



Small Town Survival – Old Timers and Newcomers

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Few folks ask me straight out if I think their town will survive, yet most of their questions work around that concern. Recently, I had the opportunity to spend a Saturday morning visiting with Marvin Gloege and his wife, Marlene. Marvin spent his life as a planner in the western and eastern parts of Washington and Oregon and retired as the planning director for Linn County. His retirement project has been to research the small towns of Eastern Montana, where he grew up, and make suggestions for what it would take for 22 of those towns to survive. Since many of my family roots are from that area, I had a good sense of the places Marvin was discussing in his book; *Survival or Gradual Extinction – The Small Town in the Great Plains of Eastern Montana (2007)*.

Montana's small towns are ahead of Oregon's small towns as they follow similar economic paths into the future. For many of the towns in Marvin's book, I could identify one or two Oregon towns that were headed in the same direction for similar reasons. In this blog, I use Marvin's and the U.S. Census Bureau's definition for a small town – an incorporated community with a population of less than 2,500 people. I define *survival* as the community remaining incorporated for the next 100 years.

Thanks to Rich Sandler, OSU Rural Studies Program, I have some very detailed information tracing the history of small towns in Oregon. Today, Oregon has 138 small towns and 108 urban places. Over the last century, 52 incorporated or unincorporated small towns started, grew, declined and are now gone. In the early 20th Century, homestead acts and the many private and government funded projects created the opportunity for lots of trading centers/small towns to develop and thrive serving the natural resource economies of Oregon. Back then, people's homes were more outside than inside towns. Most families farmed, ranched, or logged and some town folks provided the services and supplies for those activities.

County populations peaked for many of the most rural counties in the 30's, 60's, or 80's. The majority of the population change or decline for those counties came from the unincorporated portion of the counties and not the small towns. As the 20th Century moved along, globalized competition and technological improvements forced the consolidation of farms, ranches, and forests. Not as many people were needed to work in the natural resource sectors. Eventually, over the last 30 years, as the unincorporated trade areas of towns thinned or declined in population, there was not sufficient commerce to support the small town businesses and many towns' populations have been flat or modestly declining.

A century from now at least three quarters of Oregon's small towns will "...remain intact...However, they will continue to gradually lose their vitality without a concerted effort..." (Gloege 199) Earned income will continue to decline in many of the small towns, however transfer payments (e.g. Social Security) and sales of assets (e.g. land) will keep the small towns going.

Five steps need to be taken by small towns that want to remain vital;

1. Only focus on products that are processed or have a high percentage of their value added within the county.
2. Sincerely open-up to new people and ideas. Old timers and newcomers will both need to change to fit into the communities of the future.
3. Increase the skills and education of everyone.
4. Get "closer" to the outside world with lots of visiting in-county and across the U.S.
5. Partner with neighboring communities, if they are failing – you're next.

Communities have exerted a great deal of effort, at least over the last 20 years, to create visions and improve their economies. Most visions say; "We have lots of assets to be what we have always been and we are going to find a way to keep using those assets in ways that we want – to become prosperous again." We have thousands of years of experience proving visions that look forward and see the same people doing similar things are not visions for the future.

The person who drinks special coffees, wears flip flops instead of boots, doesn't want to run a chainsaw and offers ideas to stunned silence in public meetings needs to be an equal member of any economic development effort in a small town. Not because the newcomers know more or are more capable than the old times. Because the newcomers have different approaches that can be used together with the old timers' experience to come up with a different enough community that it might survive the next 100 years. Only a few economic consultants will be frank with small towns about this point so the consultants sell vision process after vision process. They generate reports that are sagging the floors in libraries and government offices and are never used or even read by most people.

I am not saying that small towns should wipe the slate clean, just that no institutions – schools, churches, retail outlets, elected offices, etc. will work tomorrow, if they do not make some major changes today.

Economies push all products to become commodities and through competition force costs and profits down. The only way to keep from getting run over is to move very fast, generate lots of ideas from different types of people and share success and decision-making with everyone in the community.

A little less yammer and a lot more detail; this is going to take another blog. So, next time I will discuss restructuring natural resource based businesses, schools, the labor force, local government and transportation.

Take care,
Bruce Sorte

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