

Can Small Towns Be Cool?

Best-Practice Communities



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Project Overview

- Funding provided by MSU Land Policy Institute;
- Site visits to more than 225 communities in Michigan, Wisconsin, Illinois, Indiana, Ohio, Pennsylvania, Minnesota, Maryland, and Kansas;
- Personal interviews with city/village managers and/or staff, elected officials, community leaders, business leaders;
- Identified individual community best practices;

Small Town Success Strategies

Today's Presentation Based on Three Levels of Analysis

- Asset mapping exercise that looks beyond individual best practices to overall success themes;
- Literature review of other community sustainability studies:
 - “Clues to Rural Community Sustainability” by Luther Wall
 - “Small Town and Rural Economic Development” by Schaeffer/Loveridge
- MI Cool Cities Survey
 - >13,000 individual online surveys completed
 - Four focus group sessions;

Small Town Success Strategies

So How Do You Keep Your Community from Going to Hell?



Small Town Success Strategies

Success Themes among Cool Small Communities

Strong Engagement between citizens, community organizations and government

Power within the community is deliberately shared. Community government actively reaches out to citizens, and residents are engaged in setting the community's agenda and future vision;

Small Town Success Strategies

Citizen Engagement

St. Joseph, MI

Precinct meetings serve as neighborhood town hall sessions; each attract 75-120 individuals;

Community calendar hand-delivered to residents;

“Critical to continually examine your connection to residents.” St. Joe City Mgr Frank Walsh



Small Town Success Strategies

Citizen Engagement



Reedsburg, Wisconsin

Sends city newsletter to everybody in zip code;

St. Joseph, Illinois

Assigns a village trustee to each of 5/10 yr. Goals. Citizens appreciate the accountability and 13 candidates filed for last vacant seat on Council;

Small Town Success Stories

Citizen Engagement

Marshall In Focus

Community visioning process involving hundreds of individuals in a process that started with “meetings in a box” to encourage small group discussions.



Small Town Success Stories

Citizen Engagement

Coopersville, MI

Signage at town entrances celebrates non-profits, business community and schools.



Small Town Success Stories

Citizen Engagement

Frankenmuth, Fremont, Stoughton, WI

City Council, school board, and township officials meet quarterly;

Littleton, New Hampshire

Schools and city recommend joint budget for voter approval;

Bangor, Michigan

Video of citizen testimonials keep committees/council focused, particularly related to land use issues



Small Town Success Stories

The 3rd Place Factor

Intrinsic to community engagement is a “3rd Place” that serves the function of a social condenser. It is the place where a community or neighborhood meets to develop friendships, discuss issues and interact with others. It is an important way in which a community develops and retains its cohesion and builds a sense of identity.

Small Town Success Stories

The 3rd Place Factor

Community Gathering Spot

- Local coffee shop
- Social Condenser
- Wireless Hotspot



Small Town Success Stories

3rd Place Factor

- Douglas, Michigan
- Community Social
- Live Band
- Involves non-profit organizations



Small Town Success Stories

3rd Place Factor

- Fergus Falls, Minnesota
- Community Play
- Involved 60% of town's residents
- Continued discussion after play



Small Town Success Stories

Success Themes Among Cool Small Communities

Realistic appraisal of future land use opportunities

Successful communities know they must take a more realistic approach in considering their community from a regional context relative to future opportunities. Deliberate efforts are made to coordinate with neighboring jurisdictions.

Small Town Success Stories

Realistic Approach to future Land Use Opportunities

Manistee, Michigan



Monthly "Planners Luncheon" between city, county, tribal representatives and township zoning officials

Small Town Success Stories

Realistic Approach to future Land Use Opportunities

- Lake Geneva, Wisconsin
- Residents know they have a "distinctive community"
- Work with Geneva Lake Environmental Council, City and four surrounding townships on overall land use plan for lake area

Frankenmuth, Michigan
UGB developed after successful joint emergency services and building inspection authorities;



Small Town Success Stories

Realistic Approach to future Land Use Opportunities

Middleville, Michigan

Current high growth area; Township & village are discussing UGB and identifying areas to ensure schools can expand;

Reedsburg, Wisconsin

Planning Director gives annual report to school on planning issues and impact on schools;



Small Town Success Stories

Realistic Approach to future Land Use Opportunities



Hastings, Michigan Partnership for Change Initiative:

Outside research to objectively examine the growth management challenges facing the community and propose alternative approaches to cooperation;

Small Town Success Stories

Successful Themes Among Cool Small Communities

Willingness to adapt zoning regulations for new opportunities

Thriving communities understand competitive factors and community leaders picture their community in relation to others. Beyond joint planning efforts with neighboring jurisdictions, there is a willingness to adapt zoning regulations to capitalize on changing trends and new opportunities.

Small Town Success Stories

Willingness to Adapt Zoning Regulations for New Opportunities

Easton, Maryland

Amended zoning regulations to allow outdoor dining; Five new restaurants in one year;

Elk Rapids, Michigan

Amended zoning to allow owner-occupied residency on upper floors in downtown building. Now nine occupied in one block



Small Town Success Stories

Willingness to Adapt Zoning Regulations for New Opportunities

South Haven

Recently revised 70's style larger lots to codes to reestablish 1950s type density with architectural guidelines.

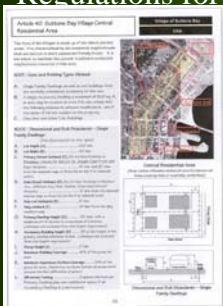
Mackinaw City

Mackinaw Crossing project required major changes to zoning regulations. Staff has proposed more than 50 changes in last 3 years.



Small Town Success Stories

Willingness to Adapt Zoning Regulations for New Opportunities



Suttons Bay, Michigan

Utilizing Landscape Architecture Students from Andrews University to develop visual zoning ordinance to ensure compliance with "village look";



Small Town Success Stories

Willingness to Adapt Zoning Regulations for New Opportunities




Cedarburg, Wisconsin

Distinctive Community and flourishing downtown with numerous antique shops;

Small Town Success Stories

Willingness to Adapt Zoning Regulations for New Opportunities




Cedarburg, Wisconsin

- Planning Director read article on negative impact of internet & Ebay on antiques and how one Kentucky community has responded;
- Conducted site visit to KY to learn more;

Small Town Success Strategies

Willingness to Adapt Zoning Regulations for New Opportunities



Cedarburg, Wisconsin

Organized local artists & antique shop owners to begin discussion on potential artist live-work centers and the zoning changes that would be necessary to accommodate them;

Proposed overlay plan to maximize potential;

Lesson: Proactive approach

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Success Themes Among Cool Small Communities

Actively Pursues Cultural Economic Development Opportunities

An organized and active approach to the relatively new phenomena of "cultural economic development" has emerged in successful communities. Communities recognize their cultural amenities and the arts community has organized to successfully market the community.



Small Town Success Strategies

Active Cultural Economic Development Approach


Petoskey, Michigan
Crooked Tree Arts Assn. has emerged as a regional player in economic development activities;



St. Joseph, Michigan
Box Factory Arts Incubator is successfully establishing local artists within a small community and has exceeded budget projections;

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Active Cultural Economic Development Approach



Fort Atkinson, Wisconsin
Fireside Dinner Theatre attracts more than 100,000 patrons/yr;

Community has worked with theatre to provide housing for performers;

Small Town Success Strategies

Active Cultural Economic Development Approach

Fergus Falls, Minnesota

- Partnered with ArtSpace to create live-work centers in vacant hotel downtown;
- Art Gallery with performance area;
- Creatives meet regularly to discuss community projects;

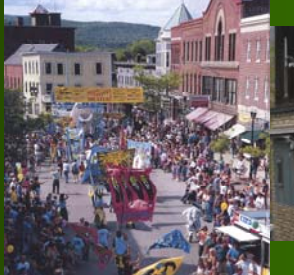


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Active Cultural Economic Development Approach

Bellow Falls, Vermont

- Used state housing rehab dollars to renovate building into artist live-work facility;
- Used momentum to integrate other cultural projects within community;
- Community celebrates its cultural assets;



Small Town Success Stories

Success Themes Among Cool Small Communities

Cultural Efforts Are Not Overly Contrived

While successful communities are actively pursuing cultural economic development activities, their efforts are genuine, often organically-driven by creative individuals within the community.

Small Town Success Stories

Authentic Cultural Activities

Winona Lake, Indiana

- 2004 Indiana Community Achievement Award Winner;
- Local entrepreneur invested \$20 million to create "Artist Colony"
- Major improvements in overall community aesthetics plus addition of live-work artist center;



Small Town Success Stories

Authentic Cultural Activities

Winona Lake, Indiana

- Home of conservative Christian college;
- Town had reputation as "dry community"
- Artist entrepreneurs were frustrated and looking to move businesses;



Small Town Success Stories

Authentic Cultural Activities

Three Oaks, Michigan

- Group of creative individuals within community began meeting in 1996;
- Re-opened downtown movie theatre to show classic films .




- Theatre includes an arts gallery in lobby.
Attendance: 400-1,000/week

Small Town Success Stories

Authentic Cultural Activities

Three Oaks, Michigan

- Two guys purchased old Featherbone Factory and converted to Acorn Theatre for live performances;
- Another couple converted old bowling alley into upscale eclectic furniture store;



Small Town Success Stories

Authentic Cultural Activities

Three Oaks, Michigan

- Creative individuals work hard to be a part of the fabric of the community;
- Developed special costumes for annual community Christmas parade;
- Village has no professional manager and community has not received state arts funding;



Small Town Success Strategies

Authentic Cultural Activities

Newaygo, Michigan

Series of murals around the city depicting community heritage;

Group of four to five local artists meet with city on a regular basis to discuss new mural ideas;

City has committed \$14,000 in annual budget to continue project;



Small Town Success Strategies

Authentic Cultural Activities



Newaygo, Michigan

- Mural project started privately with an antique store that was looking to spruce-up a side of their historic store front;

Small Town Success Strategies

Cool City Core Values

- Different lifestyles
- Diversity
- Art/culture
- Gathering places
- 4-seasons
- Music scene
- Walkable streets
- Historic architectural character
- Many different jobs
- Service businesses



Small Town Success Strategies

Success Themes Among Cool Small Communities

Cultural Efforts Reach Out to Community Youth

Although schools have traditionally played the strongest role in this arena, the communities cultural players are deliberately reaching out to connect with the youth of the community.

Small Town Success Strategies


Cultural Efforts Reach Out To Community Youth

Tecumseh, Coopersville, Charlotte, Michigan Reedsburg, Wisconsin

- Major community performing arts centers located on school grounds, often owned/operated jointly between city & schools;
- With schools of choice, looking for arts as a draw to community;
- Vision of Arts Magnet School in Tecumseh by Center Exec. Director;




Small Town Success Strategies




Cultural Efforts Reach Out To Community Youth

New York Mills, Minnesota


- Small primarily agricultural community; Home of Lund Boats
- John Davis establishes Cultural Center;
- Studio to work on cultural projects
- Cultural Center establishes visiting artist program with outreach requirement;
- Lund executives and school officials praise impact of center;



Small Town Success Strategies



Cultural Efforts Reach Out To Community Youth



Three Oaks

- Acorn Theatre has series of children activities and school book reads;

Williamston

- "Dive-In" big screen movie at community pool;

Dowagiac

- Dogwood Fine Arts Festival
- World-renowned artists and performers offer free clinics to community youth;


Small Town Success Strategies

Success Themes of Cool Small Communities

Deliberate Effort to Engage Youth

Successful communities realize that the first step in reversing the brain-drain in small communities is to create a positive childhood memory that may serve as a consideration in future location decisions.


Small Town Success Strategies



Deliberate Effort In Engaging Youth

Jonesville

- Asked older residents why they stayed in Jonesville; top response was childhood memories;
- Surveyed 3rd graders: What do you want in your community? Top response: rock wall
- Community built rock wall;
- Re-surveyed students in 7th grade; community received high marks!



Small Town Success Strategies



Deliberate Effort In Engaging Youth




Suttons Bay

- Used Andrews University students to design new community park to get completely different youth perspective;


Simple Idea For Your Community

- Provide disposable cameras to school kids and ask to take pictures of what they like and dislike in their community;

Small Town Success Strategies



Retaining Youth and Attracting Families



Community Strategies

- Create economic and career choices that are appealing to youth;
- Evolve community cultures that are progressive and embracing of youth and younger generation;
- Proactively link community goals and strategies to the attraction of young people;
- Focus development efforts on those who want to return to their hometown;

Small Town Success Strategies

Success Themes of Cool Small Communities

Dedicated Effort To Preserving Heritage

Successful communities take pride in their heritage, often showcasing their history through festivals and events which allows residents to celebrate their community and its heritage.

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Dedicated Effort To Preserving Heritage

Niles



Great "Uncover" to remove aluminum covers over historic downtown facades; \$825K project;

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Dedicated Effort To Preserving Heritage

Agricultural Roots

Bangor

- Restoring Farmers Elevator

Hilman

- Restoring mill to become operational;

Coopersville

- Agricultural Museum;



Small Town Success Strategies

Dedicated Effort to Preserving Heritage

Can You Tell What This Building Is Being Used As?



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Success Themes of Cool Small Communities

Attention to Natural Amenities

Thriving communities recognize the natural amenities that exist within their community and they are focused on capitalizing on these natural features for the enjoyment of their citizens

Small Town Success Strategies

The Outdoor Factor

The outdoor factor, as discussed in the "Rise of the Creative Class" is a grouping of individual sports and the simple experience of being outdoors. The outdoor factor includes adventure sports, natural scenic vistas, trails & parks, beaches & waterfront, and an overall commitment among the community for environmental preservation.




Attention to Natural Amenities

Allegan

- Extensive boardwalk system that ties waterfront to downtown and park system;

Canal Winchester, Ohio

- Plans to re-open buried water canal and redevelop downtown around new water feature



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Attention to Natural Amenities

Lanesboro, Minnesota

- Development of trail system served as catalyst for others to organize;
- Arts community developed arts gallery to showcase local artists; Developed artist-in-residence program;
- Performing Arts Center constructing new facility;



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Success Themes of Cool Small Communities

Local Entrepreneurial Investment

Changes in community momentum is oftentimes initiated by a local entrepreneur or philanthropist who has made a significant investment in the community. Their investment serves as a catalyst for other private and public investment.

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Local Entrepreneurial Investment In Community



Mackinaw City

- Shepler and Brown families partnered to develop Mackinaw Crossing;
- Changed entire retail flavor from t-shirts and fudge shops to a retail shopping destination;

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Local Entrepreneurial Investment In Community



Marquette

- Investment by NMU grad in downtown building helped to re-invent downtown;

Frankenmuth

- Zehnder & Bronner families have transformed community;

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Success Themes of Cool Small Communities

Community Acts As Entrepreneur

Thriving communities are willing to take risks, often taking entrepreneurial actions to improve their community. Setbacks and unexpected consequences often only strengthen their resolve.

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Community Acts As Entrepreneur

Jonesville

- Village negotiated rental rate for new business, assisted with market data research, suppliers, and lending arrangements;
- Now developing retail incubator;
- Village purchased old police radio tower and is applying for AM radio license and pursuing wireless network;

Gladstone

- City developed telecommunications authority to bring wireless internet to entire city;



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Community Acts As Entrepreneur



Dowagiac

- City purchased prominent building downtown and renovated;
- "Different Balance Sheet" than developer

Nappanee Indiana

- City was losing seniors to Elkhart & Goshen;
- Purchased Old Central School building from school and redeveloped into 54 unit Senior Housing center;

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Success Themes of Cool Small Communities


Willingness to seek help from the outside

There is little reluctance to seek help from outside resources, even when it is a lengthy and difficult process. These communities understand the system of accessing resources and they seek out the best ideas and new people to help build their community strengths. Their success in competing for these outside resources is a source of great pride.


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Willingness to Seek Help From the Outside

Newaygo



- More than \$6 million in grants and assessments: USDA Rural Dev., MSHDA, MEDA, TIFA, Special Assessments;
- Sidewalk improvements street lights, buried utilities, street paving;
- Prompted private investment



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Success Themes of Cool Small Communities

**Conviction That In the Long Run
You Have To Do It Yourself**


Although outside help is sought when appropriate, successful 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 community a good place to live is a proactive assignment, and these communities (and their leaders) know that.

Small Town Success Strategies

Conviction that you have to do it yourself

Tecumseh

- Community survey revealed the need for a fine dining establishment
- Community worked with neighboring township to secure a liquor license; recruited chef;
- Result: Evans Street Station
 - 2001 Best New Restaurant in MI (AAA)



Small Town Success Strategies

Conviction that you have to do it yourself

Dowagiac

- City spent two years trying to attract a developer to pursue dept. store, hotel & cinema;
- City bought parcel connecting two state highways and developed, through non-contiguous 425 agreement;
- Result: Amerihost hotel, Pamida, and pursuing 4-screen cinema;



Small Town Success Stories

Conviction that you have to do it yourself

Leslie, MI

- Use DDA dollars to fund advertising campaign;
- Created a “sense of pride” within community;
- New residents are relocating to communities; school enrollment is holding steady;




Small Town Success Stories

Conviction that you have to do it yourself

Argonia Kansas

- Community built grocery/convenience store after previous store closed;
- Community now pursuing housing development with houses offered at cost to new families;
- Closing costs paid if new family has children;




Small Town Success Stories

Conviction that you have to do it yourself

St. Joseph, Illinois

“We’re always looking for projects we can’t afford,”

Mayor BJ Hackler
Village of St. Joseph



Small Town Success Stories

Overall Observations

- Thriving communities work at it!
- Thriving communities don’t give up!
- Success Breeds Success!
- Thriving communities continually learn!
- Thriving communities always have an eye to the future!

Small Town Success Stories

Overall Observations

- Thriving communities listen to their community!



Small Town Success Stories

Can Small Towns Be Cool?

You Decide!

Small Town Success Strategies

Can Small Cities be Cool?

YOU BETCHA!

Small Town Success Strategies



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Thank You

Questions?