



Michigan State University Extension
Land Use Series

Can Small Towns Be Cool?

Study Translation Paper

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Introduction

“Cool Cities” has increasingly become a buzzword among both community and economic development practitioners. The pursuit of the *creative class*,¹ as outlined in Richard Florida’s *The Rise of the Creative Class*, and the opportunity to reverse the brain drain that has plagued communities has become a hot topic throughout the United States.

While Florida’s research centered around urban centers, the struggles and successes of larger cities is oftentimes amplified within rural areas. It is the small community that brings its residents, often defined by school district boundaries, together through commerce, education, and a sense of personal identity. Although these communities play a critical role in shaping the overall landscape of rural America, some towns teeter on the brink of extinction while others enjoy envious prosperity.

It is this dichotomy that prompted further examination of the topic and the research question: “Can Small Towns Be Cool?”

Method of Study

The findings from the project involved four levels of analysis.

*“Thirty seven million acres is
all the Michigan we will ever have”*
William G. Milliken

¹ The Rise of the Creative Class, and how it’s transforming work, leisure, community and everyday life. Richard Florida, 2002.

This is a fact sheet developed by experts on the topic(s) covered within MSU Extension. Its intent and use is to assist Michigan communities making public policy decisions on these issues. This work refers to university-based peer reviewed research, when available and conclusive, and based on the parameters of the law as it relates to the topic(s) in Michigan. This document is written for use in Michigan and is based only on Michigan law and statute. One should not assume the concepts and rules for zoning or other regulation by Michigan municipalities and counties apply in other states. In most cases they do not. This is not original research or a study proposing new findings or conclusions.

First, an extensive literature review on community sustainability was conducted with particular emphasis on social capital. Robert Putnam, author of *Bowling Alone* and Harvard researcher suggests that our communities are unraveling because of a lack of “social capital” by which Putnam means “civic engagement, healthy community institutions, norms of mutual reciprocity, and trust.”

Through their work in the late 1980s, Vicki Luther and Milan Wall, of the Heartland Center established a framework of rural community sustainability.² Schaefer and Loveridge provided further evidence of successful initiatives utilizing a case studies approach.³ The Community Capitals Model⁴ provided an additional understanding of communities and their dynamics.

Secondly, individual “best practice” communities were identified through an extensive referral process. Information about each community was collected as background information and community leaders were identified and contacted. Nearly 250 individual site visits to communities in eleven states (Michigan, Wisconsin, Ohio, Indiana, Illinois, Pennsylvania, Maryland, Minnesota, Kansas, Vermont and New Hampshire). In each community, positional leaders were interviewed. An interview protocol was established in both the questioning sequence and note-taking procedures. This was done to establish some parameters of standardizing the collected information.

All information collected in the interviews was combined with the interviewer team members’ impressions, other informational materials from the community itself, and data from outside sources to establish community best practices.

Utilizing an asset mapping exercise, individual community “best practices” were mapped to compare against other communities and determine common themes. Previous analysis, as identified through the literature review, was incorporated into the analysis.

An economic vitality index⁵ for each “best practice” community was calculated to provide a consistent measurement of impact. The index included the following variables: per capita income, unemployment rate, population, percent below poverty, employment and average weekly wage. This third level of analysis provided a process to benchmark best practice communities that were included in site visits.

Lastly, findings from an extensive survey process by the State of Michigan of “college-age” individuals provided a final level of analysis. More than 13,000 completed on-line surveys, coupled with four

² *Clues to Rural Community Survival*, Vicki Luther and Milan Wall, Heartland Center for Leadership Development, 1987.

³ *Small Town and Rural Economic Development: A Case Studies Approach* Peter V. Schaeffer and Scott Loveridge, 2000.

⁴ *Community Capitals Model*, Cornelia Butler Flora, North Central Regional Rural Development Center and Jan Flora, Iowa State University, 2004.

⁵ *Economic Vitality Index* developed by Katy Swickard and John McKissick, Center of Agribusiness and Economic Development, University of Georgia.

individual focus group sessions at three different university settings, provided key data relative to desirable community characteristics among younger adults. In addition to the statistical analysis of the data, a factor analysis was also conducted. The factor analysis allowed for a better understanding of the relationship among the many variables in the study to derive further meaning. This multi-dimensional correlation analysis simultaneously measures multiple variables, as opposed to one or two dimensional analysis techniques such as simple frequencies or cross-tabs. The analysis says that if you rate one variable highly, respondents tended to rate certain other variables highly as well. These relationships among ratings creating groupings or attributes that is described in the findings.

Findings

The four levels of analysis were collectively incorporated into “10 Keys For Success” as follows:

1. Strong engagement between citizens, community organizations and government. Power within the community is deliberately shared in successful communities. Community government actively reaches out to citizens, and residents are engaged in setting the community’s agenda and future vision.
 - A. 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.
 - B. The Safety and Security Factor. Factors such as good public schools, a place for family, safe streets, and a sense of community are all important elements in determining a desirable place to live. While it is important to become a safe and secure place, it is best that it be jointly undertaken with other development strategies, particularly the cool city core values (outlined in #5). A place might not necessarily be “cool” because it is safe and secure, yet, it cannot become “cool” if it is not perceived as safe from the start. This is an arena where rural communities have a decided edge on their urban counterparts.
2. Successful approach to 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 land use planning with neighboring jurisdictions and to create “communities of place” --- places where residents live, where they work, where they shop. They are where the institutions of a resident’s daily lives – schools, churches, and community centers – are located.
3. 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/change zoning regulations to capitalize on changing trends and new opportunities --- even when such changes are burdensome.
4. Actively pursues cultural economic development opportunities. A dedicated effort to preserving heritage is evident. Residents often showcase their history through festivals and events that allow the community to celebrate its customs and traditions. But beyond a noted effort to preserve their heritage, successful communities have organized to pursue an active cultural economic development approach (which is not overly contrived). They recognize their cultural

amenities, and the arts community and other institutional leaders are collaborating to successfully reposition and market their community.

5. Deliberate effort to connect with youth and/or younger generation within the community. Successful communities realize that the first step in reversing the “brain drain” is to reach out and engage their youth on a variety of levels. From polling the youth of their wants/desires to extending their cultural economic development activities to youth audiences and connecting with their local educational systems, community leaders recognize the importance of providing a positive “youth experience.”
 - A. Cool Cities Core Values. The extensive online and focus group research of college students within Michigan revealed a consistent set of desirable attributes that provide a useful definition of what constitutes a “Cool City.” Those core values include: different lifestyles, diversity, arts/culture, gathering places, four seasons, music scene, walkable streets, historic architectural character, many different jobs, service businesses. Successful communities, through a cultural economic development strategy, are addressing the attributes on this list that are more directly under their control (such as enhancing arts, historic renovation, providing for public gathering places, or supporting a vibrant music scene) thereby having a positive impact on attributes that are more difficult to address directly (such as diversity or different lifestyles).
6. 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 all citizens.
 - A. The Outdoor Factor. The Outdoor Factor, as discussed in “Rise of the Creative Class” is a grouping of individual, non-team, outdoor sports and the simple yet personal experience of being outdoors. It is a key characteristic in the selection of a place to live. The Outdoor Factor includes adventure sports opportunities, natural scenic vistas, trails & parks, beaches & waterfront, and an overall commitment among the community for environmental preservation.
7. Local entrepreneurial investment. Changes in community momentum are oftentimes initiated by a local entrepreneur or philanthropist who has made a significant investment or re-investment in their community. Their investment serves as a catalyst for other private and public investments, and community leaders are quick to capitalize on the new opportunities.
8. 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 identifying resources ranging from grants for infrastructure improvements to accessing expertise in improving their communities. Their success in competing for these resources is a source of great pride.
9. Conviction in the long run that 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 they can sit and wait for things to get better. Making their community a good place to live is a proactive assignment, and these communities (and their leaders) know that.
10. Lessons are learned from setbacks, successes are celebrated. Thriving communities recognize that setbacks go hand-in-hand with success. These communities take time to learn from their

failures without placing blame; they celebrate their successes with modesty while keeping an eye on the next challenge.

Conclusion

Community building, in every sense, has become a hot topic. And while “cool cities” may not be for everyone, the themes highlighted above represent common approaches among successful communities – approaches that are more about long term sustainability than simply being a “cool” place to live.

It is important to remember that the study provides descriptive, qualitative information. The opinions from community residents and the researchers themselves serves as an influencer on the data. Although a quantitative benchmark analysis was included in the study, the project was never intended to serve as a quantitative or statistical study, but rather as a collection of community strategies that have had success – despite odds. The intended audiences for this work are community leaders and service providers assisting small communities.

Opportunities for further study

While each of the 10 themes contributed to community success, the cultural economic development phenomena are relatively new among smaller rural communities. With rural areas increasingly facing growth pressures, opportunities exist for further study of the intersection of arts and smart growth in a cross-disciplinary manner to accomplish multiple, yet complimentary community-building goals.

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