

PLANNING

SimCity, Real Life

AS LOCAL LEGEND has it, Eureka Township, Minn., was born in 1855 when explorers planted a flag on the banks of a nearby river, exclaiming exactly what you think. Not much has changed there since 1855, but the surrounding area, including the Twin Cities, is booming. By last year the tiny farming town was worried about river pollution and encroaching strip malls. Keeping its rural charm would require a eureka moment, indeed.

Luckily, the town got one in the form of smart-growth software that maps development plans and allows residents to "stroll" through the 3-D results—a sort of SimCity for real life. The program, called CommunityViz (and not made by the SimCity folks), is a big jump for small-town citizens who previously had to make do with flat maps. In Missoula, Mont., it's helping prevent wildfire hazards. In Steamboat Springs, Colo., it's assisting low-income-housing designers. And in Eureka, a planning board hopes to let townspeople "explore" four computer-generated scenarios in October. In 150 years, those expeditions may be local legend, too.

—MARY CARMICHAEL