial packages such as those offered by IRRR. ERJPB cannot offer any of these tools, so we instead aim to partner with other organizations that operate in this space, such as IRRR and APEX. This includes listing area commercial real estate on the Northland Connection site selection tool that we manage and deep knowledge of the process necessary to move a site toward project readiness. We have provided direct support for support efforts to prepare sites such as the Laskin Energy Park (when it was being marketed) and an earlier effort to explore development along the Biwabik Depot rail spur site.

11 Realities of Economic Development

Economic development has changed substantially over the years. Northeast Minnesota's limited labor supply and distance from major freeway distribution corridors, coupled with the state's overall business recruitment climate, make bringing new businesses to this region very difficult. The region does have one strength that have helped make it competitive on a few projects: IRRR's financial power, which nearly landed a Louisiana Pacific plant in the region in the late 2010s and have created opportunities in the new Aurora Industrial Park.

As recent Summit speakers have shared, economic development in this era is rarely built around blind pursuit of jobs and investment. While those are certainly still goals, we recognize that, if certain other supports are not in place, the region won't succeed. This is why we have turned our efforts to topics such as broadband, housing, child care, and marketing the region to make it an attractive place to live. Data and research clearly shows that recruiting people, giving capacity to entrepreneurs, and helping existing businesses grow are by far the most successful strategies for job creation.¹

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When we're helping small businesses on the ground, we know not every idea will take flight. Many of the nation's most successful businesspeople have failed numerous times before they succeed, and we need to help people through several stages of success and failure. People need to be allowed to experiment, fail fast, and move on to new things. That's how business is built. We're here to support people through their journeys, knowing we won't bat 1.000 but still proud of their efforts and always here to receive their ideas positively, no matter where they are in their business journey.

Northspan is proud to have supported many local businesses on their journeys, some of which include:

- Golden Paws Dog Training growing out of a rented space in Aurora and building a new facility in the Town of White that draws in business from far beyond the East Range
- Revolv (formerly Stern Industries) acquiring new equipment and adding over 20 jobs
- Shawn Callahan in Biwabik expanding lodging options and attempting creative building revitalization on Biwabik's Main Street
- Red Top Construction both expanding a new business and later purchasing the former Bradach Lumber to sustain an East Range institution
- Supporting entrepreneur Norma Jean Jofs in several business ventures, including building rehabilitation and the Seller Readiness Rehab Program to help homesellers with issues she identified as a local realtor

¹For examples, see the work of Ben Winchester at University of Minnesota (e.g., podcasts with [Reframing Rural](#) and the [Intelligent Community Forum](#), or his PowerPoint from the 2025 Summit, which Northspan can share); the Aspen Institute's [Thrive Rural Framework](#), and the International Economic Development Council. Additional research from the [Brookings Institute](#), [Kauffman Foundation](#), and [Economic Innovation Group](#) underscores this reality.

12 The Future Is Regional

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The ERJPB is the envy of other small communities who do not have the same structure for cooperation. The existence of ERJPB creates a regional mindset and a culture that has allowed for numerous successful collaborations ranging from the East Range Police Department to the current water project.

With tight local budgets and tight tax bases, limited population growth, and tightening purse strings at a state and national level, the pressure to pool resources will only increase. This doesn't mean that mergers are always the right decision, and we respect that there will be different perspectives. But having the structure to collaborate is essential, and it gives the East Range a leg up over many other communities.

13 Holding the Line

In an era of high inflation, the Joint Powers Board's overall budget and the contributions of individual communities have not budged since Northspan took over as the ERJPB consultant. While Hibbing and Virginia pay individuals salaries (without other considerations) that are around the entire ERJPB's budget, we offer a broad range of services, in addition to administrative expenses and Cherie's support, for **\$110,000 total**, year after year. Because we cooperate as a region, we are able to get ERJPB communities that support for only **\$15,000 per community a year**, a benefit that would never be possible if the communities operated on their own.

A REGIONAL PARTNERSHIP THAT WORKS

NORTHSPAN × EAST RANGE JOINT POWERS BOARD