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Do It Yourself Development

Clues to Rural Community Survival

Small rural communities that are thriving and vibrant in a period of economic hard times do have something in common.

This conclusion was drawn from a recent study by the Heartland Center for Leadership Development in Lincoln, Nebraska. They undertook an in-depth study of five rural Nebraska communities with populations ranging from 450 to 6,000. The communities were selected from among 20 small towns that were identified as surviving the economic trends stemming from the worst agricultural economic crisis since the Great Depression. The study of insights into community success led to development of a series of possible "clues to survival," which were analyzed and re-analyzed following each community study. Finally, the clues were formalized in the following list of "20 Clues to Rural Community Survival":

1. Evidence of Community Pride. Successful communities are show-places of community care and attention, with neatly trimmed yards and well-kept parks. PRIDE also shows up in community festivals and events that give residents an excuse to celebrate their community, its history and heritage.

2. Emphasis on Quality in Business and Community Life. They believe that something worth doing is worth doing right. Facilities are built to last, and so are homes and other improvements. Businesses are built or expanded with attention to design and construction details.

3. Willingness to Invest in the Future. Along with brick and mortar investments, residents invest time and energy in community betterment. They consider themselves with how they are doing today will impact on their lives and those of their children and grandchildren in the future.

4. Participatory Approach to Community Decision-Making. Power is deliberately shared. People still know who they need on their side to get something done, but even the most powerful of the opinion leaders seem to work through the system - to build consensus for what they want to do.

5. Cooperative Community Spirit. They show more attention to cooperative activities than to fighting over what should be done and by whom. They stress working together toward a common goal and the focus is on positive results. Considerable time may be spent making a decision, and there may be disagreements along the way, but eventually, "stuff gets done."

6. Realistic Appraisal of Future Opportunities. Successful communities have learned to build on their strengths and minimize their weaknesses. Few small communities believe they are likely to land a giant industry. In fact, many wouldn't want one if it came along, fearing that too much reliance on one industry would be unhealthy.

7. Awareness of Competitive Positioning. Thriving communities know who their competitors are, and so do the businesses in them. They try to emphasize quality as a way to assist local businesses, but they also keep tabs on competitors in other towns -- they don't want any of the homefolks to have an excuse to go elsewhere. They try to provide as complete a shopping package as possible.

8. Knowledge of the Physical Environment. They know that location is underscored continually in local decision-making as leaders picture their community in relation to others. They are also familiar with what they have locally.

9. Active Economic Development Program. Successful communities have an organized and active approach to economic development. It involves both public and private sector initiatives, working in hand in hand. Private economic development corporations are common, either as a part, or an outgrowth of a chamber of commerce or commercial club.

10. Deliberate Transition of Power to a Younger Generation. In thriving rural communities, people under 40 often hold key positions in both civic and business affairs. In many cases these young people grew up in the town and decided to stay or returned after college.

11. Acceptance of Women in Leadership Roles. Women hold some of the positions of leadership in these thriving rural communities, and these roles extend beyond the traditional strongholds of female leadership. Women are elected as mayors, are hired to manage health care facilities, develop new business ventures, and are elected as presidents of Chambers of Commerce.

12. Strong Belief In and Support for Education. Rural community leaders are very much aware of the importance of good schools. Residents want their children to get the best education they can afford. Beyond that, the school is often a center of social activity, and sporting and other school events are well-attended.

13. Problem-Solving Approach to Providing Health Care. Local health care is a common concern in rural communities, but strategies for health care delivery vary, depending on community needs. This could mean simply trying to keep a doctor in town, focusing on emergency medical services, or it may mean investing heavily in comprehensive hospital-based services.

14. Strong Multi-Generation Family Orientation. Thriving communities are generally family-oriented communities, with activities often built around family needs and ties. But the definition of family is broad, including younger as well as older generations and people new to the community.

15. Strong Presence of Traditional Institutions that are Integral to Community Life. Community activities often include or are centered on the church, the strongest force in this regard. Schools may play a similar role. Service clubs retain a strong influence, and that influence is felt in community development as well as in social activities.

16. Sound and Well-Maintained Infrastructure. Successful communities recognize the importance of maintaining good streets and sidewalks, water systems, sewage treatment facilities -- and they work hard to improve them. However, many of these things are also worried that outside funding may be necessary to help keep them up, and they wonder whether it will be available to them in the future.

17. Careful Use of Fiscal Resources. Expenditures are made carefully in successful small communities. People aren't afraid to spend money but neither are they spendthrifts. Expenditures are often seen as investments in the future of the community.

18. Sophisticated Use of Information Resources. Rural community leaders are knowledgeable about their communities beyond the knowledge base available in the community. They utilize retail sales histories to study trends, census data to study population change, and many utilize computer equipment to keep people up-to-date on financial matters.

19. Willingness to Seek Help From the Outside. Successful rural communities are not reluctant to seek help from outside agencies and organizations. Many of them have been successful at competing for government grants and contracts for economic development, sewer and water systems, recreation, street and sidewalk improvement, and senior citizen programs.

20. A Strong Conviction That in the Long Run, You Have to Do It Yourself. Thriving small communities believe their destiny is in their own hands even though outside help is sought when appropriate. They are not waiting for someone else to save them, nor do they believe that "things will turn out" if they sit back and wait. Making their communities good places to live for a long time to come is a proactive assignment, and they are willing to accept it.