

OPINION

OUR VIEW

For what it's worth

Having data on economic indicators can be a useful tool to assist local leaders in determining obstacles and creating strategies to overcome those challenges. But interpreting this information must be done carefully and we're glad we've got local folks who are doing just that.

Interpreting economic data requires knowledge not just everyone has. Inadequate training of those who observe economic data can lead to mistaken plans for change or wildly inaccurate predictions.

Economic statistics cannot be accepted at face value. They must be evaluated to determine where they fall short, and where they do a good job of interpretation.

Care must also be taken to keep preconceived conclusions from driving our interpretation of data and our strategies for economic improvement.

Economic indicators are increasingly complicated to compute and understand. However, they appear to be more important than ever in today's challenging economic environment.

To discuss these indicators, we need an understanding of why they're important, how to interpret

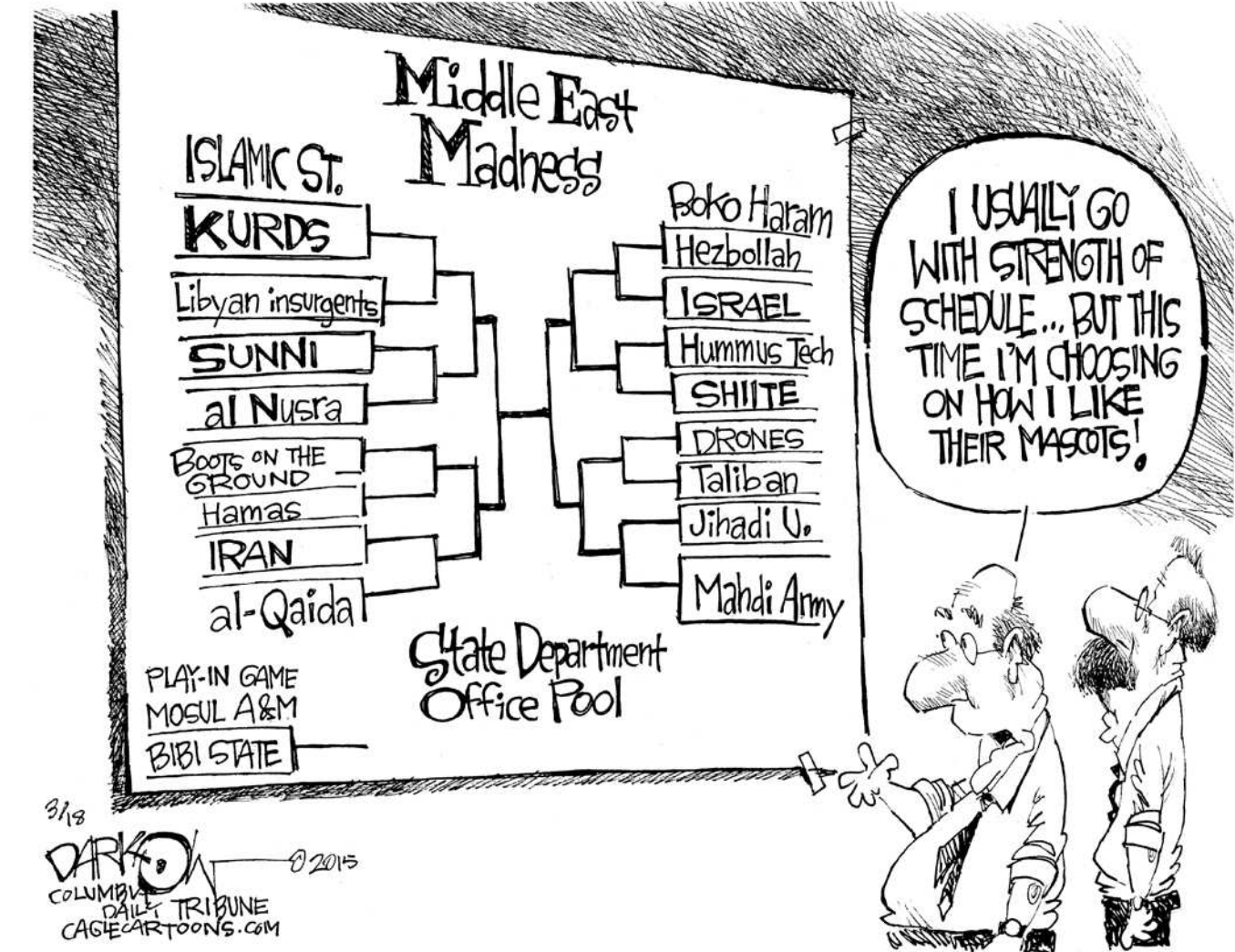
them, and their reliability in predicting future economic performance.

There are thousands of economic indicators available to expert economists, yet even they often fail and predicting economic trends like recessions. In the Big Data era, we can easily get lost in the noise of numbers. We have to sort through the noise to find reliable signals that can show us the way.

Knowing the distinction between signal and noise can help leaders to ask clarifying questions about the data and how it was obtained.

Minnesota Department of Employment and Economic Development's website offers a data center that can help leaders understand data on employment, unemployment, wages and occupations; offers reviews of labor market conditions and key economic indicators; and perhaps most importantly, offers a way to connect to analysts and experts who can explain how to use and interpret the data the state provides.

Understanding the the data is an important first step in having valuable and productive discussions about the best strategy to put in place.



GUEST COLUMN

Voyage Forward team moves forward

BY WARD MERRILL  
 Voyage Forward co-chair,  
 Public Engagement Team



There was a recent commentary in the International Falls Journal entitled “We are all a reflection of our community,” which highlighted the Voyage Forward kick-off event in late September and the keynote by Jay Bartkowski

Jay’s remarks were timely, well-stated and heartfelt by a man who cares about his hometown enough to return, run a successful business and raise his family here. Along with the stories of how Bemidji and Hermantown were re-shaping and defining their futures, Jay’s speech impacted enough of the 165 attendees that 65 showed up at the next meeting to find out what it meant to become a “steward” as part of the “Voyage Forward — Journey to Success” county-wide initiative.

We found out, “Stewards are ordinary people: people from all walks of life who care deeply about their community. They cross boundaries, take an integrated approach and build coalitions for action. They have 360-degree vision, recognizing the interdependencies between the economy, the environment and social equity. Stewards operate at the center of tough issues, not on the edges. They are risk takers. They are passionate and energetic. They are people of vision.”

That first evening included citizens from all parts of the county: from Northome, Birchdale, Ranier, Littlefork, Big Falls and the Falls. There were business people, educators, parents, seniors, local government officials, retirees, folks from nonprofits, employees from the private and public sectors — “people from all walks of life.” We brainstormed a list of “guiding principles for working together” that included putting community first, principles before personalities, reaching out to all county communities, and checking our ego at the door.

The stewards formed into three “teams” — assets, buzz and public engagement — with each team developing tasks and goals to begin moving the county-wide initiative forward. The Asset Team focused on the county’s assets and have begun work with the Voyage Forward consultants developing the economic adjustment strategy. The Buzz Team, comprised in part of energetic, tech-savvy youth have worked to create the “buzz” about Voyage Forward through social media, banners, posters, flyers and have engaged more young people.

The Public Engagement Team developed the “four questions” and has gathered input from a thousand-plus county residents of all ages. The questions focused on what citizens like about the county and their respective communities, what they don’t want to lose as the county changes over time and, if they were in charge — what would they change.

Over two dozen stewards have worked literally hundreds of hours on the Public Engagement Team since October. A positive network has been forged by these citizens from all areas of Koochiching County. They’ve worked by the “guiding principles” and have put community first; checked egos at the door; reached out to all areas of the county, kept it positive and had fun. Currently the Engagement Team is identifying emerging “themes” from the answers to the four questions. It’s a daunting task! In the case of question No. 4 — if you were charge, what would you change? — over 2,400 answers are being reviewed. From the themes that emerge from this question, the stewards will develop an in-depth survey which will drill down into the issues and clearly define our “destiny

drivers.” Those destiny drivers will enable citizens of Koochiching County to plan our future.

This might sound like a fanciful idea, but the stewards engaged in Voyage Forward believe ordinary citizens can make a positive difference by getting involved and participating. We are creating our own future by identifying what matters, what we as a region value, what makes us want to live here and build a community of choice.

We should all put community first and work together to make this community the best place in the state to raise a family.

Within the next few weeks, the themes identified by your input will be published in The Journal as well as on the Voyage Forward website. Additionally, you will be able to review each and every answer to each and every question. You will be able to visualize what people value, what they like about our community, and what they would change.

It’s your voice in action.

Like the banner over Third Street says, “it’s your voice, our future.” You will have another opportunity to make your voice heard when we complete the survey in the coming weeks.

Become engaged in creating the future of our community. To receive information and updates on” Voyage Forward – Journey to Success” – go to: www.voyageforward.org

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