

# National Award Bestowed To Pine City Planner

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Press Release



Nathan Johnson, City Planner for the City of Pine City, has been named the 2014 Outstanding Small Town and Rural Planner by the American Planning Association (APA) Small Town Rural Planning Division for his leadership in planning, contributions in providing better access to local government, and collaboration in providing more opportunities for Pine City and its constituency.

Pine City (pop. 3,127) is located 65 miles northeast of Minneapolis, in Pine County, one of Minnesota's fastest-growing rural counties. Since Johnson's arrival as city planner in 2005 the City of Pine City has become more open and interactive, and he has helped to secure almost \$1 million dollars in state and federal grants.

"I am grateful to receive this award on behalf of the City of Pine City. Too often municipal leaders focus on the day to day city operations but here in Pine City, we've been able to bring about a community vision and work toward that vision with great levels of involvement of our citizens," said Johnson.

That involvement would not have been possible if Johnson hadn't worked with a community group called Horizons to establish a community blog, hosted annual open houses to engage citizens, and led over 200 residents through the comprehensive planning process.

"He implemented a thorough and highly participatory process to produce a comprehensive plan that is both visionary and practical," said Dr. Robert Musgrove, President of Pine Technical College.

Johnson has been an advocate for efficient use of the land to reduce the cost of public services. This was thought about when the Municipal Development Ordinance, revised by him and a citizen committee he assembled, was implemented. It allowed for cluster development, mixed use as well as planned unit developments, all types of smart growth principles of development not previously allowed in Pine City.

“Nathan does an excellent job explaining how these fit in with his vision of the best possible future outcome for all parties involved,” said Frank Christopherson, Chair of the Pine City Planning Commission.

Besides modernization of the ordinances, reflective of Pine City’s growth patterns, Nathan understands the cultural change unfolding in his community. Pine City is host to a variety of events that explore and celebrate culture, including the Czech Booya Festival, North West Company Fur Post’s Fall Gathering and East Central Minnesota LGBT Pride—one of the world’s only rural gay prides—where Nathan addresses the hundreds of attendees with a welcome message on behalf of the City.

“I know that it’s good to be a welcoming community for the City’s livelihood,” explained Johnson.

“Whether it is National Night Out or the local rodeo, I see him at nearly every community event,” said Wayne Gilman, Superintendent of Pine City Public Schools.

“He has become that irreplaceable person every community needs,” commented Heidi Briski-Gainor, President of Pine Center for the Arts. “You approach him with a problem or concern, and he helps you find a way to fix it.”

“He will go above and beyond the call of duty to respond to citizen concerns and needs,” said Holly Wilson, Pine City’s city administrator.

In addition, Becky Schueller, Executive Director of the Pine City Area Chamber of Commerce, said, “He is in regular attendance at meetings for the Chamber of Commerce to ensure that there are open lines of communication between the government operations and needs of the small business.”

“He uses his resources within the community to find ways to make improvements in Pine City,” commented Lisa Perlick, Project Coordinator for Active Living by Design, a statewide health improvement program serving Pine, Isanti, Chisago and Kanabec Counties.

“He has helped secure funding for a bike-walk trail through the city, has created a historic walking map and was an integral part of a successful walkable workshop in Pine City.”

Nathan was also noted for his leadership in bringing a federally-designated business loop to Pine City, studying the implications of designating the region a national heritage area, successfully challenging the 2010 Census, and working with Congressman Rick Nolan’s office to potentially get electric vehicle charging stations in his rural part of the state.

According to the American Planning Association, the Outstanding Small Town and Rural Planner award is given annually to “an individual in public service, academia or the private sector that has made an outstanding contribution to planning in their community”. Johnson will receive the award at the National Planning Conference in Atlanta, Georgia, next month.

Johnson is a member of the APA and holds a professional degree in urban studies and city planning from the University of Minnesota-Twin Cities. In 2012, he was a candidate for Minnesota House of Representatives. He is a native of Pine City and currently resides there.