

So, What's a Small, Rural Town to Do?

Finding Someone Who Cares is the Place to Start.

The Challenge. There are different types of small cities and towns. The smaller, older, free-standing rural towns that are some distance from a metro area offer a unique challenge. They are, by definition, beyond the corona of a big regional city or metro area; beyond the reach of the regional economic and social spheres. The future of rural towns is not connected to the systems of an economic metro area and they have fewer opportunities and resources to build their independent economic, social and physical systems.

Kurt H. Schindler, Michigan State University Extension, 10.27.14, offers ten ways for rural towns to fight regression and stabilize their social and economic systems. However, the presumption is that rural towns have the resources, economic and civic, to activate the needed actions. Free-standing, rural communities not connected to a larger metro area have few options for arresting their decline; but, they do have a few.

“Top 10 planning practices for making things happen in rural and small towns”,

Kurt H. Schindler, Michigan State University Extension - October 27, 2014. **LINK:**

https://www.canr.msu.edu/news/top_10_planning_practices_for_making_things_happen_in_rural_and_small_towns

Schindler suggests ten actions, each discussed in detail on the Link:

10. Consolidation/Regionalization
9. Changing Demographics
8. Adequate Infrastructure
7. Economic Viability
6. Brain Drain
5. Growth/No Growth
4. Changing Face of Agriculture
3. Conservation, Resiliency & Going Green
2. Bridging the Gap

1. You Tell Me Schindler quotes **Jim Segedy**, Ph.D., FAICP, **The Planning Guild**, who concludes by offering six ingredients for successful rural and small town development in addition to the ten items from Schindler:

- Think and act locally
- Think and act creatively
- Close the loop
- Build linkages
- Create places for people (*placemaking*)
- Celebrate character and identity

Vision. The vision of a small, rural town varies based on its history and prospects. Some towns are just tired; they are losing the young people and they are in locations that seem to provide no advantages for business or public facility locations. Being a visionary in this setting is difficult and probably lonely. The search of assets is a continuing challenge. For small, rural towns with some prospects, being a visionary is still difficult; history is hard to overcome and momentum, once lost, is hard to recreate. But in both cases, a vision of the future helps direct day-to-day activities and, in many cases, prospects exist but require excruciating creativity.

The fundamental vision of every town is to be a nice place to live. Let this thought drive the town's strategy and actions.

Strategy. Vision drives strategy. In small rural towns with some real, but hidden prospects, that strategy is to find people who care, arm them with information and processes for searching and finding public and private investment opportunities. Investment is the critical ingredient whether it is an enhanced school, a new small business or a regional health clinic. Play the long game to attract investment that creates jobs and family incomes knowing that decisions about locations and re-locations of facilities take time.

Actions. As with redevelopment in larger towns, the process starts when someone cares to change the status quo; someone has the "want to" to get started, to find like-minded citizens and to engage in visionary thinking that leads to strategies and investment actions. Community participation, patience and persistence seem to be the essential ingredients.

- **Find Community Assets.**
 - **Community Scan.** Complete a serious study to determine the assets of the town and its environs. Professional help is useful, but not absolutely necessary.
 - **SWOT Analysis.** Once the assets are identified, a SWOT analysis will identify the strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats. Once done in a public, participatory fashion, a strategy can be fashioned to play to the town's strengths while trying to compensate for its weaknesses.
- **Natural resources** are, by their nature, at a fixed location; fixed in or near the town. Capitalizing on a beautiful natural feature works. Local, regional, state and federal lands with unique features can be the foundation for a destination attractive to campers, hunters and wildlife enthusiasts. Lakes and rivers amplify the opportunities.
- **Historic resources** also attract visitors and educate citizens. Places in or near town where significant events occurred attract people as do places where notable people were born or visited. Historic buildings are a part of the town's story; and, interesting stories sell.
- **Partnering.** Cooperative arrangements with third parties can be life-saving for the town. Consider:
 - **Private business partnerships** where a local or regional business has a need that can be provided in or near town. This is one of those opportunities that require that you ask around. Businesses are sometimes not visionary enough to see an opportunity.

- **County, state and federal agencies** also have needs that may be solveable in town. A search of their capital budgets reveals plans for facilities for the next five or so years. Finding projects that fit with the town's SWOT results is an opportunity to get ahead of the location decision.
- **Adjacent jurisdictions** may be in a similar situation as the home town.
 - **A Farmers' Market Circuit.** If everyone wants to have one, why not organize a circuit where market day in one town is Monday, e.g., the next town 20 miles away has market on Tues, and the next and the next. Two things happen by not going head to head. First, visitors and residents begin to notice the circuit and any specialties that evolve from any one of the participating towns. Two, vendors and people offering goods take up the circuit and their trucks travel from one town to another on the appointed day. Locations, notifications, signage and other features become coordinated so visitors following the circuit feel at home in every town.
 - **An Entertainment Circuit.** For those towns with some local festival, theater group, museum or gallery, patronage can grow if it is also a part of a coordinated circuit of like-minded towns. Coordinate events with neighboring cities and counties to make the collection of events bigger than any one individual performance.
 - **Coopetition.** A phrase from the past, but useful...cooperate with your competitors. In one sense, neighboring cities and counties are competing for residents, businesses and visitors; in another sense, if the collective place of three counties with several cities, for example, can present a bigger image and substance, everyone has a better chance of "winning".
 - **Service and Facility Sharing.** Based on the geography, every small town may not need a super-duper hook and ladder fire truck, a level one trauma center or a police training facility; but if there was one nearby, it might suffice. Again, the specifics are important to make sure the needed protections are provided. Equipment sharing, cost sharing, training sharing and other features may benefit not only from cost sharing but also from the collective capability of attracting better resources to a bigger place.
 - **Specialty Parks.** If there are four rural counties in close proximity with good road network, does each need a tournament-grade women's softball complex? The same question applies to all sports from soccer to swimming to track and field. Can one town have the best facility for one sport and the adjacent town have a top-quality facility in another sport and they all share the benefits? Sharing is hard, community pride is obtrusive but the benefits of regional cooperation can be significant.
- **Multi-county and multi-city organizations** can provide a means for communicating opportunities for sharing facilities, equipment, training and business development activities. In small, rural towns with limited resources, the option of partnering with neighbors is a path that may be fruitful.
- **Economic Development based on location.** Being rural and small does not necessarily mean the town is poorly located for certain activities and businesses. A rural place at the crossroads of heavily travelled transportation facilities may be the ideal spot for a distribution center.

With the growth of same-day deliveries for every national retailer, distribution locations are being found in places never before considered. The regional economic development agency should be aware of the opportunities.

- **Economic Development based on Agri-business.** Agriculture is a major industry that many small, rural towns are in the middle of. Farming and ranching is the basis for the agra-economy, but equipment and repairs offer a business opportunity. With the major equipment providers losing their strangle-hold on repairs, opportunities may exist for ONE sophisticated repair shop in an agricultural region. Can several counties and cities cooperate to locate such a facility in the region, even if not in one's hometown? Can the same be said for livestock and crop collection and distribution centers like the co-ops in the mid-west?
- **Economic Development based on "locally unwanted land uses" or LULUs.** This one is a two-edged sword. Prisons, power plants and waste disposal sites are not well accepted in urban areas, for good reason. Many end up in rural areas just because urban areas refuse them; they are LULUs, locally unwanted land uses. The factor to take advantage of is that LULUs are always looking for places that will accept them. But, many rural areas and small towns welcome the jobs without considering the negative consequences either physically, socially or reputationally. They figure what have we got to lose? The trick is to anticipate that a LULU may come your way and prepare the way with standards that enable the obnoxious projects to proceed but minimize their intrusively negative features before they enter the rural setting. Issues to pre-establish are setbacks that keep facilities at a distance from their edges, methods of waste disposal, noise and smell impacts, location of access points away from local traffic, buffers with walls and vegetation and rational closure plans.

Resources. The free-standing, rural towns have a tough row to hoe. They must create their own economic and social infrastructure. There is a body of work that addresses their situation:

- **The Small Town and Rural Planning Division of the American Planning Association** is a forum for the exchange of ideas and information of interest to professional and citizen planners in our smaller communities and **rural areas**.
LINK: <https://www.planning.org/divisions/smalltown/>
- **The Small Town Planning Handbook**, 3rd Edition, by Thomas L. Daniels (Author), John W. Keller (Author), Mark B. Lapping (Author), Katherine Daniels (Author), James Segedy (Author). This is the go-to guide for planners in small towns. For decades, this book has helped small towns and rural communities plan for change. It is a step-by-step guide to drafting and implementing a comprehensive plan through zoning ordinances, subdivision regulations, and capital improvement programs, with sensitivity to local character and limited resources. The third edition shows how technologies such as GIS and the Internet can improve the planning process. This edition contains a wealth of information on ways to maintain or improve the design of small towns and explains how to create a small town economic development plan. The authors emphasize strategic planning for economic, social, and environmental sustainability both in **remote towns** and in towns on the edge of metropolitan regions. The authors are

planners with more than six decades of experience in small towns, rural counties, and planning departments—including hundreds of evenings before rural planning commissions.

LINK: <https://www.amazon.com/Small-Town-Planning-Handbook-3rd/dp/1932364331>

- **Rural by Design, Planning for Town and Country By Randall Arendt, 2nd Edition, 2015**

For America’s rural and suburban areas, new challenges demand new solutions. Author Randall Arendt meets them in an entirely new edition of Rural by Design.

- When this planning classic first appeared 20 years ago, it showed how creative, practical land-use planning can preserve open space and keep community character intact. The second edition shifts the focus toward infilling neighborhoods, strengthening town centers, and moving development closer to schools, shops, and jobs.
- New chapters cover form-based codes, visioning, sustainability, low-impact development, green infrastructure, and more, while 70 case studies show how these ideas play out in the real world. Readers —rural or not—will find practical advice about planning for the way we live now.

LINK: https://www.routledge.com/Rural-by-Design-Planning-for-Town-and-Country/Arendt/p/book/9781611901528?gclid=CjwKCAjw7cGUBhA9EiwArBAvom6iFMz1UzYtrexiBNs0jCcCYy_9zjp7b9dAth7jYc0MZpOBE0EmXBoC2XwQAvD_BwE

- **US EPA.** Small towns and rural communities throughout the United States are looking for ways to strengthen their economies, provide better quality of life, and build on local assets. Many rural communities and small towns are facing challenges, including rapid growth at metropolitan edges, **declining rural populations, and loss of farms and working lands.**

LINK: <https://www.epa.gov/smartgrowth/smart-growth-small-towns-and-rural-communities>