

FEATURE ARTICLE:

Top 10 Reasons Rural Community Development Is So Hard to DO!

For the past three years, this newsletter has carried a monthly column by Michael Holton focused on rural community revitalization. Some articles referred to community development successes, while others related various struggles that come with the territory in community development. This month, Michael takes his experiences and insights and defines the top 10 reasons rural community development is so difficult to accomplish.

1. PEOPLE DON'T UNDERSTAND WHAT COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT IS

Community leaders and resource providers tend to put characteristics in with community development that constrict the definition. Often it is confused with other development ideas such as economic development, infrastructure, schools, and business development.

Community development is all of these things, but not packaged separately. Contrary to the belief that any one of these can fix or solve problems that need to be addressed, it takes all of them to complete the puzzle we call community development.

The definition of community development can be stated as, "The process of improving the social, economic, and cultural conditions of a village or small town." Even this definition may come up short, but at least it addresses other facets of what the community is all about.

2. DIFFERENCES BETWEEN RURAL AND URBAN

Agencies and funding sources often try to address community development as if what worked for urban areas will also work for rural areas. This very seldom happens as they are two different beasts. Why refer to them as beasts? Because urban and rural communities have lives of their own.

Where do we separate the two so that we can all grasp the differences? Maybe we don't have to. This is an area of understanding and perception, so it all leads back to the fundamental, yet simple, conclusion that rural is anything urban is not.

While this is easy for some of us who live in smaller rural townships (less than 2,000 in population), it is not as easy for agencies addressing development and providing funding. Fair or not, this becomes one of the reasons why community development in rural areas is so difficult.

3. UNDERSTANDING COMMUNITY GATE KEEPERS

Rural communities are made up of a social group called the gate keepers. This may prove to be one of the most difficult aspects of community development in small rural towns.

Gate keepers are usually people who have lived in the community for years, often clear back to the time when small rural communities were thriving. They made a living and prospered while raising their children. The community was and is still good to them. They do not want to see new community development come in and take away what they have acquired.

These people often resist big changes with statements like, "We don't need that!" or "It was good enough for me when I was growing up." The key to dealing with the gate keeper plight is to involve

them from the beginning in the discussion and work.

4. CHANGE IS NOT COMFORTABLE

Like the gate keeper mentality, change is also a barrier to community development. Comfort levels and routine are easier to understand for most community members. Large-scale change is uncomfortable and often hard work.

When you are dealing with buildings, you may have destruction and construction going on all around the community that disrupts routine. When you are dealing with people and politics, elections bring new leadership, but they also may bring change to the community.

New business brings competition which communities may view as healthy, but to existing business that must now compete for the shrinking rural dollar, it is not. Communities are made up of people first and structures second. Change must be addressed in those terms.

5. PAROCHIAL ATTITUDES

You hear the term parochial brought up in discussions regarding rural communities, even with those trying to work together regionally. Many people do not know what parochial means or why it is used in the context of community development. Our definition refers to small rural communities being insular or narrowly restricted in focus or scope.

Parochial attitudes in small rural communities address the ability for these areas to shut themselves off from the outside. Communities, particularly small rural communities in the Midwest, have the notion that they have always managed to do it on their own, and they don't need any outside help. It is this independent desire of the people that is reflected in local institutions and their way of doing business.

The problem with this attitude today is that small rural communities cannot do it on their own as we transition from a local to a global economy. This reflects change and upheaval in the traditional sense of economic and social development.

6. LACK OF RESOURCES AND CAPACITY

Due to depopulation, the changing face of agriculture, and dwindling businesses in towns, the ability to find what we need locally has diminished. We are forced to look to outside resource agencies for help and to find the resources we once found locally.

Viewing this in economic terms creates a bleak picture, but not one without hope. Choices become clearer when we understand the realities. We may still need to buy products out of town, and we may need to ask for help from outside agencies. But when we make our own community development choices, we can strengthen the local economy based upon the diversity our choices bring.

7. NEGATIVE ATTITUDES

It is easier to be an art critic than it is to be an artist. In small rural community development, we all know what we will hear from many of the residents of a town. It is nearly always negative and destructive.

I often say in meetings in small rural communities that I can find out everything that is wrong with the

community in one hour at the local coffee shop. It takes me much longer to get people to talk about what is good about their community.

We need to focus on positive contributions of the community and its people to the world as we know it. Asset-Based Community Development (ABCD) is an approach that works well in identifying positive attributes of our communities and starts the conversation in a positive direction. We will discuss this concept and practice later.

8. LACK OF PARTICIPATION ACROSS THE GENERATIONS

This question is always brought up in two ways. The lack of volunteers for community events causes an outcry, yet youths and senior citizens complain of not being asked to participate in a meaningful way. I often hear, “Why should I voice my opinion, they don’t care anyway?” This is brought up by both young people and the elderly.

Small communities talk about the crisis in the dwindling number of volunteers for special events and the burnout that occurs with the volunteers they do have. So why are the elderly and youth left out? Communication is a big key to crossing generations and finding a meaningful way to include all of the community rather than a few overworked individuals. An inclusive, open communication process benefits all.

9. PURPOSE OF EXISTENCE

Community identity is often clouded by confusion over the true motive for the community’s existence. Every small town in America, rural or not, has an identity and a purpose. This is part of the culture that is passed from one generation to the next. Communities have forgotten why they exist, and when change has altered that reason, they have not learned to adapt to the change.

History plays a large role in establishing the purpose and ultimately the pride we feel towards our hometown. The key to survival is to not live in the past. The truth is that history is not static; it is dynamic.

We are making history in our communities everyday. History is the change we make to our communities to make them better. In the end these changes serve a purpose for the community’s very existence.

10. LEADERSHIP CAPACITY

Of all of the factors and indicators of small town demise, I see the lack of leadership as the biggest of all. We are changing, and leadership is needed to address these conditions. The very definition of change is the ability to bring people and ideas together without coercion or force.

I heard a leader in one of the rural communities I work with say to me, “Why should I take leadership training, I am already a leader!” What this said to the community was that he was unwilling to lead the town in a positive direction. There is untapped leadership in every community, and one of our goals should be looking for those resources.

WHAT CAN WE DO TO ADDRESS THESE PROBLEM AREAS? DISCUSSION GUIDES WILL PROMPT DIALOGUE

From mid-December and in 2007, the Center for Rural Affairs will be publishing discussion guides and helpful tools to use in working with your community in asking the right questions. These publications will be available on our website for you to download and begin working through the discussions with your community.

The publications will also be sent to anyone requesting them. The discussion guides consist of two parts. One is a list of questions on such subjects as volunteer recruitment, leadership, agricultural involvement, beautification, history, rural culture, schools, churches, hospitals, youth, and others. The other part is a facilitator's manual to empower community leaders to help with the discussions.

Once communication and dialogue begins, real change can occur. With a little help we can all be part of our community's development. Maybe then we can create a real chance for the vigorous, prosperous life we dream of in small rural communities across the country.

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