

## **A valuable investment in rural U.S.**

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Are you worried about small towns? Do you fear that these precious, peaceful places to live will fade into oblivion? Do you agree it's time to do something to reinvigorate this treasured style of down home living?

If you answered yes to any or all of the the questions above, you will find encouragement and inspiration in an announcement which spread through the state today. Following a national selection process, Nebraska's HomeTown Competitiveness program received a \$2 million grant from the W.K. Kellogg Foundation of Battle Creek, Mich.

The seven-figure support will provide a major boost for a program which has made valuable contributions in the pst few years with only limited funding. Seven communities are now participating, including Imperial and Grant in this area.

The idea behind HomeTown Competitiveness is that small towns and rural areas don't have to lay back and accept the changes which threaten their communities' existence. They can fight back ... doing all within their power to preserve their way of life.

An example is Valley County, who piloted the HomeTown Competitiveness Program in 2002. Since starting the program known by the initials HTC, Valley County has graduated 70 from a leadership class; set up a \$1.2 million endowment program with a bequest from a local couple; and hired a business development consultant. In Ord, the county seat, seven small business loans have been made from a one-cent sales tax fund.

That's the idea. Fight back. Do all possible to keep small towns competitive.

What Ord, and other communities are finding, is that it's not enough to maintain the status quo. Towns must either gain or fall behind.

Just to maintain population at current levels, the HomeTown Competitiveness program estimates towns must keep 27 percent of their high school's average graduating class. That's more than one out of four, so communities must devote themselves to economic development, paying particular attention to ways to create employment opportunities.

HomeTown Competitiveness is a joint effort of the Heartland Center for Rural Development, the Center for Rural Entrepreneurship and the Nebraska Community Foundation. Their pioneering efforts possess the potential to revive small towns, not only in Nebraska, but throughout the nation. By making the \$2 million grant, the W.K. Kellogg Center is making a valuable investment in rural America.

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