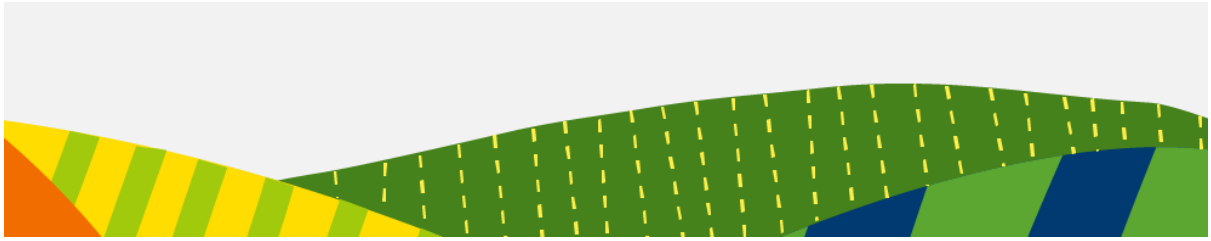

The Brookings Institution
***Reimagine Rural* podcast**

"The Morris Model is helping a Minnesota prairie town go green and avoid partisan divides"

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Guests:

- WARRENN ANDERSON, Attorney/businessman, Morris, Minnesota
- TROY GOODNOUGH, Sustainability Director, University of Minnesota Morris
- BLAINE HILL, City Manager (ret.), Morris, Minnesota
- JACQUELINE JOHNSON, Chancellor (2006–2017), University of Minnesota Morris
- GRIFFIN PECK, Energy and Adaptation Planner, West Central Initiative Foundation
- MIKE REESE, Director of Operations, University of Minnesota West Central Research Outreach Center

Host:

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Episode Summary:

Morris, Minnesota, a rural place on the edge of the prairie, is at the forefront of environmental sustainability. In this episode, Tony Pipa visits Morris to discover how its residents and local leaders have set aside partisan politics to build powerful, trusted partnerships to invest in clean energy and conservation practices that improve the town's economic viability and offer new opportunities to build lasting community wealth.

[sound of bottles clinking, cash register]

PIPA: So this is a new one: I'm at the municipal liquor store in Morris, Minnesota. But I'm not here to shop. Those who know me well know that I don't even drink alcohol! I just came to see the roof. It's lined with solar panels that power the store.

The city of Morris owns the liquor store here, and it's one of four city-owned buildings with this technology. It's just one part of an ongoing community collaboration on environmental sustainability that's come to be known as The Morris Model, a partnership among the University of Minnesota Morris, the City of Morris, the county, and the local school district.

GOODNOUGH: Part of our goal was to open up this dialogue. And so we said we were gonna work on energy conservation, we were gonna work on clean energy. We were gonna work on community resilience, which again, is a way of talking about climate and climate adaptation without saying climate.

PIPA: That's Troy Goodnough, sustainability director at the University of Minnesota Morris.

GOODNOUGH: A key aspect of our Morris Model work and Morris Model partnership is geared towards thinking about how do we build community wealth?

PIPA: In today's episode, we'll learn how the partners that collaborate on the Morris Model managed to set aside politics and implement changes big and small — all while building buy-in in this small, conservative prairie town of 5,200 in the Land of 10,000 Lakes.

[music]

I'm Tony Pipa, a senior fellow in the Center for Sustainable Development at the Brookings Institution. And this is *Reimagine Rural*, the podcast where I talk to local people, capture their stories of the positive changes unfolding in their hometowns, and explore the implications and the intersections with public policy.

Morris is situated in west central Minnesota, 50 miles southeast of the borders with both North Dakota and South Dakota. Agriculture is central to the local economy here. There are 500 working farms in Stevens County, where Morris is the county seat, with corn and soybeans among the top crops.

[2:24]

HILL: Morris is that little community out in the western prairie that is more than just a farm community. There's a very large, religious community here with the Apostolic Christians that are here. And then you have a liberal arts college. But the combination of all of them works really well.

PIPA: That's Blaine Hill, the retired city manager of Morris, and a retired Army lieutenant colonel.

HILL: The community is a fairly wealthy community in that the farm community is doing very well. But, at the same time you have what I consider kind of the regular

community people that were born and raised here in town and maybe stuck around to do work and things like that. One of my high school classmates owns the grocery store. One of ‘em just retired and owned the mechanic shop.

You know, I think the biggest issue we recently went through was fighting over whether or not to put a a large playground in a park. But, you know, we really don’t get into a lot of political issues and things like that.

PIPA: The University of Minnesota system has five satellite campuses. What became the Morris branch had an inauspicious start — it first opened in the late 19th century as one of hundreds of boarding schools for indigenous children across the county. The university acknowledges this history, noting that these institutions “separated children from their families and attempted to eliminate Native languages and cultures, with intergenerational impacts still felt across Indian Country.”

By 1910, Morris became an agriculture boarding school for rural youth and was established as a public liberal arts college in 1960. Native American and First Nations students can attend for free.

The project that came to be known as the Morris Model started long before the moment it got that name in 2015.

[4:29]

JOHNSON: You know, and it’s funny, it’s sort of like when an artist finishes a painting and maybe it’s been painted over multiple times and the final product is what you see — it’s the painting, as if that’s, that’s how it emerged sort of out of nowhere. Well, you know, I think in many ways the Morris Model is like that. It wasn’t just, you know, someone’s vision, strategic thinking, let’s do these 10 things and then we’ll have a Morris Model. Much more incremental than that, I think.

PIPA: That’s Jacquie Johnson, former chancellor of the University of Minnesota Morris.

JOHNSON: So it began with this sense of what can we do that’s different that will help us economically, help us stay alive, basically? Where are we situated as a campus and what’s distinctive about that? And, you know, that is part of the magic, I think. Morris, Minnesota, is just right at the center of wind, and the sun, and biomass. And, you know, there are visionaries there — there were and there still are — visionaries who said, why don’t we use those local natural resources?

PIPA: Even before the Morris Model adopted its official name, people behind the scenes at the university were laying the groundwork for what was to come.

[5:49]

JOHNSON: Lowell Rasmussen, who was in charge of finance and facilities while I was there, says, and I think he’s right, is that the interest in renewable energy, in particular sustainability, came out of economic necessity and fear. Gas prices spiked in the early 2000s. And Lowell is thinking about how we’re gonna afford to keep the campus open.

PIPA: Troy Goodnough explains.

GOODNOUGH: The heroes in this story have really been from my vantage a lot of these salty dog facilities managers who could have coasted into retirement and not really done that, you know, taking these risks. Our facilities managers were thrust into this incredible limelight. And what we've seen, I think the last 20 years, is the curriculum I would say largely across American higher ed has been the laggard.

PIPA: In 2006, her first year as chancellor, Jacquie received an invitation to join the American College and University Presidents' Climate Commitment, promising, along with other university administrators across the country, to work toward carbon neutrality on campus. By then, one wind turbine was up and running on campus, and a biomass project was already underway.

[7:04]

JOHNSON: So I took it to my leadership team, and everyone agreed and kind of said, well, why, why wouldn't we — look at what we are doing, look at what we could do given where we're situated. And so for the University of Minnesota Morris, I signed the letter, and then got in trouble with, with Bob Bruininks, who was president of the University of Minnesota system.

Well, how was I supposed to know that I needed permission before I signed a letter? That I needed permission from the Board of Regents, apparently, and from Bob Bruininks himself. Too late. Too late. I'd signed the letter.

PIPA: This was the mid aughts, and climate change was making its way into the national conversation like never before. In 2005, Hurricane Katrina became one of the deadliest storms in U.S. history. Former Vice President Al Gore released the film *An Inconvenient Truth* a year later and went on to share a Nobel Peace Prize in 2007 with the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change at the UN.

Troy noticed the increased interest on campus.

[8:14]

GOODNOUGH: We also had students who were coming here seeing polar bears on ice floes, right? This is what was in the media, right? As, as the students were coming in saying, what are you doing?

[music]

PIPA: Over the next few years, the University of Minnesota Morris started capturing the attention of their colleagues on the Twin Cities main campus and across the country. In 2012, the school received grants for an "experiential" sustainability course and an internship to help a student create a state energy and environment "report card." The following year, students from the University of Minnesota from the Morris and Twin Cities campuses won a national award for a yearlong project that culminated in a presentation at the governor's 2013 Environmental Congress. The governor's energy adviser called their presentation "powerful" and said it would help shape policy.

There wasn't any real connection between the University of Minnesota Morris and the City of Morris on these efforts — at least not at this point. But the city and university didn't exist in separate worlds either.

[9:24]

JOHNSON: Morris is an economic — the university — an economic driver in the community. People who work at the university live in town or live surrounding. So you know, the university may be seen as a sort of liberal bastion, but people's livelihood depends on being connected to it.

PIPA: Then one day in 2015, Lowell Rasmussen, the facilities director at the University, was talking to then-city manager Blaine Hill about the benefits of LED lighting. The university had installed LED lights in their parking lots. They were all positioned toward the ground to reduce light pollution. And it also wound up saving them money.

Here's Blaine Hill again.

[10:07]

HILL: It was kind of a no-brainer. And that's one of the things I shared with the city council. We can do this, it's gonna cost X, but we're gonna save this. And so in the end, it doesn't really cost us anything.

But we wound up having some conversations that started with regards to energy and what they're doing at the university. And they kind of started it and I looked at it and said, yeah, we wanna kind of jump in and be part of that. So whatever we can do to kind of learn from you and work with you that's what we wanted to do.

PIPA: Troy Goodnough describes how these partners came together.

[10:44]

GOODNOUGH: So the city and the University of Minnesota Morris formed the Morris Model and then we continued to grow the circle by inviting other people into that circle. The Morris Model is just a name, a team name we gave to this community partnership between the University of Minnesota Morris, the campus, the City of Morris, the county — Stevens County — the Morris Area School District, the University of Minnesota West Center Research and Outreach Center, and other partners.

And so it's just, like, this is our club, and you don't have to pay any admission fee. there's no application. But we are thinking about organizations in the community that are leadership organizations that in many cases have elected leaders and serve the public and do truly influence what happens at multiple levels in our community.

PIPA: Relationship-building, even across political affiliations, has been key to the Morris Model's success.

[11:44]

GOODNOUGH: The other thing is just, again, not rocket science, but it's rocket science 'cause we don't often do it, is just cultivating different trusted messengers. Right? So I'm mindful of my own reputation in the community, right? And so that's, that's good and bad in that I sometimes have to rely on other friends who have different identities in the community.

There was a *New York Times* article that talked about our Morris Model. And there's a funny quote in there from my friend Mike Reese, who's the director of the University of Minnesota West Center Research and Outreach Center on the top of the hill in Morris. And I think Mike says something like, well, you know, I'm on the conservative side, Troy's on the liberal side. But what we share in common is an interest in building community wealth. That's right.

JOHNSON: Troy is just the master, I think, of building relationships. And the students love him, but it's beyond that. He really, he's very good at building relationships and very patient, and that used to, there used to be some tension I think between Troy and I. I wanted, I wanted results, and I wanted the product, and Troy would just say, you know, you just gotta build the relationship.

GOODNOUGH: Our students were frequently, through the cool organizations we have on campus, they were already basically doing projects with the city.

[music]

But putting this kind of sustainability lens on it, like was kind of maybe a more intentional twist. This is highly relational work. You know, you're going to a community meeting, you're gonna see the county commissioner buying bananas next to you when you go to the store next, right? And so it is, doing this kind of work is, I think it can be positive and challenging at the same time when you're really trying to stay in in relationship.

PIPA: As the Morris Model was taking shape, in 2016 the Institute of the Environment at the University of Minnesota created the Climate Smart Municipalities Program — an exchange program between places in Minnesota and Germany that eventually grew to include 12 cities. Morris was invited to be one of the first sister cities on the U.S. side.

[13:56]

HILL: Morris was really created as a city by German and Scandinavian immigrants. And so on our city council at the time, we had at least three council members that had German background. Obviously, it's way back, but still. So they were kind of interested in this idea of partnering with this German community. And so we jumped in.

GOODNOUGH: So we had laid some groundwork as a Morris Model team. So when that request came in, Hey, do you want to sign a climate protection agreement with a community in North Rhine Westphalia called Saerbeck? A rural town, 7,000 people,

make 400% more of the energy than they need from renewables. Do you want to learn and be part of this sister city and form a technical partnership?

So the ground was prepared. And the city council said yes, and the campus was there to really support that partnership because they were like, well, how will we structure this and who will support it and all that stuff? And we said, we're here for you, so we can do that together.

HILL: And so the first thing that was kind of eye opening for me is that they're the same people as we are. I mean, realistically. Their government's a little bit different, but they're the same people.

I said, you have to understand something that they have very expensive gasoline. They have very expensive natural gas. But then we could see, what if our gasoline was a problem? What if our natural gas was a problem? What if electricity's a problem? You know, and what are the solutions? And this little community started doing all these things.

And then when we came back, we said, we can do some of those things. We can put up solar. We can start looking at trying to figure out the conversion over into electric vehicles and stuff like that, that they were doing.

And the mayor in Saerbeck, Germany, is like the city manager in Morris. So the mayor runs the city. Plus they run the school and so they oversee the school. And so then we hit it off just naturally 'cause we're both grandparents and we had the same interests in what's gonna happen in the future.

[16:18]

GOODNOUGH: So then it was great. We were already working on projects, but our Saerbeckian partnership inspired us to do something which was something we called the Morris Model 100, which is they essentially got a group of leaders together and said let's just brainstorm a bunch of things you could do. And that's exactly what we did, is we got a bunch of leaders together and said, okay, let's just, let's go crazy. What are a hundred things we could do at level different levels of sophistication? And that became our Morris 100 projects.

[music]

And so today now many of that initial Morris Model 100 projects have been accomplished.

PIPA: About a decade into the community partnership, the Morris Model team has made real progress: The University of Minnesota Morris campus is now completely carbon neutral. The City of Morris has offset 20% of city building energy use by installing renewables, including on the liquor store. The county launched a composting program. And the local school district has two electric buses — one of the first school systems in the state to add them to their fleet — and plans to expand a solar array to power them.

As my guests mentioned earlier, the university's commitment to sustainability began years before they established the Morris Model. In 2008, the University unveiled a biomass gasification plant that, instead of natural gas, burns prairie grass, wood chips, cornstalks, and other agricultural byproducts. Three years later, they were using this process to heat and cool much of the campus. Their work that year drew the attention of the University of Minnesota main campus in this promotional video.

[18:08]

PROMO VIDEO: "Morris will be producing more energy than the campus can use by 2010. The extra will go back into the community providing money for the campus and clean energy for everyone."

"We are kind of the test campus. We're on the forefront of this, you could call it the Green Revolution in university and colleges across the U.S.

"A small school in a small prairie town making a major impact on America's green Revolution."

PIPA: It's efforts like these that brought Griffin Peck across Minnesota from the big city to the prairie.

[18:45]

PECK: I went to a school, a high school in the Twin Cities, called the School of Environmental Studies. It's a public high school located on the Minnesota Zoo campus. And when I was a student there, my capstone project focused on doing a LEED certification. LEED is "Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design." It's a way of quantifying sustainable built environments. And so I participated in that as a senior in high school and freshman in college when I was at Normandale. And kind of what was continued volunteering for that team. And we were the first LEED project to be certified by students.

And so when I was transferring to another school, I had kind of put out the call on social media to my friends — I want to go to a school that's environmentally conscious. I want to go to a school that prioritizes clean energy. And I'd never heard of the Morris Campus before. And one of my friends from the environmental high school was like, hey, you should come out — she was a student at the time — and she was, like, you should come out here and tour. And I drove out, got here late at night, stayed at the Super 8 hotel the next morning, got up and drove around for the first time and saw the wind turbines cresting the horizon. And I was like, this is the place.

PIPA: Their senior year, Griffin began sharing some research they'd conducted with the Morris Model team. After graduation, Griffin was hired as the City of Morris Sustainability Project Coordinator.

[20:09]

PECK: It wasn't an easy transition by any means, but I've really come to love and appreciate rural communities and how people in rural communities think and how really all rural communities can be a model for sustainability. We talk about making

Minneapolis and St. Paul walkable and bikeable, but we have a thousand communities in Minnesota that are already walkable and bikeable because they're only a square mile big.

And so I think a big part of me moving to a rural area was doing a lot of unlearning. I had a lot of preconceived notions, a lot of assumptions about what I thought rural was, what I was raised to believe rural was. And coming to Morris really helped me undo a lot of those assumptions and get exposed to a rural community that was doing it differently than what I'd been portrayed in the media or on the news.

PIPA: Griffin was also figuring out how to effectively talk about this work and get community buy-in. When the city changed over to LED lights, in those early days of the Morris Model, it made sense to emphasize the obvious cost savings.

[21:20]

PECK: That, in my head, is the really the beginning of how the university and the community started working together. And even in that process, I learned, you know, they went from using 65,000 kilowatt hours to light Main Street to 15,000. That's more than an average house uses. That's more than four average households use households use in Morris in energy savings just from switching out LEDs on one street.

And so I think that underscores why we talk about clean energy, why we talk about energy efficiency, why we talk about any of this in rural communities, and that's it saves money. It's the smart thing to do.

PIPA: This strategy, of underscoring the *practical* reasons, came up a lot in our conversations in Morris. Like Jacquie said earlier, as gas prices soared, the facilities director was thinking mainly about how to keep the lights on.

Griffin now lives in another small town an hour north and works on energy planning projects for a community development organization — taking ideas from the Morris Model and transferring them to even smaller towns.

[22:27]

PECK: I don't come in and say, you're gonna save green greenhouse gas emissions, you're gonna save the planet. I come in and say, you're gonna save $5,000 a year. One of the communities I'm working with, on the building we're putting solar on, they had a sign on the wall with a box under it, and the sign said, "Donations for light and heat." And this is a multi-purpose building. This building has a senior center, a food shelf, a private business, a gymnasium, and six low-income apartments in it. And it's in the old school building in this small town.

And that's the opportunity that clean energy and sustainability and, frankly, resilience present, is we're de-risking rural life and we're increasing economic opportunities.

PIPA: Troy's bedrock principle has always been bringing civility and humility to this work. Maybe it's a function of being Minnesota nice.

[23:25]

GOODNOUGH: Midwest Nice, Minnesota Nice is a real thing and it's a complicated thing. And some people say it's Minnesota passive aggressiveness. But I think this idea of we've gotta try to get along because it's challenging to live here and it truly is, it's super cold, it's super hot, it's an extreme place, and it's beautiful. And I'm trying to figure out still like when and how do I use my privilege, power, relationships in a good way and not ruin it?

PIPA: From Blaine Hill's perspective, having a conversation about climate change isn't required to make progress on community sustainability projects.

HILL: But it's a conservative community in general. So politics wise, this area votes conservatively. And when you get into discussions on issues like climate, you have to not tiptoe, I never tiptoe around anything, but it's the focus. And that's one of the things that you'll find out from me. You don't have to sit down and have the debate on climate. You focus on doing things that you know are important to deal with climate. And that seemed to be a pretty good model to work with.

PIPA: Griffin Peck's sustainability work in small towns is a reminder that part of the success of the Morris Model has been about bringing young people into the conversation and creating opportunities for them to contribute in meaningful ways. Jacquie Johnson sees it as part of the ethos of the University of Minnesota Morris campus, and one reflected among its faculty and staff.

[25:02]

JOHNSON: So I was leaving my office one evening, it was maybe 6:30, walking out to the north parking lot, which is probably where you came in, and there were two staff members from our grounds crew who were getting out of a car. They had just come back from somewhere. And they called out to me and said, come, come here, come here, we want to show you something. Well, they had just come back from a conference on cold weather composting, I think it was at Iowa State University. And of course they had gone with students. Of course, they didn't just go themselves. And they said, we want to show you this. And this student had written a little one page essay on why composting is a liberal art, and, and they were so proud.

[music]

And it is a liberal art. Because why? It involves politics, it involves chemistry, it involves ethics, it involves philosophy, maybe. And so the student had written this essay on why composting is a liberal art, and you know, that was wonderful.

But to me, even more wonderful is that we had these staff members who, you know, who are in charge of composting and the grounds and all the rest of it who had worked with this student and who had gone with this student to a conference.

PIPA: Mike Reese has felt this, too — the importance of engaging young people in this work, and a desire to encourage them to stay in the area. As Renewable Energy Director at the University of Minnesota West Central Research and Outreach Center, a research farm near the Morris campus, he has acted as an intermediary between

the liberal-leaning university and conservative Stevens County. Right now he's working on a massive green fertilizer product out of his experimental agricultural station, which we'll hear more about in a bit.

[26:52]

REESE: I'm from nearby, Hancock, Minnesota, which is a small farming community about seven miles away from Morris. I have a family farm just east of Hancock. And I grew up in the area. And through that process I realized that there's a number of young people moving away for other opportunities. And it actually impacted my life too, because I'd go to church and go to events and I realized that I was one of the only ones of my age at these events. And so I became interested in economic development to rural economic development, especially trying to support our area.

PIPA: Mike is the guy Troy Goodnough mentioned earlier, who acknowledged that he and Troy might have not have the same politics, but they both care about the future of Morris. When young people leave, that affects community wealth for generations.

REESE: Even farmers, their children that have moved away, can recognize that young people have different thoughts about that they want lower CI, lower carbon intensity products, and they want to save the planet and reduce greenhouse gas emissions and all those things.

I did speak to the CEO of one of the big four fertilizer companies about green ammonia a few years ago. And he said, I would never thought of calling you before, but my young children say that this is the way that our company needs to go.

PIPA: Green ammonia — you heard that right. Mike's been working for years on groundbreaking technology to reduce farmers' carbon footprint and lower their overhead costs. Now, this is a *little* technical, but I'll give you the highlights. Farmers use nitrogen fertilizer to support the growth of their crops. That fertilizer is made from fossil fuels and accounts for about 2% of worldwide greenhouse gas emissions. Farmers across Minnesota buy around *800,000* tons of fertilizer per year, mostly from other countries. But what if they could make their own?

To test the theory, the West Central Outreach and Research Center, with support from the State of Minnesota and the University of Minnesota, built a prototype. The process starts with the turbine on campus. And the flat terrain of the prairie makes it a pretty windy place, perfect for generating electricity. The nitrogen is separated from the air. Then, when a current of electricity is added to the water, the two hydrogen atoms separate from the oxygen atom. Two pure gases remain: hydrogen and nitrogen.

[29:34]

REESE: You take wind, water, and air and you make hydrogen. You pull nitrogen from the air, you combine the hydrogen nitrogen to form ammonia.

PIPA: That's the first step. You'll hear Mike use the term "urea" — that's a name for fertilizer widely used in the agriculture industry.

REESE: You can transport the ammonia via truck from the high wind resource areas that we have here in Minnesota, and as well as the Dakotas. Bring it to an ethanol plant and produce urea. You're capturing the CO_2 at the same time; urea goes back into the corn for fertilizer. The CO_2 is released. Bring the corn to the ethanol plant, ferment it. CO_2 is released there too. You capture that CO_2 and you combine it with urea and the cycle just keeps going.

And so when you're looking to create a hydrogen economy, it was almost serendipitous that we would be able to use the vast renewable resources that we have here in the Midwest and produce a product that is used essentially right underneath the wind farms.

PIPA: People took notice of the potential. Warrenn Anderson, a trial attorney who handled personal injury and wrongful death cases for most of his career, began representing clients on energy-related matters. One day, Xcel Energy, the big electric utility in Minnesota, called Warrenn up to talk about working together to create this green urea.

[30:57]

ANDERSON: There isn't any corn that's raised anymore that doesn't have fertilizer. And so it's kind of a great synergy here to have the farmers that raise the corn that comes to the ethanol plant that emits the CO_2 get connected through wind to make urea, which then goes back to the farmer to put on his next year's corn production.

And of course we added a few other wrinkles to it. We decided let's get the local co-ops involved because they are the farmers. So we put that together and that's what our goal is to do right now. We don't know whether we're gonna be successful with this or not. But anyway, we're, we're trying.

[music]

REESE: And then kinda where I started from, you know, how do we help improve our rural economies and have that economic development? I often call it create wealth in rural areas. And I often also say it's not the wealth that most people think of, you know, the Elon Musk type wealth. It's the wealth that helps support hospitals and churches and schools and services that sometimes rural areas lack.

A lot of the people in politics saw this too as an opportunity to help support rural Minnesota. And so our state legislature has actually been, and governor, have been very supportive of this. And I think we've seen some of that too at the national level.

But I think one of the issues now is that the policy isn't consistent, and that's probably where it's faltering at the moment, just having that consistency. So, we're talking about hundreds of millions, if not billions of dollars it takes to do these projects. And, again, where's the consistency and the stability to be able to move forward in something like that?

PIPA: Private equity firms would be interested in this project — both Mike and Warrenn are sure of it. But that type of investment comes at a cost, too.

REESE: And once you give a portion of that company away, it's back to the same system where the dollars leave. And so that's what Warrenn and others have been trying to prevent. Trying to retain as much ownership as possible for the local groups and through the cooperatives, which is a very democratic way of approach of doing that.

PIPA: So what's ahead for the City of Morris, Stevens County — and the state?

[33:38]

GOODNOUGH: And so Minnesota gets about 30% I think right now of its electricity from wind. So, to me at least, I think it's about using what we have, right? We have wind, let's use what we have here in our own community. And I think that's what you're gonna see. If you come back in 10 years, I think what you're gonna see is we're gonna see more wind farms, we're gonna see more solar, we're gonna be asking more questions about how we connect to the grid.

[music]

It's not gonna be everywhere. And this is the myth that a lot of people are not understanding — is our clean energy future doesn't mean that every single acre of land is gonna be populated by a wind farm or a solar field. It's gonna be a relatively small amount of land. I think there's about 360,000 acres in Stevens County — 330,000 are working lands, in production of some sort. And we're talking about a small fraction of that land that could potentially be, and this is just one county, that could basically contribute towards economic development. Again, clean energy being part of that backbone.

PIPA: Collaboration on the Morris Model has become emblematic for the small town, but continued shared trust and vision among the partners will be necessary to keep it going as leadership and policy shifts occur. A new city manager and mayor have taken office within the last couple of years, for example.

Warrenn and Mike were glad that the One Big Beautiful Bill Act recently signed into law brought some clarity to the uncertainty around federal tax credits for clean energy, but they also feel daunted by the short timeline of having to get construction underway by July 2026 to take advantage. Other federal policy changes, and the rhetoric around them, are also likely to create pressure.

Despite the changes in Washington, Griffin Peck remains optimistic.

[35:35]

PECK: Regardless of federal policy, Minnesota, Illinois, and Michigan all have 100% clean electricity laws. And so regardless of where federal policy goes and how it may shift back and forth, our three states have already committed to that goal. And because we're relatively close geographically, our three states can support industries even if there isn't the federal incentive to do so.

I also think if you look at the cost to construct new clean energy — so new solar, new wind, new biomass, other new forms of renewables — against the cost to construct a

new gas turbine or a new coal fired power plant, there's no competition. It's still the cheapest form of new generation you can build in the U.S.

[music]

And so, you know, I think given that students in that school have grown up seeing wind turbines every day, seeing solar panels every day, have grown up composting their food every day, that those people as they graduate high school and become active members of our community, that they'll carry some of that with them as it's just the right thing to do.

And so I, I think the future here is really bright because of the framing and because of the model that's been established, and that it's a unique partnership between a university, a city, a school district, a county, and others.

PIPA: Maybe it's a bit of Minnesota Nice, as Troy Goodnough suggests. Maybe it's the practicality of saving the town money or following the example of another town where there's shared German heritage, as Blaine Hill recounts. Maybe it's the entrepreneurial promise of new economic opportunity that keeps wealth local, as Mike Reese and Warrenn Anderson are working on. Or maybe it's how the university can be a catalyst for new ways of doing things, as Jacquie Johnson explains.

It's all these things, but also something more: a willingness to build trust among neighbors despite your differences and commit to unlikely partnerships to ensure the future of the place you love. That seems to me to be the key ingredient of the Morris Model that's helped this place remain vibrant and pointed towards the future.

Thanks for listening.

My sincere thanks to all the people who shared their time with me for this episode.

[music]

To provide further policy insights based on this episode, we also publish a Q&A with an outside expert on the Brookings website. You can find the link in the show notes.

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I'm Tony Pipa, and this is *Reimagine Rural*.