

# Low-Budget Strategies for Small Town Survival



Small towns in rural America are experiencing tough economic times. For many, main streets consist of empty storefronts and rundown buildings. Signs of trouble include declines in agriculture and manufacturing. Improvements in rural transportation make travel to larger towns and urban America for retail trade much easier. Local officials must come to terms with their situations and give their citizens a realistic evaluation of the town's future, realizing that some businesses will die.

## Broad Strategies

To reverse these trends, rural towns must be willing to invest in their futures by approving bond issues and taxes. These support the development of roads, water and power supplies, schools, and public transportation for future economic development efforts. They must create community spirit where local citizens can disagree and still cooperate on critical issues.

Rural towns must involve young people, women, and minorities in local government. They must think globally and act locally by recognizing that some activities in the local economy, like retail and services, still happen in the community. Local officials must accept and embrace change and be creative and flexible. They must realize that progress is optional but change is inevitable. Constant review and development are the hallmarks of successful communities. Here are ways rural towns can support existing businesses:

- Link local suppliers to local businesses
- Create pool purchasing power for supplies or products to sell
- Start "buy local" programs
- Encourage an appreciation of lifelong learning

Rural officials should support the local healthcare sector since it is usually one of the largest employers in the community. They should support regional economic development efforts because everyone benefits when employment expands in the area.

## Specific Strategies

A list of specific strategies for small town survival follows. These strategies are useful and community-focused. They are both action-oriented and information-oriented since local officials often deal with economic development issues and question their role in this process. A companion publication, MSU Extension publication M1433 *Local Governments' Role and Response to Economic Development*, addresses these and other issues.

### Education

Support the education of young people and the continuing education of adult workers because the entire town benefits from having educated citizens. Lifelong learning is the key to survival of rural communities.

### Community Assets

Identify and promote the positive assets of the town. This helps to create a feeling of identity among citizens about the community as a place to live and work.

### Infrastructure

Provide places for citizens to relax and interact by developing public meeting facilities, green spaces, flower gardens, hiking trails, parks, and other recreational facilities that support an enhanced quality of life.

### Safety and Appearance

Create a sense of safety in the community by installing more streetlights and cleaning up or removing eyesores and unsafe buildings. Community appearance is vital to growth. Many businesses and industries gauge communities with a "windshield survey" before giving the area serious consideration for locating there.

### Labor Force Preparedness

Encourage and provide many opportunities for adult education and training for local citizens. Lack of education is a major problem for the future successes of small businesses. In cases where enrollment in local schools is declining, these facilities should provide the human and physical resources needed to put this strategy into action.

## ***Business Retention***

Capture the advantages of locally owned businesses by exploring opportunities for the community and/or local workers to buy such establishments when possible. Make use of the small business development centers, MSU Extension Service, Mississippi Development Authority, and other resources to improve competitiveness of local businesses.

## ***Business Attraction***

Ask questions about new industry locating in town.

Specific questions might include the following:

- How many employees will come from the local labor force? How many will relocate to the community?
- What is the local commuting distance?
- What percentage of the employees will shop within the town's trade area?
- What impact will the industry have on local taxes?
- Will the industry be a good corporate citizen by investing in the community and protecting the environment?

## ***Community Sharing***

Learn from the experiences of other communities that struggle with weak economies.

## ***Strategy Evaluation***

Whatever economic strategies and projects are set in motion, each will require serious evaluation by local officials and citizens. An evaluation consists of determining if a project is working and being willing to change if it is not.

The evaluation should focus on tangible results, not emotions about the efforts. Small towns cannot afford poor use of financial resources, especially when state and federal funds are shrinking and becoming harder to get every day. Thus, a complete evaluation of any economic development activity is needed before making a decision to invest public resources.

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