

# *Rural Community Revitalization Discussion Guides*



# Guide 1: Completing the Rural Community Development Puzzle

Michael L. Holton  
CENTER *for* RURAL AFFAIRS  
145 Main Street  
PO Box 138  
Lyons NE 68038-0136  
402.687.2100 ph  
[www.cfra.org](http://www.cfra.org)



VALUES. WORTH. ACTION.



### **About the Rural Community Revitalization Discussion Guides:**

For the past three years, the Center for Rural Affairs monthly newsletter has carried a 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.

In December 2006, Michael used his experience and insight to define the top 10 reasons rural community development is so difficult to accomplish. (See the feature article on our website, <http://www.cfra.org/newsletter/1206.htm> to read that article.)

The Center will be publishing a series of discussion guides and helpful tools to use in working with your community in asking the right questions. This is the first in that series, an overview of the community development puzzle. A facilitator's manual is a companion piece to this. It is intended 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.

### **HomeTown Competitiveness**

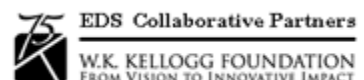
#### **A Come-Back/Give-Back Approach to Rural Community Building**

HTC is a comprehensive approach to long-term rural community sustainability. This approach goes beyond the traditional tunnel vision of economic development. HTC helps the community to focus on four interrelated strategies that depend on each other for ultimate success. The four strategic areas of HTC are:

- Developing Leadership
- Energizing Entrepreneurs
- Engaging Youth
- Charitable Giving

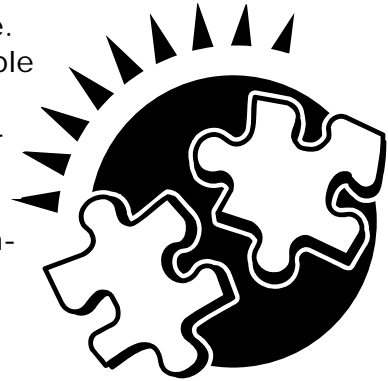
To find out more, visit <http://www.htcnebraska.org>

HTC partners include the organizations below:



## Completing the Rural Community Development Puzzle

For a puzzle to be complete, every piece must be in place. Community development is a process that requires multiple pieces, and economic development is but one. Many people equate economic development with community development, but the two are distinctly different. In terms of logic, community development is not a part of economic development, but economic development is a part of community development.



### MISSING THE BIG PICTURE

Traditional economic development strategy rests heavily on business recruitment and marketing. Support for entrepreneurship is a distant third. This approach doesn't work well for small rural communities. Why not?

Most economic development strategies fail to see the whole picture. Let's use the tree as an illustration. Single branches often receive credit for holding up the tree, for example, the school, the hospital, or the downtown community.

But the real strength comes from the community itself. All the other components – community ownership, schools, churches, leadership, and succession – are supporting branches of the community.

A business recruitment-only strategy leaves these other branches out. Normally the first question asked in economic development is "What will the community do for the business?" A better question to pose is "What will the business do for the community?"

### INDUSTRY COMES, INDUSTRY GOES

It is not uncommon for a recruited business to up and leave a community for more lucrative grounds. For example, Leprino Foods established cheese plants in Hartington and Dodge, Neb. Both plants were closed when the company decided to pursue a more economically viable prospect in another state. This was clearly a corporate decision made outside the local communities, but that didn't make it any easier for the employees who were laid off.

A traditional economic development strategy would dictate these communities replace the Leprino Foods business with another like it. A solid community strategy would yield much greater rewards and would strengthen the ownership by the community in solving its own problem.

In the book, *Rural Communities*, Dr. Cornelia Flora examines the role of human capital in community. She believes rural poverty contributes to decay in human capital.

Rather than bringing another outside cheese processing plant into the communities mentioned above and having the cycle repeat itself, investing time and dollars in education and skills training would have a better, longer lasting impact.

## **Incentives Drain Resources**

Another problem inherent with industrial recruitment is the use of incentives to lure businesses to the community. Incentives drain local economic development groups and pit communities against each other in an intense struggle to attract business.

Today, we need to look at regionalism as a strategy to strengthen our resources and economy. Incentives are by their very nature competitive and do not strengthen the community structure.

Communities use marketing and entrepreneurial efforts to stand apart from one another. Marketing a community is an important piece of the community development puzzle. But if the whole picture is not put together correctly, marketing becomes hollow, much like selling an empty container. It is what goes inside that makes the community special.

Entrepreneurial efforts have become the focus of several economic development groups and individuals. Small business and entrepreneurial enterprises are the lifeblood of small communities and their economic well being. But too many developers consider this secondary to business recruitment, and individuals don't get the attention they need.

## **UNCOVERING A COMMUNITY'S LEGACY**

What are all the parts of the rural community development puzzle and where do we find them? In the Center for Rural Affairs' community economic revitalization efforts, we look to the community for the answer to these questions. Each community has slightly different needs, and cookie cutter approaches won't work the same way in each one.

The first question to ask of all communities is why do they exist? A community must have a purpose for existence. These questions are part of understanding the region and the community. Asking about the legacy of each community begins the process of understanding the social climate that will drive development in the future.

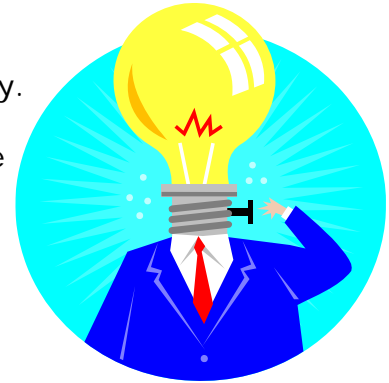
We assess the community by letting the people tell us what they need. Ernesto Sirolli, renowned community and economic developer and author of *Ripples from the Zambezi*, tells all developers that it is up to the community to determine what they want. How dare we as resource providers have the arrogance to believe that we know what they want?

Sirolli also believes the only development that could occur in any region would have to begin from the inside out. In Project HOPE, a previous Center community revitalization program, we sent surveys to the communities we worked with to help determine their needs. One of the strengths of this approach is that we listen to the needs before we act.

### **IMAGINE THE FUTURE, BUILD NEW LEADERS**

The next action is to determine a vision for the community. Many small rural communities develop comprehensive plans to identify some of the needs of the town, but these don't address a vision for the future.

We bring citizens together to imagine what the future could look like. Through focus groups, the community looks ahead 10, 20, or even 30 years.



Another outcome in this process is to identify leaders of the community. This has two purposes. First, it helps to identify the “gatekeepers” of the town. These are the people in the community that help or hinder development. They are easy to identify and spot as they are usually the most vocal and visible in the community. Second, it helps to attract new leaders that may not have had the opportunity to come forward before.

Luther Snow, author and developer of asset-based community development, recognizes relationships and “gatekeepers” as the strength and weakness of most small rural communities. We have hosted leadership workshops in communities to seek out new community leaders, including sessions on transformational leadership, servant-leadership, hidden leadership, and personality assessment.

### **MOBILIZE WITH A CORE GROUP**

The next step is to bring a core group together to begin mobilizing efforts in town. Michael Kinsley, who directs the Rocky Mountain Institute, uses an Economic Renewal process that we embrace. Once a core group is together, it is possible to begin an action plan to select projects to undertake.

In Hartington, Neb. a core group of the region formed with people from the Chamber of Commerce, the local economic development group, and the city council. It was the first time these groups came together to discuss issues.

Another example of the success of forming a core group is the emergence of the St. James Marketplace. A core group of women in the St. James, Neb. region formed an entrepreneurial effort to market their local products and provide supplemental income to help them remain on their farms and attract their sons and daughters home to live.

## **LISTING COMMUNITY ASSETS**

A strong point of the work we've done with small rural communities is the use of asset mapping and looking for assets in the community. John Kretzman, founder of Asset Based Community Development, refers to the analogy of looking at the cup as being half full rather than half empty. Each community we work with is asked to present a list of their assets. By far the top asset that all communities identify is their youth.

Plainview, Neb. also recognized a good park system and school system as worthy of particular pride. Cedar County acknowledged several beautiful churches in their region.

Wausa and Oakland, Neb. demonstrated pride in their ethnic heritage. Both are Swedish and celebrate that fact. Lyons, Neb. holds an annual bluegrass festival to draw attention to their pride as the "Sod Capital" of Nebraska.

## **A HOLISTIC APPROACH**

The Center uses a holistic approach to community development. We don't focus on one piece of the puzzle. We have helped communities with: annual festivals, swimming pools, running tracks, beautification efforts, value-added agricultural development, e-commerce trainings, athletic sports complex, comprehensive planning, policy awareness, alternative agricultural practices, entrepreneurial workshops and growth, coop development, information technology, agri-tourism, housing, inter-generational dialogue (bringing different age groups together to communicate), youth programs, church community organizing, and leadership development.

These are only a small sample of the projects that have been undertaken. We see enormous potential in linking with the HomeTown Competitiveness (HTC) Program to become a clearinghouse for community development. Through partnerships with other resource providers, we will be able to package development services to small rural communities. Community development ought to be able to do this for any community that needs assistance and asks for it.

## **FOR MORE INFORMATION**

Contact Michael L. Holton, [michaellh@cfra.org](mailto:michaellh@cfra.org) or 402.687.2103 x 1015. Michael is the Director of the Rural Opportunities and Stewardship Program at the Center for Rural Affairs. Established in 1973, the Center for Rural Affairs is a private nonprofit working to strengthen small businesses, rural communities, and family farms and ranches through action oriented programs focused on social, economic, and environmental issues.