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Revitalizing Rural America Through Community and Economic Development Initiatives

Rural America has been in a state of change for most of the last century. More Americans are urbanized than ever before in American history. As a result of the flight to the cities, rural areas are suffering. They lose their population because cities offer better education and better economic opportunity. Many rural cities in America are not willing to allow their towns to become desolate. They want revitalization, they want to emphasize community and economic development, and they want vitality and prosperity while not losing the charm of their town. Volunteer development groups have sprung up in communities all over the nation. These organizations allow for effective participation of community members in the decisions that affect their homes.

This paper will examine the reasons and repercussions of rural flight and how communities handle the economic consequences that are associated with rural flight. Community development has been addressed in rural America by both formal and informal means. This paper will analyze the ways communities organize for development and critique the models and contextualize the broad spectrum of development for one rural community. The community of LeRoy, Illinois will serve as

the case study in order to examine how this rural community has organized for development . The model of community development employed by the community, the assets and needs based assessments, and the evaluation of human, social, environmental, physical, financial capital will all be analyzed. Finally, the paper will analyze the results and recommendation of the strategic planning committee. Their goals, objectives, strategies, and action plans will be examined to evaluate the impact the strategic plan will have on the community. The case study will also be analyzed to determine the lessons that have been learned in LeRoy, Illinois and how those lessons can be transferred to other rural communities interested in development. All community information has been derived from town meetings, committee focus groups, personal interviews, and community evaluations.

Community and economic development and growth take more than a commitment from a few individuals. It requires an entire community's participation. The first step is realization there is a problem and that the community members are capable of tackling that problem. The steps that follow can cause frustration, infighting, and setbacks. Towns can become literally divided over economic development opportunities or lack there of. However, it is possible for a community to reach a compromise and make decision that will lead the community to success, growth and prosperity.

Rural Flight in America

Population in America's rural towns and villages has been declining. Since the industrial revolution and the technological advancements in agriculture the United States has seen a steady decline in its rural population. That population decline has continued into the 21st century as the industrialization of agriculture continues and the steady loss of agriculture markets to developing nations. The small world that has been created through globalization has hit the agricultural industry hard. As the economic resource that rural towns have survived on for over a hundred years dries up the towns and their residents suffer. "After more than a half-century of subsidies and anti-poverty efforts, rural America suffers a higher concentration of poor people than urban areas. Rural residents, who may enjoy lower housing costs but have greater energy, telecommunications and transportation burdens, make barely 70 percent of the salaries earned by their urban counterparts, and more than one in five rural children now live in poverty."¹

Historically, the federal government has attempted to address the decline in quality of life in rural areas by offering agricultural subsidies and providing federal funding for improving the agriculture economy. As early as 1910 Theodore Roosevelt began assessments of rural conditions. The Commission on Country Life made specific policy recommendations to improve conditions while maintaining the rural value

¹ Kotkin, J. (21 July 2002). "If we let rural America die, we shall lose a piece of ourselves." *The Washington Post.com* [online] [cited 1 December 2003] Available from: <http://www.washingtonpost.com/ac2/wp-dyn/A35559-2002Jul20?language=printer>

system. The recommendations of that commission led to the establishment of the Extension Services of the state agricultural colleges. The role of the Extension Services was to develop “concerted action by a centralized national agency for the betterment of rural conditions, especially farming.”² Extension services still focus on the betterment of rural areas but the range of programming is expanding.

Extension services still focus on traditional programs such as 4-H. “4-H (Head, Heart, Hands, and Health) is the Cooperative Extension System’s dynamic, non-formal educational program for young people. Its mission is to create supportive environments for culturally diverse youth and adults to reach their fullest potential. The program combines the cooperative efforts of youth, volunteer leaders, state land-grant universities, federal, state, and local governments.”³ Other traditional programs include, youth development, agricultural and natural resources, and family health and nutrition. Extension service programming is constantly growing and they have expanded to incorporate programming for community and economic development. Community and Economic Development programming has identified the fact that rural communities need education about agriculture and youth development but also have to focus on addressing the sluggish agricultural economy and the effects that economy has on rural communities.

Preserving rural communities throughout the United States is important.

Metropolitan areas are choked by their population density and urban sprawl continues to

² Pigg, K. E. (1991). “Introduction: The future of rural America.” In Kenneth Pigg (Ed) *The future of rural America: Anticipating policies for constructive change*. Boulder: Westview Press. P. 3.

³ “About Us” *National 4-H Council*. [cited 15 March 2004] Available from: <http://www.fourhcouncil.edu/aboutus/category.asp?scatid=122&catid=4&subid=39>.

burden services and be costly. The existence of 'rural values' is still seen as an important piece of American history and tradition. The ideal still exists that rural communities provide the much-needed counterbalance to cities in terms of morals and ethics. Rural America represents the good, simple life that is missing from urban lifestyles. "American culture embodies a central paradox: in a nation dominated by urban people, our prevailing values derive from rural traditions."⁴ Preserving rural America is important for both the moral and economic stability of the United States.

Strategies for Addressing Community Development in Rural America

Realizing that preserving rural communities in America is an important task is only the first step towards discovering how to sustain rural values but allow for economic growth. There is significant debate regarding whom or what groups should be responsible for the economic development of a rural community.

Federal, state, and local governments each play a role in the betterment of rural areas. The federal government's most significant influence is through granting subsidies for farmers. However, the federal government is heavily criticized about who is eligible for those subsidies and where most of the money goes. According to a study by the Environmental Working Group, "Wealthy agribusiness partnerships and

⁴ Howarth, W. "The value of rural life in American culture." *Rural Development Perspectives: Economic Research Service, U.S. Department of Agriculture*. [online] 27 August 1997 [cited 1 December 2003]. Available from: <http://www.ers.usda.gov/publications/rdp/rdp1096/>

corporations reaped about half of the \$2 billion in federal farm subsidies channeled into Iowa in the first three years of the Freedom to Farm program. The other half was parceled out in smaller payments of usually less than \$6,000 to small, family farmers.”⁵ State governments are not capable of adequately addressing the diversity and economic fluctuation that occurs in rural areas. Local policy makers have increasingly begun to realize that the health of their communities lies in their own hands.⁶ Recently the most significant player in creating economic development opportunities has been volunteer organizations. Some organizations work in cooperation with local governments and others work exclusively on their own.

Volunteer development groups have sprung up in communities all over the nation. “Community development groups have probably been used-or at least formed-in almost every city and village in the United States to serve as focal points for leaders to address community problems and opportunities. Theoretically, community development can and does occur without formally organized development groups. However, a volunteer development group is one effective way for people to participate, direct, and engage in worthwhile change. Organizations survive by exchanging resources in transactions with their environments.”⁷ In the central Illinois area

⁵ “Farm subsidies went to rich farmers in Iowa.” *National Center for Policy Analysis*. 2001. [cited 1 December 2003] Available from: <http://www.ncpa.org/pd/budget/pd011400a.html>

⁶ Walzer, N. and S. Deller. (1996) “Rural issues and trends: The role of strategic visioning programs.” In Walzer, E. (ed) *Community strategic visioning programs*. Westport: Praeger.

⁷ Pfeffer, J. and G. Salacik, *The External Control Organizations: A Resource Dependence Perspective*. NY:Harper and Row, 1978.

volunteer community development organizations have formed in Chenoa, LeRoy, Monticello, Pontiac, and other rural communities.

Local governments and volunteer organizations have utilized numerous strategies and models for increasing economic and community development. Strategic visioning is one model communities employ to address development. One visioning strategy used is the model created by the University of Wisconsin-Extension program called Community Economic Analysis (CEA). This model helps communities identify local strengths and weaknesses and create action plans for economic development.⁸

Capacity building is another model that economic development groups utilize. The capacity building model focuses on community well-being based on the assets the community has to offer. Those assets are found in terms of the community's physical, social, environmental, human, and financial capital. Capacity building is a process that leads to encouraging a community to identify the assets in the community and then identify the tasks that need to be accomplished to utilize those assets. This model relies on the ability of a community to take collective action.⁹

The technical assistance model of community development does not focus on the process of community development but instead only on the task. The technical assistance model utilizes consultants and 'experts' to analyze the problems in a community from a technical standpoint and suggest solutions. Technical assistance is

⁸ Walzer, N. and S. Deller. (1996) "Rural issues and trends: The role of strategic visioning programs." In Walzer, E. (ed) *Community strategic visioning programs*. Westport: Praeger.

⁹ Flora, C.B. and V. Luther. (2000). "An Introduction to Building Community Capacity." In Schaeffer P.V and S. Loveridge (eds) *Small Town and Rural Economic Development*. Westport: Praeger.

capable of using scientific means to diagnosis a problem within a community in order to make the appropriate corrections to rectify that problem.

The conflict approach is another community organizing model that some groups utilize. This model begins by assessing local power structures and determining the reasons that community organizations lack power. This model of community development is often associated with Saul Alinsky. The conflict model relies on the expertise of a professional organizer to aid in assessment and planning. Once the assessment of the community has been completed the community organizer identifies a small and easily achievable goal to focus the community's attention. This model allows communities to avoid directly tackling the power structures that exist within a community, but instead to work in conjunction with the structure for change.¹⁰

All of these models offer valuable suggestions for a community dedicated to organizing for development. Many communities have found success using these models or a combination of models or organizing. The next section of this paper will examine what one rural Illinois town did to address declining economic opportunity in their community.

¹⁰ Green, P.G. and A. Haines. (2002) *Asset Building and Community Development*. Thousand Oaks: Sage Publications.

Case Study: LeRoy, Illinois

LeRoy, Illinois is a rural community located in the central Illinois, with a population of approximately 3500 people. The community is located in McLean County on Interstate 72 between Bloomington-Normal and Champaign. LeRoy's economy has historically relied on agriculture and light industry.

In the past 20 years LeRoy has experienced declining economic opportunity and some loss of population to the more urbanized area of Bloomington-Normal and Champaign. As a result of the economic downturn concerned citizens saw the need to address the economic and development issues of the city. Local volunteers organized to form the LeRoy Pride Action Commission (LPAC) . This committee was dedicated to analyzing the issues that kept LeRoy from gaining more prosperity. The committee gained support from local policy makers by participation from the mayor and the city administrator.

The LeRoy Pride Action Commission also sought outside help from the University of Illinois Extension Community and Economic Development (CED) team. In conjunction with the Extension CED team the volunteer organization decided on what model they wanted to incorporate in the strategic planning for the community. The result was a decision to use the model of Community and Economic Analysis derived from the University of Wisconsin Extension program. This model called for planning large community meetings to brainstorm the strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and challenges that the community faced.

As a result of the community planning meeting six areas of concentration were identified for the strategic plan. The first area of need was education. While most community members spoke favorably about the educational opportunities in LeRoy there was some concern regarding what more could be done to allow LeRoy students to succeed. LeRoy community members had recently heard of surrounding communities that were being forced to close their schools and merge with other community schools because of lack of funding. Determined not to let the same thing happen in their town the community dedicated themselves to making education in the community a goal.

Another concern identified in the town meeting was the housing needs in LeRoy. LeRoy has an older population that has trouble finding low-income housing. Approximately 24% of LeRoy's population is over the age of fifty-five.¹¹ Senior housing, in terms of low-income, assisted living, and community living were important topics to the community members. Other housing concerns included housing developments that did not adhere to urban planning regulations in the community. The main reason for noncompliance with the planning regulations is the lack of enforcement and the absence of a full time urban planner.

Tourism and business development was the most emphasized concern by citizens of LeRoy. Community members were concerned about the desolation of the downtown business district and the loss of economic opportunities in the downtown area. Residents expressed a desire to develop some sort of niche to attract tourism and encourage business development in the downtown area.

¹¹ "American Factfinder." *United States Census Bureau*. [cited 15 November 2003] Available from: <http://www.census.gov>.

Related to the issue of tourism and business development is the issue of recreation. LeRoy residents felt that certain recreational activities in the community were being underutilized due to lack of planning and promotion. One such location is the Moraine View State Park. This area has thousands of visitors per year. Residents recognized the need to harness that recreational site and allow the community to reap the benefits of such a high traffic area.

Infrastructure, population retention, and resident services also made the list of concerns that LeRoy residents wanted to address. LeRoy began this community analysis with the desire to find a way to spark the local economy. However, the results of the analysis uncovered other needs within the community that were just as pressing as the economic issues.

The next step in the community and economic development process was to identify the strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and challenges each of the six focus areas. This information was generated through small committee meetings. The committee consisted of volunteer participants with an interest and some expertise in the particular issue. For example the local realtor served on the housing committee and the school superintendent served on the education committee. By linking community members to committees where they felt like they had information and opinions to share participants felt more valuable and useful. Also the community was able to utilize some of the human capital available in the community.

The LeRoy Pride Action Committee spent a significant amount of time discussing the assets and strengths of the community. They focused on the aspects of

human, social, environmental, physical, and financial capital that the community and its members had to offer. From the discussion and brainstorming that followed each committee formulated one goal that they would like to see the community focus on in the next 5 years. From that goal each group was also responsible for providing objective, strategies, and action plans to meet those goals in the community.

The result of the town meetings were compiled and presented to the community by LPAC and the University of Illinois Extension Community and Economic Development team. The next step for LPAC is to begin implementation, devise a system for evaluation and ensure that the time and energy the community put into the strategic plan does not go to waste.

Analysis

LeRoy, Illinois is an excellent example of a small rural community that has been deeply affected by the rural flight that has occurred in the United States in the last decades. They are experiencing the same problems that many rural communities in America are facing. They are concerned about the education of their children, the economic prosperity of their community, and the future of their town.

The LeRoy Pride Action Committee melded several forms of analysis and model programs together to formulate their five-year strategic plan. The community assessment was a combination of both assets and needs based assessment. Combining these tools was very valuable for the community because it did not limit the

participants to focusing on just the good or bad aspects of the community, but instead on the community as a whole. LPAC also incorporated several model programs into their community analysis. The Community Economic Analysis model was used extensively to encourage community participation and focus on the strategies and actions of community development. However, aspects of the conflict model were used as well as seeking assistance from a professional organizer, through the University of Illinois-Extension team, to help articulate the problems of the area.

Overall the process of community and economic development in LeRoy was extremely successful. The community was able to work quickly and efficiently and go from the initial town meeting to the submission of the final report in less than 6 months. Experiencing the community and economic development process and utilizing the models of development allowed the community to develop a stronger interest in the success of LeRoy. Ideas and strategies were abundant and individuals were really able to pull together collectively for community organizing.

Some of the criticisms of the work done by LPAC surround the level and type of participation. Some community members felt they were being excluded from the strategic planning process. Some city government officials also raised concern that the volunteer organization was treading into city territory. There was also some criticism about one of the aspects that was formerly mentioned as a positive outcome; the participation of experienced individuals on the subcommittees. Some community members claimed that these individuals actually hampered the planning process with defensive attitudes and claims about the impossibility of some suggestions.

One of the important lessons that can be drawn from the LeRoy development experience is that there does not have to be complete adherence to one specific model of development in order to be successful. The positive results in this case study were based on the fact that the models and assessments were curtailed to fit the needs and the desires of the community. Another important lesson is the need for flexibility in community development. LeRoy set out with the intention to address economic concerns of the community. Their final project focused not only on business development but also included recommendations for improving resident services and low income housing concerns. Other communities can learn a lot from the way LeRoy utilized several models and remained flexible when the outcomes were discovered.

Another key component for successful development is community buy-in. Community members need to have a reason to care about the prosperity of the town and the education being provided by the schools. Without that buy-in then there will be no participation in volunteer development organizations. Community members have to feel the need to invest their time and energy into a worthwhile project. It is the responsibility of the community organizer to make sure the public is adequately informed about the needs of the community and how each member can participate in making it better.

Sustainability is a major concern of community planning groups. There can be very detrimental results if key members lose interest, power struggles ensue, tasks are not carried out, or a wide variety of other circumstances that can sidetrack the best-formulated plans. It is too early at this stage to determine if the LeRoy five-year

strategic plan will be sustainable, but there are indicators that point to success for LeRoy. Enthusiastic participation from the community, desire for real community development, and external resources providing support are all indicators that the development project in LeRoy will be sustainable.

Conclusion

The face of rural America is changing as quickly as the rest of the globalizing world. The loss of economically viable agricultural production and continued rural flight has left many rural American towns in despair. “But giving up on rural America would be a big mistake. The effects of the heartland's decline are becoming readily apparent, and they touch the entire country -- economically, environmentally, socially and culturally.”¹² Public participation is one of the most essential needs for success in community development. There are a variety of factors that affect the success and competitiveness of rural American communities. Volunteer and local government organizations have answered these concerns by taking matters of community and economic development into their own hands. Communities face many frustrations and setbacks. However, a dedicated group of individuals can use models, assessments, and community development theories and reach lofty goals in their towns.

¹² Kotkin, J. (21 July 2002). “If we let rural America die, we shall lose a piece of ourselves.” *The Washington Post.com* [online] [cited 1 December 2003] Available from: <http://www.washingtonpost.com/ac2/wp-dyn/A35559-2002Jul20?language=printer>

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