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Spring 1999

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FACTORS IN RURAL COMMUNITY SURVIVAL: REVIEW OF INSIGHTS FROM THRIVING SMALL TOWNS

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ABSTRACT—During the 1980s crisis in the agricultural economy, some observers claimed that many towns were too small, too isolated, or too distant from larger population centers to survive in times of economic turmoil. We decided to evaluate these assumptions through a series of in-depth case studies of thriving small communities in the Great Plains. The communities we studied fit the general description of towns that were doing better than expected. Using an anthropological approach, the teams of field researchers from the Heartland Center for Leadership Development visited communities, ranging in size from 300 to 6,000, in Colorado, the Dakotas, Kansas, Nebraska, and Texas to interview opinion leaders, positional leaders, and average citizens. These findings were updated recently through telephone interviews. The findings suggest that leadership, rather than size or location, is a clearly critical factor in whether or not a community survives. This article summarizes the research approach, reviews examples of local leadership behaviors and community development strategies that illustrate these characteristics, reflects on the characteristics commonly shared in thriving small towns, and offers some ideas for additional research that may add to this or related bodies of knowledge.

Introduction

In the mid-1980s when a farm crisis, then considered the worst since the Great Depression, was taking its toll on rural communities throughout the Great Plains, newspaper headlines forecast a dismal future for towns dependent on production agriculture for economic well-being (e.g., Associated Press 1985). Commentaries and forecasts by various experts suggested that some communities were too small, too isolated, or too distant from larger population centers and, therefore, were unlikely to survive into the 21st century. Typical headlines in the news media of the Great Plains foretold gloom and doom: "Economists at federal reserve banks note trend:

Financial woes causing farmers to leave business" (Associated Press 1982); "Grim ag trends forebode rural desettlement" (Associated Press 1985); and "Decaying Great Plains towns, the rural ghettos of tomorrow" (Peirce 1988).

Such concerns were not necessarily ill-founded, as commodity prices were severely depressed and land values in some areas had declined by a staggering two-thirds. For example, in the north central Nebraska community of Broken Bow, population 4,000, a bank closed and 26 storefronts were emptied (Peirce 1988). Further north, anyone driving through could see that center-pivot irrigation systems that once had spelled promise for marginal land were abandoned; their rusting, weed-grown wheels presented silent testimony to the end of an era never really realized. One prominent theory about the future of small towns in Nebraska held that communities that were part of the so-called "fishhook" area, along the Platte River from the west through Lincoln and Omaha on the east, were the only ones that had any real chance of thriving (DeCamp 1999). One highly controversial suggestion, popularized by researchers from Rutgers University, was that vast rural reaches of the Great Plains should be transformed into a "Buffalo Commons," a nature preserve where the American Bison could roam freely as they had a century before (Popper and Popper 1992).

In 1985, a group of leaders, mainly from Nebraska state government and the University of Nebraska, attended a series of seminars by the futurist Robert Theobald, who had been retained by the administration of then Governor Bob Kerrey. Theobald's message of opportunity within change, detailed in part in his book, *The Rapids of Change: Entrepreneurship in Turbulent Times* (Theobald 1987) and other writings, provided one form of potential relief to the state's economic headache. A project called "Visions from the Heartland" transported Theobald around the state for a series of seminars designed to help small town leaders view the future in more positive terms. In a post-seminar de-briefing session with aides of the governor, an idea for a follow-up project emerged: Why not study small towns that were thriving, even in tough economic times, rather than towns whose future seemed dim? That query was translated into a key question to focus the research: "Why are some rural communities coping with fundamental (economic) restructuring when others seem to have surrendered to crisis?" (Luther and Wall 1987).

The importance of addressing how small communities coped with economic change was perceived as responding to concerns about the future viability of small towns. The goal was to develop improved insights about what contributes to community success, and to communicate these insights to small communities as well as to state and national policy makers who

TABLE 1
 Thriving Communities Studied in Depth
 For Clues to Rural Community Survival
 (with locations within respective states and current est. population)

Algona, Iowa (north central, 6,000)
* Broken Bow, Nebraska (north central, 4,000)
* Chadron, Nebraska (northwest, 5,600)
Cheney, Kansas (south central, 2,000)
Clifton, Illinois (northeast, 1,350)
Coopersville, Michigan (southwest, 3,400)
* Eustis, Nebraska (southwest, 450)
* Geneva, Nebraska (southeast, 2,300)
Hartley, Texas (panhandle, 300)
Jackson, Minnesota (southwest, 3,600)
Larimore, North Dakota (northeast, 400)
Lyons, Nebraska (east central, 1,100)
Rosholt, South Dakota (northeast, 400)
St. Paris, Ohio (west central, 1,850)
Superior, Nebraska (south central, 2,400)
Watsonville, California (west central, 37,000)
* Wausa, Nebraska (northeast, 600)
Wray, Colorado (northeast, 2,000)

* Initially studied community.

might be interested in developing effective programs for small town survival. The idea for this study was embraced by the Governor's Policy Research Office, which funded an initial project by the Heartland Center for Leadership Development, a new Nebraska-based nonprofit that had been founded by coordinators of Visions from the Heartland. The aim of this paper is to summarize and review the findings of this study of thriving small towns within the Great Plains.

Research Approach

The initial step in the study was identification of rural communities in Nebraska that could be described as relatively stable in population with somewhat diverse economies (Table 1). A quantitative assessment was



Figure 1. Locations of communities visited for study of thriving small towns.

undertaken through collection and analysis of economic, demographic and employment data. Of particular interest were communities where population trends were steady in areas experiencing overall net loss. Also of interest were communities that showed relative economic diversity, although in every instance these towns were significantly reliant on agriculture. A qualitative assessment was also undertaken, through a survey of leaders of state associations such as school boards and municipalities. These leaders were asked to nominate towns that were “holding their own” in economically tough times.

The initial five communities in Nebraska were visited in 1985-86; others, eventually totaling 18, were visited between 1987 and 1995, as funded projects took Heartland Center staff members into various other states (Fig. 1). In addition to the indicators of success mentioned above, we also selected communities that participated in programs which recognized the small town for its demonstrated strengths. For example, some communities were selected for participation in a corporate-sponsored training program through a highly competitive process that required demonstration of



Figure 2. Town square, Broken Bow. Photo by Milan Wall.

local leadership potential to build on community assets. In one instance, another community was identified initially through its designation as a Rural Enterprise Community in the Federal Empowerment Zone/Enterprise Community program. That program also requires a comprehensive application for support, including development of a strategic plan, and selection occurs through a competitive process. Another community was suggested by the Center for the New West because it appeared to be particularly strong in uses of telecommunications to support growing businesses.

The five Nebraska communities initially selected for intensive study, which included site visits, were Broken Bow (Fig. 2), Chadron, Eustis,



Figure 3. Community meeting, Wray, Colorado. Photo by Milan Wall.

Geneva, and Wausa (Table 1). These towns were chosen to represent a range of size (450 to 6,000), geographic location within the state, and variation in distance from nearby population centers and main transportation routes. All were considered rural by federal standards (7CFR Part 3550.10, App. 1, pp. 20-21). The town closest to a major metropolitan center, Geneva, was about 50 miles from Lincoln. The most distant, Chadron, was 400 miles away. Most were many miles from an Interstate Highway; however one, Geneva, was only 15 miles from Interstate 80.

Teams of interviewers first received extensive training in field research techniques, using a social anthropological approach similar to a community power study, which result in both descriptive and qualitative information

TABLE 2

Interview Questions for Quality of Life/Community Strengths and Weaknesses

<ul style="list-style-type: none">• What is it that people like about living here?• How would you describe the quality of life in this community? What are some examples?• What do you see as the strengths of this community? Weaknesses?• What are some of the sources of pride for the people who live in this community?• What's this town known for? What's the image of this town to outsiders?• When people from other towns visit, what do they come for?
--

(See, e.g., Hunter 1953.). Then, the teams were sent into the five communities to talk with positional leaders, reputational leaders, and citizens encountered on the streets and in the coffee shops. Interviews were established in advance by telephone contact with people in positions of leadership, such as mayors, town council members, Chamber of Commerce executives, bankers, retailers, and ministers. Once on site, interviewers asked questions that led them to reputational leaders, that is, people whose opinions seemed to be highly respected. Other local residents met with the team in accessible locations, such as local cafes, schools (Fig. 3), and senior centers. In larger communities, a team of as many as four to five researchers conducted interviews over three to four days then, as necessary, did follow-up interviews by telephone. In some communities, 20 or more individuals were contacted and asked a series of questions (see Tables 2-5).

The focus of the interviews, recorded in extensive notes by each researcher, was to record responses to a series of questions covering key topics: quality of life and community strengths or weaknesses (Table 2), local economy and economic transitions (Table 3), social change and planning for the future (Table 4), and leadership and citizen participation in community decisions (Table 5). These topics were selected because of their

TABLE 3

Interview Questions for Local Economy and Economic Transition

-
- What kind of changes have you seen in the economy in the last three years?
 - What connections do you see between the local economy and that of the area?
 - What are your economic strengths? Weaknesses?
 - What economic development activities in the community do you know of?
 - Are there any outside resources used for economic development? (Outside the community?)
 - Has any building or construction taken place in the last three to five years? Homes, public facilities?
 - What new businesses do you know about?
 - What future opportunities do you see for the town?
 - How do people invest in this community? Money, time, ideas?
-

importance to community perception of its competitive situation and community response to the challenges of change. For example, under the topic "local economy and economic transitions," the questions included: "What kind of changes have you seen in the economy in the last three years?"; and, "What future opportunities do you see for the town?" Under "leadership and citizen participation," the questions included: "If you wanted to get something done in this town, who would you need behind you?", as well as "Who could block changes?"

Field notes were analyzed extensively by the interviewers and a review group. Then, a case study was written in narrative form for each of the five communities. Interviewers and members of the review group, named by the Governor's Policy Research Office, read and discussed the case studies at length, looking for patterns that formed "clues to community survival." These "clues" were viewed as characteristics found commonly that appeared to contribute significantly to a community's success. Eventually, the consensus that emerged was called "20 Clues to Rural Community Survival" (Luther

TABLE 4

Interview Questions for Future Planning and Social Change

-
- How has lifestyle here changed over time?
 - Is there a group of community leaders that thinks, talks about or plans for the future?
 - What kind of things is the community doing to prepare for the future?
 - If you could do anything you wanted to improve your community, what would you do?
 - Can you describe this community the way you think it should be in ten years?
 - Do other people in the community share that vision of the future?
 - What advice would you give to the leaders of a community like yours to help them survive in hard times?
 - What do you think your community can teach other small towns?
-

and Wall 1987, 1998). Since the original report was published in 1987, additional in-depth studies have been completed and the original ones updated for a total of 18 communities in 12 states, mainly in the Great Plains and the Midwest (see Luther and Wall 1998). The current status and findings to date are reviewed here.

In addition to Broken Bow, Chadron, Eustis, Geneva, and Wausa in Nebraska, the communities studied included: Lyons and Superior, Nebraska; Algona, Iowa; Cheney, Kansas; Clifton, Illinois; Coopersville, Michigan; Hartley, Texas; Jackson, Minnesota; Larimore, North Dakota; Rosholt, South Dakota; St. Paris, Ohio; Watsonville, California, and Wray, Colorado. These profiles were last updated through telephone interviews in 1997-98, and a revised volume was published recently in book form by the Heartland Center (Luther and Wall 1998). The revised volume contains the case study profile for each community, which range in population size from 300 to 37,000.

The main question occasionally raised about the research approach has been why the study did not compare and contrast the thriving to declining

TABLE 5

Interview Questions for Leadership and Citizen Participation

-
- How would you describe the role the community's leaders have played in its survival?
 - How do leaders get citizens involved in community decision making?
 - Where do ideas for new community projects or activities come from?
 - How do these projects get carried out?
 - If you wanted to get something done in this town, who would you need behind you?
 - Who could block changes?
 - In what ways does your community work with other towns the area?
 - How does your community use state government resources such as state agencies and programs? County or regional programs?
 - How do new leaders emerge? Get new leadership skills?
-

communities. Basically, we sought lessons of success that might be emulated or adapted, rather than lessons of failure that might be avoided.

Characteristics Shared by Thriving Rural Communities

The study profiles produced a list of 20 characteristics, which we have called "20 Clues to Rural Community Survival" (Table 6), shared by thriving small towns. The traits fall into six groups focused around: community attitude (clues 1-5), economic enterprise (clues 6-9), political and social inclusiveness (clues 10-11, 13-14), forward thinking (clues 12-13, 16, 20), use of traditional institutions (clues 14-16), and internal leadership (clues 16-20). The study findings, including the list of clues, are being presented as widely as possible, and used in training conducted by the Heartland Center and other entities. They are also being distributed in community

TABLE 6

20 Clues to Rural Community Survival

-
1. Evidence of community pride.
 2. Emphasis on quality in business and community life.
 3. Willingness to invest in the future.
 4. Participatory approach to community decision-making.
 5. Cooperative community spirit.
 6. Realistic appraisal of future opportunities.
 7. Awareness of competitive positioning.
 8. Knowledge of the physical environment.
 9. Active economic development program.
 10. Deliberate transition of power to a younger generation of leaders.
 11. Acceptance of women in leadership roles.
 12. Strong belief in and support for education.
 13. Problem-solving approach to providing health care.
 14. Strong multi-generational family orientation.
 15. Strong presence of traditional institutions that are integral to community life.
 16. Attention to sound and well-maintained infrastructure.
 17. Careful use of fiscal resources.
 18. Sophisticated use of information resources.
 19. Willingness to seek help from the outside.
 20. Conviction that, in the long run, you have to do it yourself.
-

development curricula, such as Oregon's "Rural Futures Forum (Rural Development Initiatives 1995) and "The Search Communities" (Pioneer Hi-Bred International, Inc. 1991). In addition, the list of traits has been cited repeatedly in newsletters and news media (e.g., Guskind and Peirce 1988; *Wichita Eagle* 1996). These uses have allowed broader awareness and assessment of these results.

These results are consistent with other research projects that have correlated the "clues" with their independent assessment of community success. The most extensive of these studies was undertaken by Daryl McKee,

Associate Professor of Marketing at Louisiana State University. McKee (1995) surveyed more than 300 leaders of small to medium-sized communities in Louisiana, Mississippi, and Texas. McKee (1995) synthesized the "20 Clues" into three "community development culture" attributes identified in marketing research, specifically economic development, community spirit, and institutional foundation. He then examined the correlation of those attributes to economic development performance. His conclusion was that two of the three, economic development and community spirit, were positively related to community economic performance (McKee 1995). This research supports our findings that community characteristics and leadership are significant factors in the development and maintenance of small town vitality.

Taken as a whole, these results suggest that leadership constitutes a highly critical factor in community success and survival. Thus, this study does not support the common expectation or perception that factors outside the community's control determine whether or not a community survives. While location, size, and other uncontrollable contingencies do have some influence on a community, local leadership behaviors and locally driven community initiatives and economic development strategies can overcome many natural disadvantages that communities face. By local or community leadership, we mean those people who hold positions of leadership with significant community institutions, such as city and county government, banks, schools and hospitals; those who provide significant leadership to community-based (typically volunteer) organizations, such as Chambers of Commerce, service clubs, arts groups and recreation groups; those who own and manage significant businesses located in the community and its market area; and those other individuals whose personal leadership is important because their ideas are respected or their expertise is viewed as important to the community's well-being. In the latter category, examples include large landowners and medical professionals. In some communities, high school youth play important leadership roles, as well. The contributions that these leaders make to community attitudes, quality of life, and economic vitality were considered particularly important.

Factors, other than those eventually identified, that were thought to be important in advance turned out not to be so critical. For example, common ethnic heritage, which was a frequent rallying point in some towns for community celebrations and festivals, did not appear essential. On investigation, we discovered that ethnicity was exploited as a community development opportunity, rather than being the cause of community activity. One

community leader in a town that emphasizes its Germanic background said he was of Irish descent himself, “but after a few months everybody here becomes German.” In many communities, ethnic background was little noticed by community leaders.

Examples of Leadership and Development

In this section I illustrate how the “clues” are evident in selected communities that were the focus of this study. Several of the clues are well illustrated by Eustis, Nebraska (Fig. 4). Eustis has a population of 450, and it is located in countryside typified by high table land and rugged gullies in south central Nebraska. Here, “evidence of community pride” (clue 1), “emphasis on quality in business and community life” (clue 2), and “willingness to invest in the future” (clue 3) were reflected in the decision of the Farmers State Bank to build a new, modern, brick building on the town’s main street in the early 1980s, just as the farm crisis was reaching its peak. The bank’s two Vice Presidents explained that since the bank had been saving the money to build the new structure for years, and since the bank’s owners believed in the future of the community, there was no reason not to proceed. The end result was a new building that both the bank and the community could view with pride. “If you’re going to do something,” said one of the bank’s executives, “you might as well do it right.” The vote of confidence represented by the new bank’s construction was appreciated throughout the community, they said. In addition, bank construction encouraged the town to move ahead with other infrastructure improvements, including a new senior center, improvements at the fairgrounds and, eventually, a new water system. Local matching grant funds to build the senior center were raised in pledges in just 60 days.

Business owners also followed suit. A local automotive body shop improved and expanded, adding satellite locations in several larger communities in a market area with a 100-mile radius. An entrepreneur from the town of Gothenburg, which is 25 miles away and eight times bigger, bought the old pool hall and turned it into a restaurant with a menu admired throughout the area. Eventually, she purchased the old hotel next door and transformed it into a bed and breakfast. She and her family have since relocated to Eustis, adding to the number of younger, entrepreneurial business and community leaders.

Another example is provided by Cheney, Kansas (population 2,000 and growing). In this case, another woman entrepreneur saw an opportunity

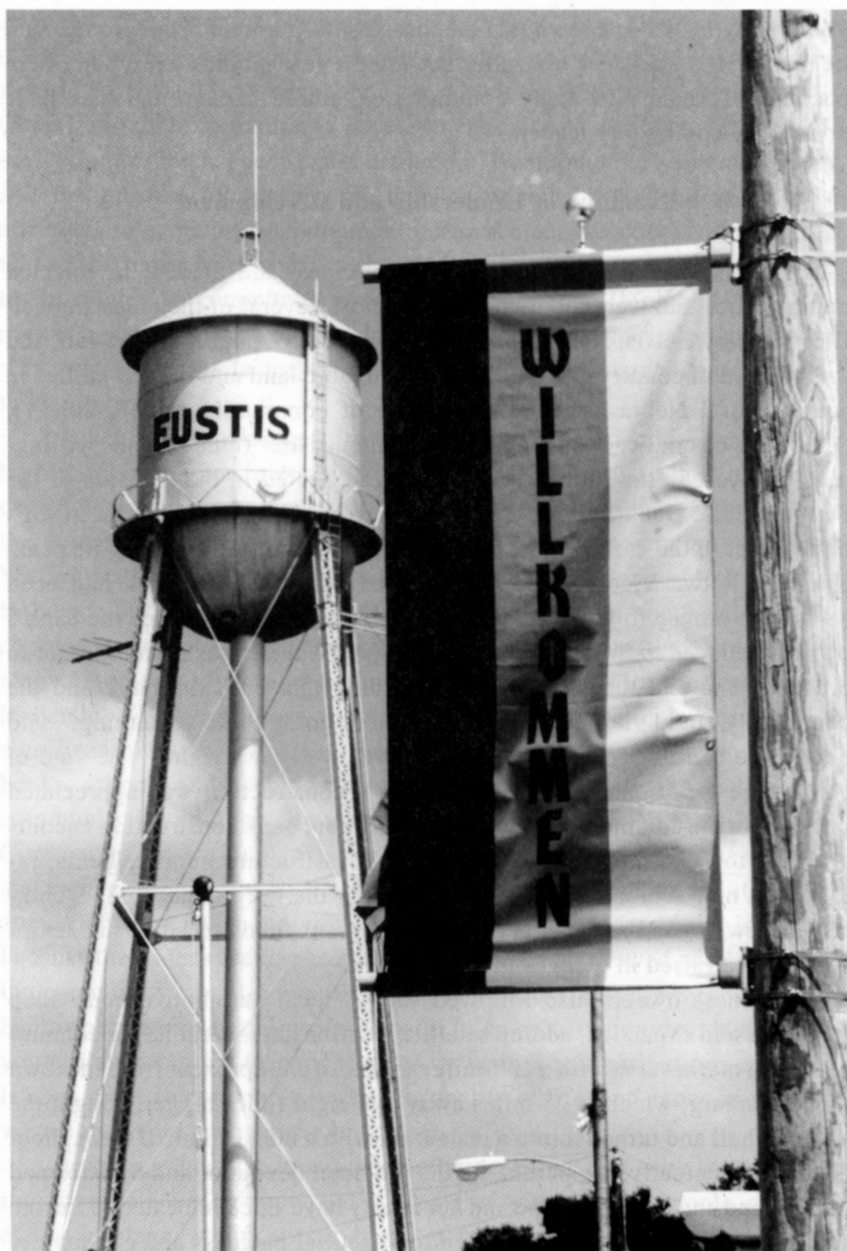


Figure 4. Water tower in Eustis, Nebraska. Photo by Don Brockmeier.

when several younger families moved to town, but kept their jobs in the aircraft industry in nearby Wichita. Suddenly, day care became important to community survival. This farm wife completed the education necessary to qualify as a licensed day-care director, borrowed \$100,000 from the local bank, and built a day-care center with the capacity for 100 infants and children. In two years, a full year ahead of schedule, the center was full. Since then, other providers have taken over the task of providing quality child care services. However, the original risk taken was appreciated by community members, who showed their support for the endeavor by donating services and enrolling their children to reach capacity. The support of this effort illustrates clue 11, "acceptance of women in leadership roles." And, the bank's willingness to approve the loan underscores clue 15, "Strong presence of traditional institutions that are integral to community life."

Wray, Colorado, is a town that illustrates the value of "cooperative community spirit" (clue 5) and "participatory approach to community decision-making" (clue 4). Located on the plains of northeastern Colorado, this town of 2,000 could be considered remote and isolated by conventional standards. Situated on Highway 34, once a major east-west transportation route, traffic became mostly local when Interstate Highways I-70, 56 miles to the south, and I-80, 67 miles to the north were completed in the mid-1960s. Amtrak trains roll through toward Denver, 3 ½ hours away, but the train barely slows down in Wray as it passes through. In this community, an abandoned school building, located in the center of town, could have been written off as an eyesore. Instead, a group of young community leaders thought they saw a possible home for a long-discussed community recreation center.

Hopes for renovation of the school house were dashed when the state declared the building unsafe. However, disappointment was quickly replaced by a newfound fervor to build a completely new, state-of-the-art recreational facility that would also serve as a physical rehabilitation center. The latter suggestion arose during community discussions (e.g. Fig. 3); it became clear that while a recreation facility would serve the young, the elders would also benefit from the opportunity to get to physical therapy close to home, rather than make the long drive to Denver and back after hip or knee surgery. Suddenly, what had been a modest idea for a \$300,000 building renovation had grown into an ambitious plan to raise more than \$2 million for a new community facility. The drive to raise the money took several years. Ideas for raising money were as creative as allowing people to pay to be "Mayor for a Day" (\$25 to buy the honor, as one local resident did

for Nebraska's football coach on the day of the Nebraska-Colorado football game) to more traditional ice cream socials. A regional foundation donated more than \$100,000, the largest single gift, but most of the \$2 million came in the form of small donations.

By the time the ribbon was cut on the Wray Rehabilitation and Activities Center in 1992, plans were also in the works for a bond issue to upgrade the existing community hospital. A completely modern facility would cost \$6.5 million. The vote was positive. Now, Wray has become a regional medical center. The new facility, opened in July of 1995, was recognized as a significant effort for a rural hospital, according to the Colorado Hospital Association (Wall 1999). This rural hospital not only retained a local medical doctor but, in addition, attracted two more family practice physicians, a general surgeon, and several physicians assistants. All the effort—and the resulting success—led to Wray's designation as an "All-America City," the smallest community so honored at the time. Wray's successes illustrate the importance of clue 13 "problem-solving approach to providing health care" and clue 14 "strong multi-generational family orientation." As in many other small towns, Wray has its challenges. For example, a problem of chemical abuse was identified, but teens and adults worked together to come up with solutions. One realization, articulated by local leaders, was that making a community a better place to live is a never-ending process. One confided in an interview that "No matter how well we may have done in the past, the challenge of change never goes away."

Jackson, Minnesota, is a town with a population of 3,600 that underscores the importance of clue 9: "active economic development program." Community leaders worked actively on economic development but discovered, to their chagrin, that their development strategy had been misdirected. The entire economic development committee from this southwestern Minnesota town was in Chicago, trying to recruit new businesses, when it got an emergency message from back home: one of the community's largest industrial employers had suddenly closed its doors. This meant 300 good-paying jobs had disappeared. "There was lots of doom and gloom," said a local business owner who heads the industrial development board. But that attitude was quickly replaced by a new leadership aggressiveness that has revitalized economic development strategies as well as the town's image of itself. The focus of local development efforts shifted from recruiting new industries to "building from within" (Fig. 5). Existing businesses were put on a regular visitation schedule, to find out what they needed to stay or to expand. An annual celebration now honors employees of local firms. Today,



Figure 5. Industrial Park, Jackson, Minnesota. Photo by Milan Wall.

businesses that are expanding in Jackson, or relocating there, cite community attitude as a major reason.

The new strategy in Jackson, Minnesota, has worked. Within one year, the 300 jobs that had been lost were replaced. Since then, several hundred more have been added, mainly through expansion of already existing employers. Not everything works, of course. "We've had some successes; we've had some failures," said one local business leader. "Most importantly," he said, "we've had some extremely good team work come out of our crisis." That teamwork has also benefitted the retail community, which has undergone its own revitalization.

Larimore, North Dakota, is another town that has faced challenges and is on the way to re-inventing itself. This town of 1,500 is now largely a bedroom community of Grand Forks, 30 miles to the east. Here, it is evident

that clue 10, "deliberate transition of power to a younger generation of leaders," was critical to facing the challenges of a transforming economy, as the town has undergone transition from a bustling rail hub and commercial center to a new, still developing role. One major disappointment was Larimore's failure to compete successfully for an ethanol production plant. Larimore put together a proposal and emerged as one of three finalists. However, the project was delayed and eventually canceled altogether. Rather than decry their lack of success, the town exploited a newly discovered ability to cooperate to get things done. "We all worked together on that proposal and it got everyone, including the City Council, thinking about developing our community," said one of the town's younger leaders. "That effort opened up lines of communication and cooperation that are still serving us well today."

Young community leaders in Larimore, who had been a part of that effort, subsequently revitalized the Commercial Club, which eventually evolved into a Chamber of Commerce. The Chamber faltered, but one of its more active committees assumed leadership and the Larimore Economic Development Corporation was formed. Now active for nearly a decade, the Economic Development Corporation can point to many successes. Taken together, those successes add up to major additions to the community and its quality of life. Among the facilitated projects by this group are a \$2.25 million remodeling project at the nursing home, a \$1.9 million addition at the high school, new housing adjacent to the golf course, a satellite medical clinic, expansions to the bank, a new potato processor, a car wash, and new ownership for the hardware store. Several more projects are on the drawing board.

In Hartley, Texas, an unincorporated village of just 300 in the state's panhandle, clue 7, "awareness of competitive positioning," and clue 12, "strong belief in and support of education," were highlighted. This community has kept itself competitive by emphasizing high quality education provided in a country school that was once threatened due to low enrollment. The focus on educational quality, financed with what was at one time the highest local levy in the state, paid off when a new state aid to education formula benefitted schools where students were succeeding. Also, as a result of the school's reputation, enrollment has increased more than 50% in the last decade.

Hartley's new fortunes began when a reorganized Lions Club started bringing together a community that had been known for its cliques. The Lions focused their initial attention on an aging community building. This

building, after several improvement projects, has become an active center for community activities, wedding receptions, and family reunions. The Lions also organized a series of chuck wagon suppers, which were held several times each summer as community gatherings and fund-raisers. Eventually enthusiasm in the Lions Club faded, but a new group called the Trailblazers picked up and moved things ahead. The Trailblazers got excited about their small town when they took advantage of a rural development program sponsored by Pioneer Hi-Bred International, Inc., the seed corn giant that is merging with Dupont. Pioneer's program, designed with help from the Heartland Center for Leadership Development, emphasized a self-help approach to community development, taking advantage of external resources while assuming grassroots responsibility for community and economic development. The Trailblazers have focused mainly on strengthening community support for the school and on maintaining local business vitality. Attitudes of Hartley leaders underscore the importance of clues 19 and 20, "willingness to seek help from the outside," and, "conviction that, in the long run, you have to do it yourself." In the words of one Hartley resident, "Rural America is taking a beating. But things aren't going to get any better unless we do something ourselves."

Future Opportunities for Research

What this study did not do, by definition, was to compare thriving towns with withering communities and then attempt to discover to what extent the less successful communities may also have some of these characteristics. Nor did it explore extensively certain factors that, while technically outside a certain community's control, may have contributed greatly to its economic strengths. Chadron, Nebraska, for example, is the site of a state college. Larimore, North Dakota, and Cheney, Kansas, are within easy driving distance of larger population centers. One might also explore whether these characteristics lead to community success, or whether community success leads to such characteristics. Further, it would be useful to know to what extent communities that deliberately tried to strengthen their weaker characteristics could demonstrate resultant successes that added to community vitality. None of these questions were specifically addressed by this study. Further, with the exception of the telephone interviews conducted for the 1998 update of the entire study, no systematic, ongoing evaluation of these communities' continued successes has been undertaken. Nor has any attempt been made to try to determine through further research whether

some of the clues are more important than others. However, we hypothesize that certain traits are absolutely essential, among them clue 3 [willingness to invest in the future], clue 4 [participatory approach to community decision-making], clue 9 [active economic development program], clue 12 [strong belief in and support for education], and clue 20 [conviction that, in the long run, you have to do it yourself.] We also suspect that clue 18 [sophisticated use of information resources] is becoming more important, with the advent of the World Wide Web. All these areas, and perhaps others, are ripe for additional studies.

Conclusion

The Heartland Center's study of successful rural communities, begun more than a dozen years ago, focuses attention on those elements critical to community survival that are within the community's control. Again and again, the evidence points to the importance of local leadership. The "20 Clues to Rural Community Survival" discovered represent characteristics found commonly in thriving small towns throughout the Great Plains. These characteristics underscore the role that leaders play, through what they say and do, to how a community views itself and its opportunities for development. Future research might continue to test validity of the clues or compare conditions in once-thriving towns with conditions in those that continue to exploit their competitive advantages. Current work at the Heartland Center includes creation of a supplemental manual that will guide local communities in use of the clues as a tool for local development, including suggestions for analyzing possible indicators of success for each clue, plus suggestions for strategies might be undertaken to build strengths in areas of apparent weakness.

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