

Launching a Lifeline

ATTRACTING YOUTH AND WEALTH ARE KEYS TO A NEBRASKA INITIATIVE
THAT HELPS SUSTAIN SMALL TOWNS. By Peg Zenk



Boarded-up windows and For Sale signs have become too common on the main streets of small towns across the country. But hope is not lost in some communities, including Mullen, Neb.

This little town of fewer than 600 residents, in the middle of the state's Sandhills region, is fighting to maintain its business community and retain more of its young people. And the tide is beginning to turn.

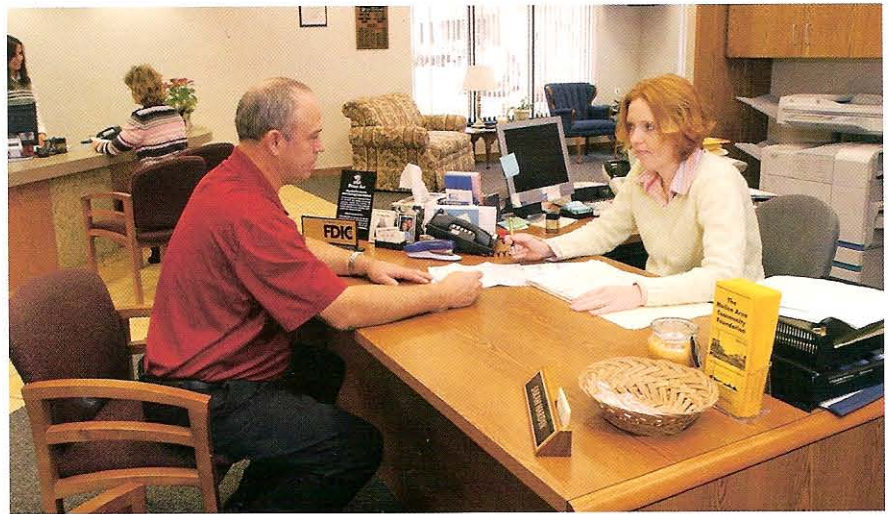
Mullen's Commercial Club—a group of local boosters—has organized business owners. They've formed a community foundation and raised more than \$40,000 for an endowment to provide financial assistance for new businesses, training and support for existing businesses, and seed money for community projects. The local telephone company provided a matching grant of \$3,000 per year for five years if local businesses and residents could raise \$6,000 each year.

As a result of the tiny town's efforts, several new businesses, including a bank, an auto repair shop and a linen cleaning service, have opened their doors. Equally important, existing businesses have remained open.

Town leaders are reaching out to students in the local school, talking with them about entrepreneurship and the benefits of living in a small town. Organizers are tapping into a strong school alumni association to reconnect with Mullen High School graduates who have moved away, with hopes of drawing some of them back home.

"There seems to be more enthusiasm in the community now, more hope that we can maintain the businesses and quality of life people really want," says Ron Boyer, vice president and branch manager of the new Nebraska Land National

Mullen youth raised more than \$6,000 to renovate a local park and turn it into a Frisbee golf course. Students trying out the course are, from left, Brandi Simonson, Chad Pearman and Adrienne Licking.



Ron Boyer, branch manager of the new Nebraska Land National Bank in Mullen and chairman of the community foundation, stops to talk with Sarah Hardin, one of the bank's employees and community development coordinator. Boyer is a Mullen native who returned after graduating from college and beginning his career elsewhere. Hardin moved to Mullen with her husband.

Bank and chairman of the community foundation. "We hope to stabilize our population by drawing some Mullen natives back to the community, as well as attracting a few new residents."

"This kind of positive thinking has created the environment that makes people want to come here."

He knows that can happen. Boyer is a Mullen native who went off to college and worked elsewhere in the state for many years before returning six years ago. "I know what it's like to live and work in bigger communities, and I recognize the benefits a small town can offer," he says, "especially for people who grew up here."

Turning Point

Three years ago, Mullen residents weren't so optimistic. For Sale signs were posted in eight storefronts in town. And Hooker County, all

rural land with the exception of Mullen, was identified as one of the state's poorest counties.

That's when a few community leaders, including Boyer and Commercial Club President Kirk Jacobs, decided something had to be done. Along with forming the community foundation and trying to convince former residents to move home and start businesses, this small group applied to participate in the HomeTown Competitiveness (HTC) initiative.

A collaborative effort of the Nebraska Community Foundation, Heartland Center for Leadership Development, Center for Rural Affairs and RUPRI Center for Rural Entrepreneurship, HTC received national attention and a \$2 million grant from the W.K. Kellogg Foundation in 2005 to continue its work helping rural communities remain vital and sustainable.

HTC uses four key strategies:

- Build community leadership,
- Identify and provide training and support for current and potential entrepreneurs,
- Engage young people in leadership roles and entrepreneurial ventures, and
- Cultivate and capture at least 5 percent of the area's multi-generational wealth transfer



Employees put up fencing at Sand Hills Golf Club near Mullen to prevent erosion. This top-rated private club set a precedent. Now another course and resort are being developed nearby in the remote Sandhills region, better known for ranching.

outlook of residents.

"Our involvement in the HTC initiative has provided the resources and technical help we needed to make things start to happen here in Valley County," says Bethanne Kunz, executive director of the Valley County Economic Development Board. "This kind of positive thinking has created the environment that makes people want to come here."

That welcoming environment draws new businesses, including an ethanol plant that will add 35 permanent jobs. Help with business transfers has ensured that a retiring dentist was replaced by a recent dental school graduate and that a clothing store remained open and viable. And at least 10 families have recently moved to Ord, bringing with them a variety of professional skills.

The first community to go through the HTC initiative, Ord has experienced several successes over the last five years, says Kunz. Along with the sizable endowment fund, the city council passed a one-cent sales tax to fund low-interest loans for business development and creation, which has already helped to establish a new well-drilling business and a dental practice.

"We also can help existing businesses work on their business plans or get training to bring them up to speed on incorporating technology into their operations," she says. "For some, it's been helpful just to provide computer training."

"With help from the HTC field

through charitable giving to support these activities.

"In small towns, when children grow up and many move away, they take with them inheritance and assets that family once contributed to the local community," says Don Macke, director of the Center for Rural Entrepreneurship. "Losing that is as important as losing people. That's why a pillar of the strategy we developed is for local leaders to capture a small percentage of this wealth before it leaves the commu-

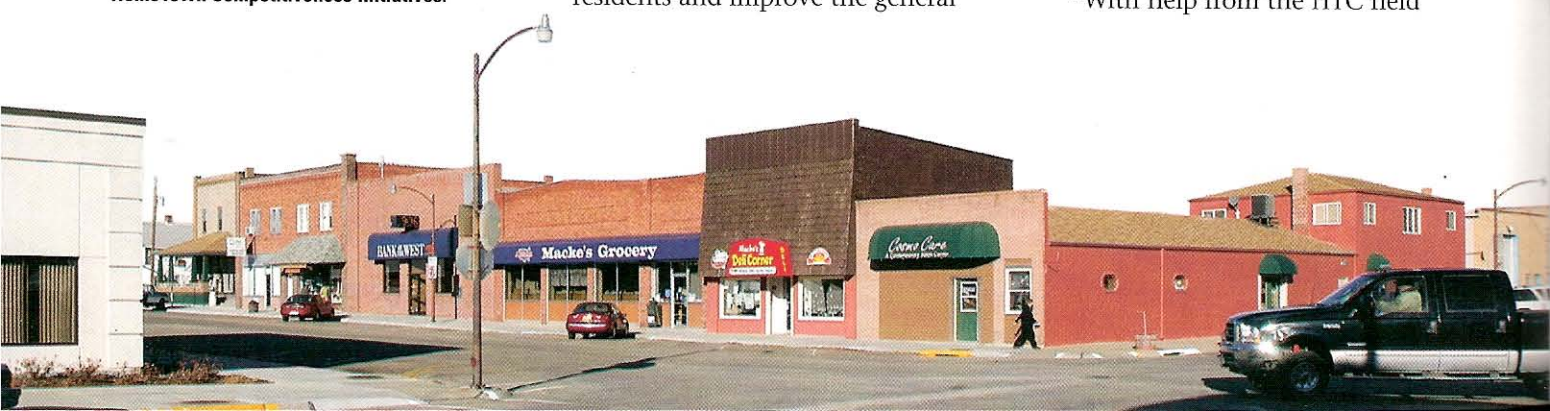
nity forever."

The funds are put into a community endowment fund, where the principal remains untouched but the interest fuels community-building efforts, he explains.

Opportunities in Ord

Another Nebraska community that has been getting national attention for its successful revitalization efforts is Ord, population 2,269. Building a \$1.2 million community endowment has helped Valley County in east-central Nebraska improve business climate, retain more young people, attract new residents and improve the general

Main Street in Mullen, Neb., begins to come alive on an early January morning. The community is reawakening in many other ways as it pursues HomeTown Competitiveness initiatives.



staff, we've also applied for and received state and federal grants," Kunz adds. "One of those grants helped upgrade 25 low-income homes in the county."

While helping communities access outside grants and resources is part of what HTC can offer, much of the long-term progress is made at the local level, notes Macke. "We think it's really important that a community stabilizes from within. That's why we start by taking an asset-based approach: What has the community got to offer? What are its strengths? Then we go from there."

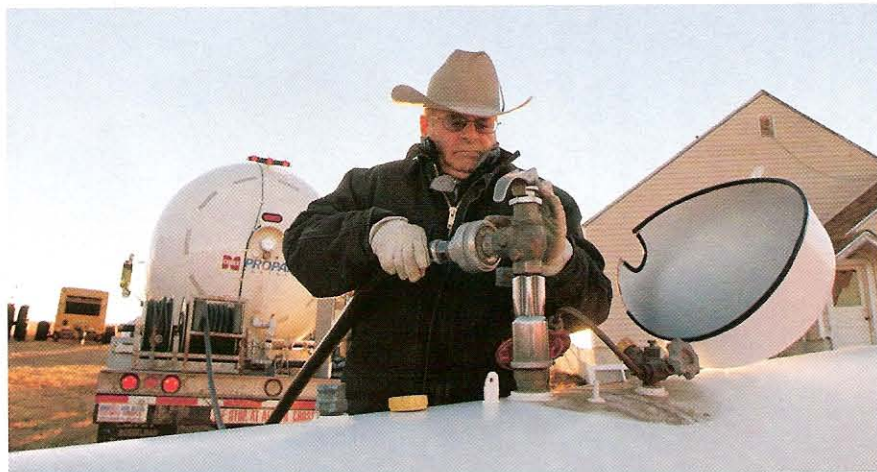
Because HTC resources are limited, Macke reports the initiative occasionally must turn down an interested community. "We need to see that they have the right stuff to make it work—enough leaders and existing businesses. And they need to be ready to commit to a lot of hard work."

Loyalty and Leadership

That commitment is what made tiny Mullen stand out, says Craig Schroeder, a senior associate with the Center for Rural Entrepreneurship, who worked with Mullen leaders when they began the HTC initiative more than two years ago.

"There is a very strong sense of loyalty to the community in

Bonnie Hilderhoff, right, who runs the Farmers Ranchers Cooperative gas station at Mullen, chats with a customer.



Glenn Garner, propane and refined fuels bulk truck driver for Farmers Ranchers Cooperative, Mullen, fills the tank at an area ranch.

Mullen. And they already had a strong group of community leaders who were trying to attract people and businesses to the community. Through HTC, we helped them develop a more strategic game plan, offered technical assistance and helped them with leadership development, especially by engaging youth in the community."

Having local people speak to elementary and high school classes about owning and operating a business is one way they've begun that process, says Sarah Hardin, Mullen's development coordinator. "We are working to develop a class on entrepreneurship for high school students so that, even if they go away to college, they'll consider coming back to Mullen to start a business some day. More young people need to realize that is possible and that the community needs them and is

willing to help."

One project Mullen youth took on themselves was raising more than \$6,000 to renovate a local park and turn it into a Frisbee golf course, she says. "They replaced the fences and planted trees and did almost all the work themselves. It was a great experience for the kids. The rest of the community was pretty impressed with what they did."

Mullen residents also have seen several new businesses open in the past few years. Just 10 miles south of town, a new Jack Nicklaus-designed golf course and resort is due to open later this year. Along with the already well-known and top-rated Sand Hills Golf Club six miles away, the new facility will provide another economic boost to the small community.

"There is no question that our businesses and community benefit from having those courses nearby," says Boyer, "but the kind of progress we're trying to make here has more to do with making sure Mullen is a place people come back to.

"People who grew up in this area have a strong affection for it," he adds. "We just have to provide them with the right incentives to come back." ■

To learn more about the HomeTown Competitiveness program, visit www.htcnebraska.org.