



Small towns need strong leadership

BY JEFF YOST

I am writing to respond to the question posed by the Lincoln Journal Star concerning the “small-town problem.”

The Aug. 17 story headlined “Nebraska needs to discuss small-town problem” asked, “Can small towns that aren’t close to Lincoln or Omaha or near Interstate 80 be ‘saved’ from eventually dwindling to nothing?”

To address the pressing issues facing our rural communities, leadership will be the determining factor in success or failure, not location. The Nebraska Community Foundation has built a system to partner with local leaders to provide homegrown solutions, increase regional cooperation and provide new economic opportunities, especially for young people.

Occasionally, I am asked why I’m trying to save small towns. My response is I’m not; I can’t. Only the people who live and work in a rural community can provide the leadership necessary to make their hometown vital and prosperous.

Working together, we can get much further than we can individually. That is a primary premise on which the NCF system is built.

Nearly 8,000 gifts were given last year to help build and sustain Nebraska hometowns through NCF and its 200 affiliated funds. In the past five years, \$40 million has been reinvested through NCF.

Many of those gifts were to

very small communities. Diller, Erickson, Mullen, Ruskin, Shickley, Thedford and Wallace all have populations of fewer than 500 residents. And each of them, through the vision and hard work of local leadership, have endowments and confirmed planned gifts of at least \$100,000. Shickley has more than \$1.8 million committed.

And much more is possible. We estimate that \$94 billion will transfer from one generation to the next within a few decades in rural Nebraska. For our most sparsely populated counties, the peak of that transfer is happening now. Through NCF’s system, local leaders are motivating donors to give a portion of that wealth to build endowments. These new resources are being invested in ways that will help build local economies and provide a margin of excellence.

Many of the solutions to small-town challenges will come in the form of regional cooperation. In Butler County, Holt County, Valley County and other rural landscapes, cooperative efforts have been formed. Many times these agreements formalize a new platform to connect local resources (including taxes, business investments and charitable endowments). In Holt County, this collective approach has grown organically for several years, starting first in Stuart and Atkinson, then including O’Neill and now including the county and all of its municipalities. The sources of funding for this

collaboration are varied, and in the next few years some planned gifts will mature to help sustain these efforts.

As the Holt County example shows, these solutions will take a team effort: current and former residents, government and the private sector all working together to help communities, and groups of communities, determine and pursue their regional competitive advantages. (Note: These regional solutions will work only if they are formed locally. If state and federal policymakers require regional approaches, it’s unlikely that donors will support these efforts.)

Our 15 years of experience in the field of rural development philanthropy tells us that there are indeed many rural leaders who are eager to stake their futures close to home in very small places when new opportunities are revealed and sufficiently resourced.

What are these new opportunities? Paradoxically, what most people see as the greatest problem is actually our greatest opportunity: our young people.

Most of them are smart and motivated because of the excellent education they’ve received. Over the past four years, NCF has conducted surveys of middle and high school students in 21 rural communities. More than 80 percent rate their community as above average for a young person to live in. Counter to most adult assumptions,

about half of the students say they would like to remain or return to their hometowns after high school graduation. They also tell us that the biggest barrier to their returning is not that their communities are “too small;” rather, it is the perceived lack of career opportunities.

The rapid growth of the knowledge industry already is challenging that perception. Today, the Internet is the new interstate. Interestingly, among the students we surveyed, more than 40 percent indicated an interest in owning their own businesses some day. Technology is making this option increasingly achievable.

Young people value their hometowns not because they live in a “fog of nostalgia,” but because that is where they would prefer to raise their families.

As we continue our debate and discussion about the future of small towns, we should focus on questions of how we can support local leaders in working together to move our interdependent rural and urban economies into a 21st century system of place-based opportunities and strategies.

The industrial age and the culture of dependency are yesterday’s habits.

Jeff Yost is president and CEO of the Nebraska Community Foundation, a 501(c)(3) organization established in 1993 to serve communities, organizations and donors throughout Nebraska.