

Growing businesses, growing communities

By TRACY PORTER
National Information
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For more than 40 years, National Information Solutions Cooperative has maintained a steady path for growth in its traditional services of selling and supporting integrated software solutions to rural electric and telephone companies across the United States. It has expanded into related service and software opportunities that has helped grow NISC to more than 500 customers. Through a consolidation in 2000, NISC now has offices in Mandan and Lake St. Louis, Mo.

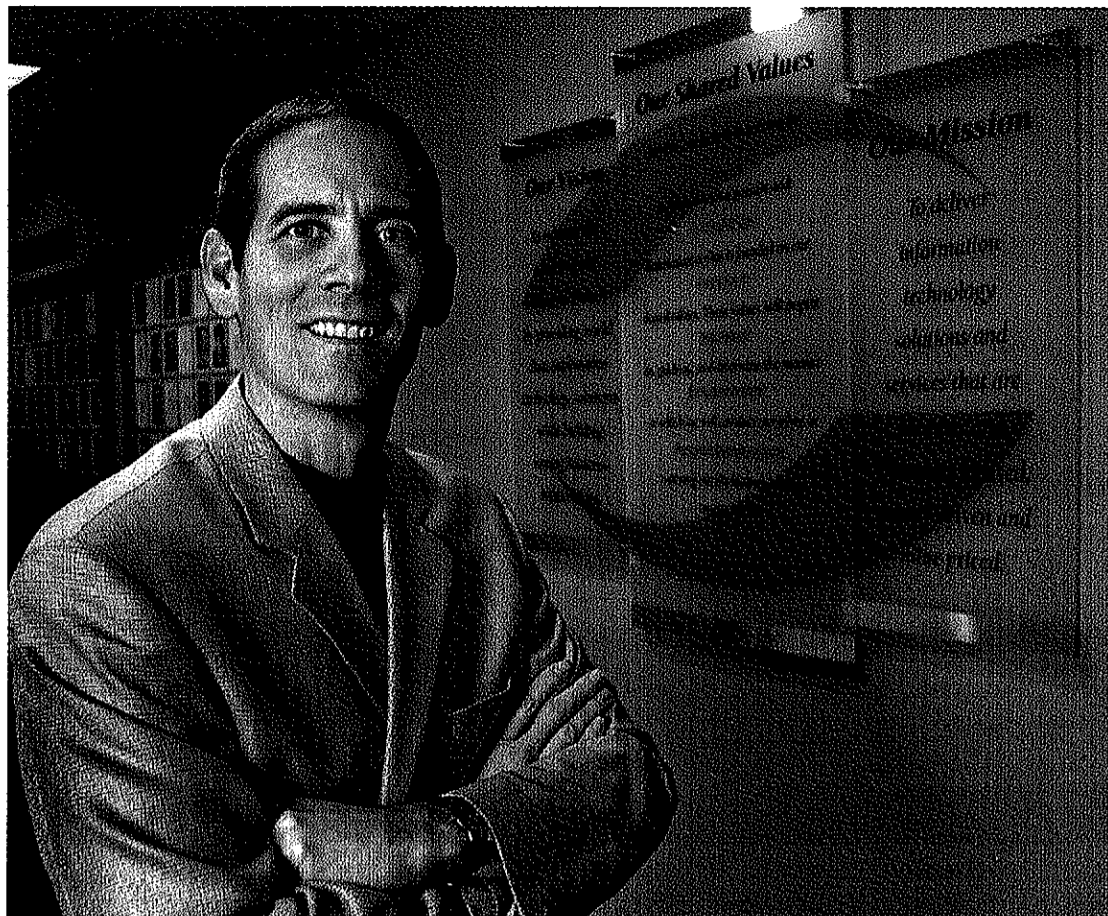
With NISC's existing software products and the potential of our products under development, we are optimistic about the future of NISC and the growth of high-tech jobs in the Bismarck-Mandan community.

Bismarck-Mandan has its corporate infrastructure built around the 5,000 jobs needed to support the state and federal government; excellent health and long-term care facilities employing another 5,000 people; careers at major long-term employers like Bobcat, MDU and Basin Electric in Bismarck and Tesoro, BNSF Railroad and Cloverdale in Mandan; an expanding job growth in the retail sector at national chains like Wal-Mart, Target, Kohl's and Menards, and in the "processing center" sector at companies like Unisys, Aetna, Coventry and Laducer; and finally, the ability to educate and train our future leaders through a quality higher education system with a combined enrollment of more than 6,000 students at the University of Mary, Bismarck State College, United Tribes Technical College and Medcenter One School of Nursing.

And growing business does mean growing local and community series to match, as can be seen in the work of agencies like the Mandan Park Board.

The roots of NISC date back to the early 1960s, when central locations for data processing replaced manual ledger sheets for preparing electric and telephone bills. The cost and size of computer equipment during this time period prohibited these rural businesses from operating their own computer systems, so they formed regional IT companies to provide this service. IT companies were so critical to their business processes, they decided to establish them as a "cooperative owned by cooperatives." This cooperative structure would provide a governance model that protected the interests of the owners, focused on service and followed a mission statement of "providing world-class information technology solutions while building lasting business relationships." This simple but effective strategy has helped sustain the growth at NISC.

Another fast-growing service of NISC is the bill payment group that employs about 50 staff. These employees process and pay 90,000 utility bills on behalf of several large multi-site national



AMY TABORSKY/Tribune

Tracy Porter, CFO of National Information Solutions Cooperative.

companies, representing \$250 million in energy spent each month. The customer's utility bills for every store or location get mailed to Mandan, where they are scanned and keyed into a database. The list of companies using this service includes Wal-Mart, JC Penney, Hobby Lobby and the U.S. Postal Service. The advantage to outsourcing this function by the customer is found in the efficiencies NISC provides by reducing late fees, locating missing bills, resolving balance forwards and using technology to process and pay a high percentage of the bills electronically. The customer also gets real-time access to view their energy data and bill images on a secure Web site hosted at NISC.

The growth and expansion in Bismarck-Mandan does put pressure on local government to keep pace with the necessary services required to support the community. I'm fortunate to be in my third term on the Mandan Park Board, and although we do not operate a very large piece of the total tax bill, we try to offer quality programs and facilities for the recreational activities in Mandan.

Many of the projects we've completed in recent years have been in cooperation with the

city and school district as these projects generally have significant benefit for all parties. For example, the renovation of the baseball and softball diamonds have resulted in Mandan hosting the Central Plains Legion Baseball tournament in 2005 and being selected to host a national softball tournament in 2009. Improvements to the soccer complex, including a new concession-restroom building, allowed Mandan to host the state high school soccer tournament in 2007.

Future projects on the drawing board include a proposed park in the Plainview Heights subdivision, tennis courts located near the new junior high and expanding our trail system east of Collins Avenue along Old Red Trail. The hope is to someday connect to the trail by the Fort Lincoln Trolley on Third Street Southeast. 2011 will provide new opportunities for the Mandan Park District as \$140,000 in debt service from current projects will be retired, and in 2013, another \$125,000 in debt service will be retired. Hopefully, this will be timed perfectly to allow the Mandan Park District to consider improvements or new facilities to keep pace with our growing community.

Tracy Porter

Tracy Porter has worked as National Information Solutions Cooperative's chief financial officer since 1993. He is a certified public accountant and holds a bachelor of science degree in accounting and business administration from the University of Mary, Bismarck, and a master's in business administration from Colorado State University, Fort Collins, Colo. Porter is also the president of the Mandan Park Board.