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Onaga, Kansas

Leadership, entrepreneurship, wealth retention and youth development are all pieces of the recent successes of Onaga, Kansas, a very rural community of 704 people. Driving down Kansas Highway 16 and seeing the sign “Onaga, next five exits” would make you think it’s a large town. Indeed, it isn’t. But it’s the brainstorm of community developers who propose that adding such a series of signs would encourage more travelers to stop in.

“Onaga has a lot of assets that other communities would die for!” That is the sentiment of the part-time community development specialist for Onaga. This kind of sentiment is reflected in the philosophy of HomeTown Competitiveness (HTC), a collaboration between three partnering organizations in Nebraska, including the Heartland Center for Leadership Development. This philosophy is embedded in four “pillars” of youth, entrepreneurship, leadership and community philanthropy. County-wide, the HTC initiative has taken root in each of the pillar areas. In fact, a foundation has been established that has raised over \$1 million dollars in only 20 months, with 13 affiliated local funds.

The community of Onaga is one that has grasped the HTC framework and run

After many attended an HTC Academy, a group of Onaga citizens banded together to establish goals in eight categories including transportation, communications, quality of life, business and industry, agriculture, housing, population/school enrollment and tourism.

One unique outcome of this goal-setting exercise was a financial partnership between Pottawatomie County Economic Development Corporation, Community Health Care Systems, the City of Onaga, the Chamber of Commerce, down-town businesses and the Morrill & James Bank. The corporation, the city, the bank and the hospital each invested \$5000, downtown businesses added \$1800 and the Chamber added \$1000. Combined, the \$22,800 has been used to fund the part-time services of the community development specialist for the community. It is the development specialist in turn, who has helped implement a neighborhood revitalization program, organized volunteers and fundraising for a playground project and secured funding for streetscape renewal. Other leaders in the community have taken on several other critical community improvement projects.

Some of the goals established included growing Onaga by 500 people,

Some of the goals established included growing Onaga by 500 people, ensuring enough student enrollment to maintain 2A school status, identifying value-added agricultural opportunities as well as agri-tourism ideas and creating a local “homestead” program.

The homestead program is in place with 10 free lots currently available that also qualify for the city’s neighborhood revitalization program, a 10-year sliding scale tax rebate for improvements to existing residential and commercial properties, as well as new construction.

The community has applied for and received more than \$4 million in state and federal grant funding to support new infrastructure and downtown revitalization, including sewer, water, and street-scaping. Funding for a new fire truck and fire fighting equipment was also received.

Community volunteers constructed a new senior center with the help of a state grant and hundreds of hours of volunteer time. The city purchased a nine-hole golf course (and club house) that also has room to add another nine holes in the future. The community found a new business to replace a failing enterprise and the local school system has been retained. Blue Valley Telecommunications Cooperative purchased the area telephone exchange from Sprint and then promptly invested millions of dollars to install fiber optic cable to homes and businesses in Onaga and the surrounding area. Now, homes and businesses in the community and nearby farmsteads are served by high-speed broad-band interconnectivity.

The regional Farmers' Cooperative built \$2 million dollars in new grain storage and processing facilities, while agreeing to have the facilities immediately annexed into the city in order to increase the city's property tax base.

Besides a vision for the future, Onaga takes pride in its past to build aspirations for the

Besides a vision for the future, Onaga takes pride in its past to build aspirations for the future. Case in point, Onaga has one of only an estimated eight 8-sided fair pavilions in the state. The pavilion, built in 1921, is modeled after one built during the Chicago World's Fair. Fears of collapse and disrepair almost led to the demise of the pavilion until a group of concerned citizens formed "Friends of the Fair Pavilion" to restore this unique architectural feature.

The Dough Boy, a World War I memorial purchased by the American Legion and unveiled on November 11, 1920, is another one of the community's treasures. The statue originally stood in an intersection downtown but due to highway repairs, the state roads had it moved to the town cemetery. After several years, the Doughboy found a final resting place again downtown.

This community understands the value of working together and volunteering in order to get the job

This community understands the value of working together and volunteering in order to get the job done. The new senior center was built in part from proceeds of a Kan-Step grant that amounted to \$168,000 of the \$400,000 project. But it was the 110 volunteers mustered by the leadership of a former mayor and retired banker who put in over 7,000 volunteer hours of work that saw the center come to fruition within one year of breaking ground.

One would think that a tiny town like Onaga would not be a center of financial wealth, but First Trust Company of Onaga is just that. First Trust acts as a custodian for a multitude of self-directed Individual Retirement Accounts. Established in 1978, First Trust now performs all the administrative work required to support thousands of individually managed IRA's with over \$50 million in assets in all 50 states and many foreign countries. Based on the results of a marketing study completed by a team of graduate MBA candidates from Kansas State University, and with financing from a USDA Rural Development loan, the bank recently built a new building and moved its 35 people to the new facility where it continues to expand.

Many people in this community want to see Onaga succeed. “You have to progress or you die.”

So many rural communities face challenges and obstacles because of lack of opportunities, loss of youth and competition from urban centers. Many people in this community want to see Onaga succeed and this sentiment is echoed by the local newspaper publisher who says, “you have to progress, or you die.” Further evidence that supports the claim that Onaga is on the right track includes being chosen as one of only three communities in Kansas to take part in the pilot projects of the Governor’s Rural Life Task Force. This designation resulted in all the available rural housing program and financial resources offered by the Kansas Department of Commerce and USDA Rural Development being targeted on Onaga simultaneously. This has resulted in financing for several residential renovation projects as well as financing for purchases of existing homes and new home construction.

The mayor, the Pottawatomie County Economic Development Corporation and other local advocates were recently successful in clearing away the legal and financial “debris” from a failing composites plant in Onaga to make it possible for the plant to be acquired by MGP Ingredients, which is headquartered in Atchison, Kansas. MGP Ingredients’ Onaga R and D facility has since been experimenting with the manufacture of combinations of wood composite resins and plant-based biopolymers in order to produce biodegradable dinner-ware for use by the military and the outdoor recreation industry. These starch- and protein-based products derived from agricultural products are made into pellets which are then processed into bio-degradable products.

With its homestead neighborhood revitalization program, Onaga is recruiting new people to its community and young people are also returning. A banker came back after going to school and gaining some world experience. Like so many others, he sought the quiet and solitude that reflects Onaga and he wanted a safe community to raise his children.

But Onaga is not relying solely on recruiting younger people to help the community thrive.

But Onaga is not relying solely on recruiting younger people to help the community thrive. Several older citizens have returned because of the peacefulness and the full range of services provided by the hospital and the numerous assisted living and long-term care services. The community development specialist and her husband retired but through serendipity, her experience with Main Street communities and timing of HTC, she was lured out of retirement to take on a new community development role with even greater responsibilities.