

Strategies to Revitalize Rural America

Strategy #5: Desirable Places to Live

Making Rural Communities Desirable Places to Live

For rural communities to thrive, they must be places that people want to live.

Making rural communities desirable places to live is not the whole answer. If there is no economic opportunity in an area, young families can't live there no matter how much they might want to. However, economic opportunity is more likely to be created in attractive places to live because they draw young families and entrepreneurs who start new farms and businesses and revitalize existing enterprises. In recent decades, rural communities with natural amenities to draw people – lakes, mountains, rivers, or climate – have grown.

Most farm and ranch communities don't have mountains or lakes. They aren't likely to become the next tourist-filled Aspen, and most of us wouldn't want that. But each of our communities has assets, strengths, and opportunities we can build on to draw people – native sons and daughters back to raise their families and others seeking a rural life style. Those assets range from natural amenities, to strong schools, to friendly neighbors. The best place to start is with existing strengths.

Strong Small Schools. Small schools have long been a drawing card for rural communities. Communities that make a commitment to provide a quality education in small, community-based schools and invest in them will always have a powerful advantage in attracting young families with children. But small rural schools are facing increasing financial pressures and are under growing political pressure to consolidate.

Only local people in each community are in a position to make decisions about whether and when to consolidate schools or override levy limits to increase school funding to enhance educational quality. But the contribution of strong, small, community-based schools to the viability of the community should be a strong consideration.

State policymakers should not blindly force school consolidation that undermines both education and communities under the misguided assumption that bigger is better and more efficient in education. The research indicates that small schools have the best educational outcomes for most children.

Fewer kids fall through the cracks. And the efficiency gains of consolidation often disappear when construction and transportation costs are counted and efficiency is measured in cost per graduate. Small schools graduate a higher percentage of their students.

There are opportunities for communities to work together in ways that enable them to keep and strengthen their schools while holding the line on costs. Some districts are sharing a superintendent. That spreads the costs of the highest salary and perhaps enables each district to gain the advantage of a more talented leader than they could each hire

individually.

Others are sharing teachers and offering joint classes by distance education or by transporting upper-level students between communities to enable them to offer advanced courses with low enrollments at a reasonable cost.

A Sense of Community. Many people long to live in a community where people know and care about each other. It's not surprising. Surveys on happiness and life satisfaction suggest the factor most strongly correlated with satisfaction is regular contact with a network of friends – community. It's more strongly correlated with satisfaction than income.

Communities that create spaces for people to meet and interact and work at being friendly are more likely to attract and keep families and businesses than those that don't. That is especially true of native sons and daughters who have experience living in the community. They are more likely to return home to raise their families if they experienced a strong sense of community and supportive interaction as children.

Social Capital. When *Christian Science Monitor* reporter *Laurent Beltsie* was interviewed on *National Public Radio* about his series, "Alone on the Range," he was asked whether he thought the rural communities of the Heartland could turn it around and survive. He said that while all the trends were against them, he would not count them out because he was so impressed by the people he had interviewed – their spirit, their entrepreneurial bent, and devotion to working together to make their community work.

That's social capital.

Communities that have it are more attractive places to live because things work better. People work together to solve problems and make things better. They have disputes, but they resolve them rather than letting them simmer. Communities can enhance their future by establishing a culture of working together to solve problems, launch new initiatives, and make the community a better place to live.

Young people and families must be involved in the community. If we want them, we need to give them some influence in making the community a place they want to live and raise their families.

They have unique needs. They want swimming pools, summer baseball, and other programs to enrich the lives of their children. Perhaps they want better Internet service or have ideas for making the community more attractive by restoring historic buildings and character. Communities that allow them to lead will more likely keep them and draw more like them.

High Speed Internet Service. It's a necessity. Young people see it as a contributor to quality of life. It enables them to connect to the outside world in a way that brings cultural and other amenities of distant places closer.

Access to Nature and a Quality Environment. In the future, access to uncrowded natural land will be increasingly hard to come by, and it will be an increasingly valuable asset for communities. Communities that offer it will have a leg up in attracting families to start businesses and drive revitalization.

Access to a quality environment also offers a base for tourism-related businesses like bed and breakfasts and guest ranches that offer a weekend away within an easy commute of population centers. This is one of the factors where farm and ranch communities have a natural advantage. They are surrounded by land. But often, there is little public access and in some areas, almost every acre is cultivated.

Still, almost every community has potential natural assets. Those with small streams could work in partnership with landowners to restore the stream corridor to grass and trees and provide public access for hiking, biking, and fishing. Likewise, Conservation Reserve Program acres with farm ponds could be good for hiking and fishing.

Tyler Sutton of the Conservation Alliance of the Great Plains suggested in the *Lincoln Journal Star* that restored grasslands could draw people to Great Plains communities. He wrote, “Not long ago the Northern Great Plains was one of the most spectacular grasslands on the planet. It was alive with wildlife, rivaled only by Africa’s Serengeti. People came from around the world to experience one of the greatest wildlife spectacles on earth.”

Sutton proposes changes in management of national grasslands and public-private partnerships to own land, acquire conservation easements, and set wildlife management objectives. These newly created areas would be a natural amenity for local communities – “reasons for people and businesses to stay and to move to the surrounding communities.”

New public policies can facilitate development of natural amenities. The Conservation Partnerships and Cooperation Program created by the farm bill authorizes the Secretary of Agriculture to undertake conservation projects in partnership with communities and make needed adjustments in conservation program rules to make the projects work.

For example, landowners could be provided a bonus through the Conservation Reserve Program for restoring land along a stream and providing public access, in concert with a community plan. The federal government is restoring 40 million acres through the Conservation Reserve Program. Why not manage it creatively to also help communities? It may also be necessary to revisit state laws to ensure that cooperating landowners who provide public access are protected from liability for any injuries that occur.

Finally, the growing value of a quality environment in community revitalization should give pause to those who would weaken the authority of local zoning boards to control the location of giant livestock facilities.

The economic development benefits of mega-livestock operations are often less than

anticipated and outweighed by the negative influence of such facilities on the decisions of families and businesses about whether to locate in the community.

People who want to start businesses, farms, and ranches prefer to do it in good places to live. Making our communities better places to live is one of the critical factors in enhancing their future.