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The Demand for Citizen Leadership in Non-Metropolitan Nebraska

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CORNHUSKER ECONOMICS

The Demand for Citizen Leadership in Non-Metropolitan Nebraska

Market Report	Yr Ago	4 Wks Ago	10/22/10
<u>Livestock and Products,</u>			
<u>Weekly Average</u>			
Nebraska Slaughter Steers, 35-65% Choice, Live Weight.....	\$84.72	\$98.11	\$100.57
Nebraska Feeder Steers, Med. & Large Frame, 550-600 lb.	101.30	123.51	123.23
Nebraska Feeder Steers, Med. & Large Frame 750-800 lb.	97.38	111.44	115.78
Choice Boxed Beef, 600-750 lb. Carcass.	137.68	157.60	159.19
Western Corn Belt Base Hog Price Carcass, Negotiated.	51.49	80.84	62.90
Feeder Pigs, National Direct 50 lbs, FOB.	*	*	38.00
Pork Carcass Cutout, 185 lb. Carcass, 51-52% Lean.	55.43	90.80	77.52
Slaughter Lambs, Ch. & Pr., Heavy, Wooled, South Dakota, Direct.	88.25	144.87	147.37
National Carcass Lamb Cutout, FOB.	242.02	333.25	338.87
<u>Crops,</u>			
<u>Daily Spot Prices</u>			
Wheat, No. 1, H.W. Imperial, bu.	4.45	5.88	5.50
Corn, No. 2, Yellow Omaha, bu.	3.79	4.67	5.11
Soybeans, No. 1, Yellow Omaha, bu.	9.86	11.00	11.25
Grain Sorghum, No. 2, Yellow Dorchester, cwt.	6.21	8.25	8.84
Oats, No. 2, Heavy Minneapolis, MN, bu.	2.45	3.22	3.52
<u>Feed</u>			
Alfalfa, Large Square Bales, Good to Premium, RFV 160-185 Northeast Nebraska, ton.	*	*	185.00
Alfalfa, Large Rounds, Good Platte Valley, ton.	82.50	82.50	75.00
Grass Hay, Large Rounds, Premium Nebraska, ton.	*	*	*
Dried Distillers Grains, 10% Moisture, Nebraska Average.	121.00	125.00	155.00
Wet Distillers Grains, 65-70% Moisture, Nebraska Average.	38.25	47.00	52.75
*No Market			

Those who work with rural communities know this issue well: Population losses have left many rural communities with a shortage of residents willing and able to take on the public and volunteer leadership roles required to keep their communities running smoothly. As a result, individuals are often asked not just to participate in local government and voluntary organizations, but also to accept positions of authority and responsibility in their operation. The outcome, according to conventional wisdom, is that capable and involved citizens can be “burned out” by the demands made on their time, with local leadership often being left in the hands of a few individuals. This phenomenon, it is argued, can foster apathy and limit innovation, especially in rural communities where many public services are essentially run by volunteers.

While the availability of individuals to fill leadership roles is likely to be a concern for any rural community, it appears to be especially problematic in the Great Plains. Consider local government, defined here as the sum of all counties, cities and special districts (e.g. fire districts, cemetery districts, resource districts, etc.). Nationally, the United States Bureau of the Census counted 89,476 such governmental entities in 2007, or one for every 2,278 U.S. residents.

Nebraska’s 2,659 local government units places us 14th among states, well below the 6,694 governmental entities found in Illinois, the national leader. However, with a population of just under 1.8-million, Nebraska has one such governmental unit for every 676 residents, while Illinois has 1,846 residents for each unit of government. By that measure, Nebraska ranks 48th among states, just ahead of North Dakota and South Dakota, and behind Kansas, Wyoming and Montana.

The logically predictable relationship between total population and the availability of a pool of potential leaders for local government is clearly supported in Table 1 (on next page). It is also clear that a small population is not necessarily correlated with a reduced number of governmental units. However, even in small population states, the ratio of governmental units to population does not on its face appear to be problematic.

Table 1. Local Government Units and Population

State	Local Government Units	Total Population	Population Per Local Government Unit	National Rank
North Dakota	2,699	646,844	239.7	50
South Dakota	1,983	812,383	409.7	49
Nebraska	2,659	1,796,619	675.7	48
Kansas	3,931	2,818,747	717.1	47
Wyoming	726	544,270	749.7	46
Montana	1,273	974,989	765.9	45
United States	89,476	310,000,000	3,464.6	

There might be minimal reason to be concerned about the leadership pool in rural communities, if the ratio of governmental units to population was the only measure of the demand for citizen involvement. But the problem is not quite that simple. First, not all residents are eligible for leadership roles. Simply limiting the definition of the pool of available leaders to adults (age 18 and older) reduces the size of that pool by 20 percent or more on average. Second, communities are also characterized by the formation of non-governmental voluntary associations, which themselves demand participation in leadership roles. Finally, it is not the case that each governmental unit or voluntary organization generates a single leadership position. Each of those organizations is likely to have a multi-member oversight or administrative board or committee. This will include even those organizations that tend to have paid directors, such as Chambers of Commerce.

So what is the true demand for leadership in our smaller communities? An estimate of that demand requires that we count both local government units and local voluntary organizations. Where the former are a matter of government record, the latter can only be estimated. Fortunately, many voluntary groups register as 501(C) non-profits, and these can be counted to provide the required estimate, albeit a conservative one.

The National Center for Charitable Statistics reported that there were 13,501 registered 501(C) organizations in Nebraska in 2009. That number incorporated all registered non-profits, including public charities, foundations, church congregations, private schools, service clubs, business leagues, social and recreational clubs, labor unions, farm bureaus, community theaters, neighborhood organizations and many more. Since not all such organizations are required to or choose to register, this count understates the total number of voluntary organizations in the state.

Combining voluntary organizations and local government units raises the number of Nebraska organizations requiring some form of citizen leadership to 16,160, or one such organization for every 111 Nebraska residents. Introducing the assumption that those citizens are adults, age 18-years and older, reduces the ratio of residents to organizations to 83:1. Finally, if we further assume that each organization will require not just one leadership role but several, and arbitrarily estimate the required number to

be three (arguably a conservative number), then the ratio of residents to organizations is reduced to 28:1.

The size of the available leadership pool of course declines as the population becomes more rural. One might assume that this would be mitigated by a smaller number of governmental and voluntary organizations being supported by the smaller populations in rural areas. Such, however, is not the case. Even the most rural counties in Nebraska tend to support multiple voluntary organizations, along with an array of local government entities. In fact, registered non-profits have increased in number over the last decade, even in areas where the population has declined.

As demonstrated in Table 2 (on next page), the ratio of governmental and non-governmental organizations to population declines in a more or less linear fashion, as the size of the total population declines. Nebraska's nine metropolitan counties provide just over 34 adult residents for every role in governmental and voluntary organizations. Ten micropolitan core counties (having a population center of 10,000 or more) provide just over 30 residents per organizational role. For small trade centers (having a population center of 2,500 to 9,999), the ratio of adults to organizational roles is under 20:1. For small town counties (having no population center of 2,500), the ratio is about 16:1 and for frontier counties (with no population center of 2,500 and fewer than six residents per square mile), the ratio is just in excess of 13:1.

At the high end of the scale, metropolitan Sarpy County potentially provides 55.8 adults for the estimated leadership positions required by 661 governmental and voluntary organizations. At the low end, Grant County can provide at best 5.9 adults for each such role required by the 25 organizations located there. A county by county display of the ratio of adults to estimated leadership roles can be seen in Figure 1 (on next page).

For very rural areas then, leadership shortages do indeed appear to be likely. This would be true even if all adult residents possessed the skills, energy and interests appropriate to leadership roles. This problem is apparently recognized by rural residents. In 2002, the Nebraska Rural Poll found that 63 percent of respondents living in or near a town of under 1,000 residents

Table 2. Non-profits, Government Units and Population by County Type in Nebraska

County Type (# Counties)	Registered Non-Profits	Local Government Units	Total "Public" Organizations	Population Age 18 and Over	Population Per Leadership Role*	Population Per Organizational Role**
Nebraska (93)	13,501	2,659	16,160	1,344,978	83.2	27.7
Metropolitan (9)	6,989	636	7,625	784,289	102.9	34.3
Non-Metropolitan (84)	6,512	2,023	8,535	560,689	65.7	21.9
Micropolitan Core (10)	2,487	470	2,957	267,880	90.6	30.2
Small Trade Center (24)	2,128	641	2,769	164,783	59.5	19.8
Small Town (22)	1,242	606	1,848	89,758	49.6	16.2
Frontier (28)	655	306	961	38,268	39.8	13.3

Source: National Center for Charitable Statistics and Bureau of the Census

*Assumes one leadership role per organization

**Assumes three roles per organization

felt that volunteering time to community activities was “very important” to the future of their community.

Voluntary organizations appear to benefit from this attitude. In the same 2002 Poll, 74 percent of those responding from very rural parts of Nebraska indicated that they had volunteered personal time for a local organization during the previous year. Nearly half (46%) indicated that they played some type of leadership role as a volunteer.

If there is a problem in locating rural leadership, it appears to be bigger for local government. The 2004 Nebraska Rural Poll found that only 14 percent of non-metropolitan Nebraskans had ever held elected or appointed office. More importantly, 61 percent of respondents to that survey indicated that they had “no interest” in running for or being appointed to a public office.

Still, even if willingness to participate in leadership roles was universal, when one of every six people is needed for a role in a governmental or voluntary organization (as in Grant County) while the population is declining and the number of organizations is growing, the potential for a crisis of rural leadership is logically quite high.

Rural places seem to have a limited number of options for addressing this issue. Anecdotally, we are told that the common solution is to “double up” on the number of roles accepted by individuals. That, of course, invites the problems of burnout and stagnation with which this paper was introduced.

It may be possible to expand the pool of potential leaders through education, especially for women who are traditionally less likely than men to play leadership roles in rural communities. The 2004 Nebraska Rural Poll found that only seven percent of

rural women had held elected or appointed public office (compared to 18% of men), although poll data indicates that women and men participated in voluntary organizations at about the same rate, and 40 percent of women indicate that they have played a leadership role in such organizations (compared to 45% of men).

The popularity of leadership education programs waxes and wanes, but they are common enough to be easily implemented by most communities. Ironically, such programs also demand active local leadership if they are to be successful, adding one more role to be filled by the local leadership pool.

Rural communities might benefit from expanding their definition of the leadership pool to include more youth. There is, however, a limit to how young a person can be and still be widely accepted in a leadership role, especially in government. Moreover, mentoring young leaders will again add time and responsibility to the current leadership pool, which is apparently already stretched thin.

Finally, some rural communities may want to consider the often unpopular course of eliminating or consolidating organizations, both voluntary and governmental.

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