

# **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**
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- 10. Deliberate Transition of Power to a Younger Generation of Leaders**
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- 18. Sophisticated Use of Information Resources**
- 19. Willingness to Seek Help from the Outside**
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## 1. Evidence of Community Pride

Successful communities are often showplaces of community care and attention, with neatly trimmed yards, public gardens and well-kept public parks. But pride also shows up in other ways, especially in community festivals and events that give residents the chance to celebrate their community, its history and heritage.

What actions could your community take to encourage community pride?

Sample action items could include:

- Coordinate a community clean-up project.
- Organize an annual community festival.
- Promote a local yard or garden contest.
- Form a task force to deal with dilapidated, vacant buildings.
- Conduct community "cleanup," "paint-up," "fix-up" campaigns through cooperative action by volunteer civic groups and the local government.

## 2. Emphasis on Quality in Business and Community Life

People in successful communities believe that something worth doing is worth doing right. Facilities are built to last, and so are homes and other improvements. Newer brick additions to schools are common, for example, and businesses are built or expanded with attention to design and construction detail.

What actions could your community take to emphasize quality in business and community life?

Sample action items could include:

- Working with a high school class to do a "customer satisfaction survey" for the Chamber of Commerce.
- Do a community survey on the quality of city services.
- Encourage service clubs to discuss and outline the best qualities of the community.
- Adopt and actively enforce "community decay" ordinance for blight removal.
- Aggressively enforce the Uniform Code for the Abatement of Dangerous Buildings to eliminate dilapidated or deteriorated buildings, such as the clearance of a substantial portion of unsafe, vacant, deteriorated structures that cannot be economically rehabilitated.
- Adopt zoning to encourage compatible land uses in the community.

## 3. Willingness to Invest in the Future

Some of the brick and mortar investments are most apparent, but these communities also invest in their future in other ways. Residents invest time and energy in community improvement projects, and they concern themselves with how what they are doing today will impact on the lives of their children and grandchildren in the future.

What actions could your community take to determine your community's willingness to invest in the future and to encourage a greater willingness to invest?

Sample action items could include:

- Prepare a summary of past business expansions and start-ups.
- Track and document the total hours of donated volunteer hours as evidence of citizen investment in the community.
- Have high school students create a task force on the future of the community.
- Start a community foundation to support long-term community development.
- Prepare or update a capital improvements plan for community infrastructure.

#### **4. Participatory Approach to Community Decision-Making**

Authoritative models don't seem to exist in these communities, and power is deliberately shared. People still know who you need on your side to get something done, but even the most powerful of opinion leaders work through the systems -- formal as well as informal -- to build consensus for what they want to do.

What actions could your community take to encourage a more participatory approach to community decision-making?

Sample action items could include:

- Form or use a citizen's task force to develop policy recommendations for local elected officials.
- Create a town web page or monthly newsletter to publicize town news and issues.
- Schedule an annual New England-style town meeting to discuss and identify issues of concern to the community.
- Encourage local elected officials and other business and community leaders to schedule an informal monthly coffee "klatch" to be accessible to citizens.
- Make sure the local newspaper provides adequate coverage of town council meetings.

#### **5. Cooperative Community Spirit**

Successful rural communities devote more attention to cooperative activities than to fighting over what should be done and by whom. The stress is on working together toward a common goal and the focus is on positive results. They may spend a long time making a decision, and there may be disagreements along the way, but eventually, as one small town leader put it, "stuff does get done."

What actions could your community take to encourage a more cooperative community spirit?

Sample action items could include:

- Have local service and business groups cooperate to organize an annual community festival.
- Encourage Main Street businesses to cooperate on setting evening shopping hours and sales events.
- Create a "Good News" column in the local newspaper to report on the efforts of civic organizations and share how people are working together.
- Have local service and business groups cooperate with the high school to organize an annual homecoming event and parade.

## 6. Realistic Appraisal of Future Opportunities

Many of the communities have already learned an important strategic lesson, namely building on your assets and minimizing your weaknesses. Few small communities believe that they are likely to land a giant industry. Many of them say they wouldn't want one if it came along, fearing too much dependence on one employer would be dangerous. The successful communities know that a more realistic approach considers the community and the region as the context for future opportunities.

What actions could your community take to encourage a more realistic appraisal of future opportunities?

Sample action items could include:

- Invite authorities from the state's universities or governmental agencies to discuss economic and demographic trends.
- Create an up to date profile of your community's situation as a "reality check."
- Invite outside speakers from business, industry, or economic development organizations or agencies to discover what businesses consider in relocating or expanding.

## 7. Awareness of Competitive Positioning

The thriving communities know who the competition is and so do the businesses in towns. Everyone tries to stress local loyalty as a way to help, but many businesses also keep tabs on their competitors in other towns -- they don't want any of the hometown folks to have an excuse to go elsewhere. This is an area in which the recognition of community assets -- people, associations and institutions -- is vitally important. The comparison of one town to another is a significant means to spur improvements.

What actions could your community take to encourage a greater awareness of your community's competitive position?

Sample action items could include:

- Survey local residents on their shopping needs and whether the community is providing them. Research in-town and out-of-town prices and calculate the cost of travel and time to shop elsewhere.
- Try to identify your community's competitive edge or "niche" and consider how they might be improved.
- Support local or regional efforts to create "micro-business" loan programs to encourage local small business reinvestment and expansion.

## 8. Knowledge of the Physical Environment

Importance of location is underscored continuously in local decision-making, as business and civic leaders picture their community in relation to others. Beyond location, however, communities must also be familiar with what they have locally. For example, the issue of preservation and protection of natural resources must be balanced with development options. Communities that manage this balance have a long-term approach to both environmental preservation and economic development.

What actions could your community take to increase local knowledge of the physical environment?

Sample action items could include:

- Work with the local planning board and soil conservation district to learn about current community planning and development and resource conservation issues.
- Review the community's comprehensive plan or growth policy to identify physical constraints for community development such as floodplains, transportation infrastructure, water quality, etc.
- Organize a public forum on local environmental or community planning issues.

## **9. Active Economic Development Program**

An organized and active approach to economic development is common in successful communities. This type of approach depends on public and private sector resources working hand in hand. Private economic development corporations are common, either as a subcommittee or an outgrowth of a Chamber of Commerce or commercial club. However, it's clear that the most successful towns emphasize retaining and expanding existing businesses as well as trying to develop new businesses. This is a "gardening, not hunting" model of economic development.

What actions could your community take to create an active economic development program?

Sample action items could include:

- Develop an on-going relationship with federal, state or regional economic development programs.
- Encourage internships or "School to Work" programs for high school students with local businesses.
- Create a business directory for your community.
- Support the activities of the local Chamber of Commerce or form one if one does not exist.

## **10. Deliberate Transition of Power to a Younger Generation of Leaders**

Young leadership is more the rule than the exception in thriving rural communities. In many cases, these young people grew up in town and decided to stay or returned later to raise a family. In just as many situations, they are people who've decided to make a life in the community even though they grew up elsewhere. However, it's typical in a successful community to have a formal or informal means for established leaders to bring new recruits into public service.

What actions could your community take to encourage a deliberate transition of power to a younger generation of leaders?

Sample action items could include:

- Place younger people on local business or service organization boards of directors.
- Encourage younger community leaders to participate in leadership training opportunities.
- Encourage "term limits" for leadership positions to encourage recruitment of younger people into leadership roles.

## **11. Acceptance of Women in Leadership Roles**

Women hold positions of leadership in these rural communities and those roles extend beyond the traditional strongholds of teacher, nurse or librarian. In successful communities, women take on roles as mayors, law enforcement officers, non-profit managers, business owners, etc. In many communities, this inclusion is expanded to minorities, newcomers and all types of non-traditional leaders.

What actions could your community take to encourage the acceptance of women in leadership roles?

Sample action items could include:

- Place women on local business or service organization boards of directors.
- Encourage women to participate in leadership training opportunities.
- Encourage recruitment of women into leadership roles.

## **12. Strong Belief in and Support of Education**

Good schools are a point of pride as well as a stable employment force, and rural community leaders are very much aware of their school's importance. However, this characteristic goes beyond the K-12 system to include an approach to life-long learning that puts education at the center of many community activities. Whether adult education is targeted at skills and job performance or hobbies and recreation, the successful community makes the most of education at all levels.

What actions could your community take to foster a strong belief in and support of education?

Sample action items could include:

- Support the efforts of the local parent-teacher association.
- Support the development of cooperative extension outreach programs in the community.
- Support the development of continuing education programs in the community through the local high school, vocational schools, or the university system.
- Encourage annual school open houses and multiple use of school facilities for non-school community organizations or functions.

## **13. Problem-Solving Approach to Providing Health Care**

Local health care is a common concern in rural communities, but strategies for delivery vary, depending on community needs. While one community may decide that keeping a doctor in residence should be the priority, another may choose to train as many people as possible as EMT's or to use telecommunications to augment a clinic. The point here is the variety of solutions to a common problem.

What actions could your community take to encourage a problem-solving approach to providing health care?

Sample action items could include:

- Encourage more people to volunteer for training as "emergency medical technicians" (EMT's).

- Provide office space for health practitioners.
- Investigate opportunities for “tele-medicine” using satellite and computer technology tied to regional medical facilities.
- Research government programs which support recruitment of doctors or nurse practitioners to under-served rural communities.

#### **14. Strong Multi-Generational Family Orientation**

These are family-oriented communities, with activities often built around family needs and ties. But the definition of family is broad, and it includes younger as well as older generations and people new to the community. A typical example of this attitude is the provision of child care for community town hall meetings, thus allowing young families to attend.

What actions could your community take to encourage a strong multi-generational family orientation?

Sample action items could include:

- Promote the interaction of senior citizens and pre-school children through tutoring programs or construction of shared facilities for senior citizens and programs such as Head Start.
- Provide senior discounts to encourage the participation of older citizens in school events such as sports or plays.

#### **15. Strong Presence of Traditional Institutions that Are Integral to Community Life**

Churches are often the strongest force in this characteristic, but other types of community institutions such as newspapers and radio stations, hospitals and schools fill this role also. Service clubs retain a strong influence in social activities as well as in community improvement efforts.

What actions could your community take to support the strong presence of traditional institutions that are integral to community life?

Sample action items could include:

- Support or start a ministerial association and encourage their involvement with human service programs.
- Encourage news media coverage of and involvement in organized community improvement efforts.
- Help organizations or programs identify new clients by sponsoring local events or displays. For example, promote a local housing rehabilitation project by photo displays and providing brochures at the local library or social service agency offices.

#### **16. Sound and Well-Maintained Infrastructure**

Thriving rural communities understand the importance of physical infrastructures -- such as streets, sidewalks, water systems, sewage treatment plants -- and efforts are made to maintain and improve them. In these communities, a clean-up day includes public parks and playgrounds, business owners keep sidewalks repaired, and volunteer labor and donated materials go a long way to maintaining public buildings.

What actions could your community take to assure that it has sound and well-maintained infrastructure?

Sample action items could include:

- Adopt a long-range, financial capital improvements plan (CIP) and update it each year.
- Adopt a capital budget, which is updated annually in conjunction with the CIP.
- Support adequate operation and maintenance budgets, including reserves for repair and replacement of community infrastructure.
- Implement recommended best management practices for operation and maintenance of public facilities.
- Adopt and implement a wellhead protection plan for a groundwater sources of drinking water.

## **17. Careful Use of Fiscal Resources**

Frugality is a way of life in successful small communities, and expenditures are made carefully. People aren't afraid to spend money, when they believe they should, and then, typically, things are built to last. But neither are they spendthrifts. Expenditures are often seen as investments in the future of the community.

What actions could your community take to assure that it makes efficient use of fiscal resources?

Sample action items could include:

- Adopt a capital budget, which is updated annually in conjunction with an adopted capital improvements plan.
- Support adequate operation and maintenance budgets, including reserves for repair and replacement of community infrastructure.
- Seek out, analyze, and secure the firm commitment of alternative or additional funds from all appropriate local, state, and federal public or private sources potentially available to assist in financing community facilities.
- Raise taxes, user charges or fee schedules to the extent necessary to assure adequate operation and maintenance of community facilities and reserves for repair and replacement.
- Institute water metering to encourage conservation and a more equitable assignment of user costs.
- Establish a community foundation.
- Utilize cooperative purchasing opportunities or federal or state surplus property programs.
- Invest in current computer technology and software to improve financial management.

## **18. Sophisticated Use of Information Resources**

Rural community leaders are knowledgeable about their communities beyond the knowledge base available in the community. In one town, for example, retail sales histories from a state university were studied for trend information. In another, census data was used to study population change. In many communities, computer links to the world wide web have made all types of information, available.

What actions could your community take to assure that it makes sophisticated use of information resources?



Sample action items could include:

- Research all sources of information including past plans, studies, reports, etc. at local state, and federal level.
- Use the Internet to cost-effectively search and access existing available data on the community.
- Make sure state agencies have current data on the community.

## **19. Willingness to Seek Help from the Outside**

There's little reluctance to seek help from outside resources. These communities understand the system of accessing resources, ranging from grants for infrastructure improvement to expertise about human service programs. Competing for such resources successfully is a source of pride for local leaders.

What actions could your community take to demonstrate its willingness to seek help from the outside?

Sample action items could include:

- Investigate federal and state or private foundation sources of matching grants or low interest loans to improve community facilities and services.
- Actively participate in state municipal or county government associations.
- Seek out, analyze, and secure the firm commitment of alternative or additional funds from all appropriate local, state, and federal public or private sources potentially available to assist in financing community and economic development projects.
- Seek assistance from state university architectural school in designing a Main Street redevelopment project.

## **20. Conviction that, in the Long Run, You Have to Do It Yourself**

Although outside help is sought when appropriate, it is nevertheless true that thriving small towns believe that their destiny is in their own hands. They are not waiting for some outsider to save them, nor do they believe that they can sit and wait for things to get better. Making a hometown a good place to live for a long time to come is a pro-active assignment, and these local leaders know that no one will take care of a town as well as the people who live there.

What actions could your community take to demonstrate the conviction that, in the long run, you have to do it yourself?

Sample action items could include:

- Efforts to resolve community problems with local resources by raising taxes, user charges or fee schedules to the maximum reasonable extent, considering local financial constraints.
- Resolve community problems through local non-financial community efforts, such as implementing recommended best management practices for operation and maintenance of community facilities.
- Provide adequate on going, long-term support of adequate operation and maintenance budgets, including reserves for repair and replacement.

- Undertake efforts in the community to address housing and community revitalization needs, such as improving public facilities, establishing and promoting the use of tax incentives for building remodeling, or coordinating with private housing efforts, such as Habitat for Humanity.
- Conduct annual community "cleanup," "paint-up," "fix-up" campaigns through cooperation of volunteer civic groups and local government.