

MOBILIZING HUMAN AND NATURAL RESOURCES IN RURAL COMMUNITIES

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The pattern of growth and decline of many small towns in rural America has in part been a function of myopic quick fix attitudes in economic development that are tightly connected to an increasingly unstable world marketplace. The result, in a world whose stability is measured in leaps of faith, is extreme instability at the local level, especially in small towns with little indigenous economic cushioning. In very few cases, in those towns which have taken this route to economic "well being," is there the ability to get recharged by this rapidly changing environment. Clearly a fundamentally different approach must be developed that enables more realistic expectations of what small town economies must really focus on and the assimilation of this approach into our planning strategies.

Two basic approaches that pervade this nation's vision of rural

America have resulted in this unstable environment. The first approach is based on the paradigm of "let's attract business; in fact, the bigger the better." So, the Chamber of Commerce is asked to do some promotion. Models of big town economic development, e.g. "the Western model," are used. Certain businesses are attracted due to their potential multiplier effect in support services. If a given business is part of a national or international consortium, it is looked at even more favorably.

Of course, the reason these businesses are interested in locating in these small towns at all is the lure of low wages, low taxes, and low land costs. They are rarely, if ever, interested in the community itself. By becoming dependent on externally controlled businesses, a certain sector of the small town local economy is now part of a tangential business arm of a company required to compete in the national marketplace. If these businesses fail, however, it is more serious to the community than if they never were to have come. This seriousness is based not on the amount of money the firm has brought to the town but rather on the sequence which ensues, which requires reorienting local labor both psychologically and in skills retraining to the newly rediscovered reality of the rural area. Sometimes, historical skill bases are lost completely depending on how long the new business was in town and can reach such proportions that the people no longer possess any of the basic skills on which these towns' essential functioning once was based.

The second approach to rural destruction is the crisis reactive approach to housing, energy, and food. These are the very areas that should be least troublesome for the people of rural areas to establish some degree of independence, yet are the first areas to become major dependencies. With proper planning, these issues could provide permanent life support bases used to rejuvenate rural areas. Crisis planning often represents the fullest extension of this attitude. In these situations, instead of placing faith in the people who have lived through a tornado disaster, for example, as was the case recently in Saragosa, Texas, various government entities, the Red Cross, and religious organizations took charge and handed over a new town outfitted and provided in every

way leaving the townspeople with virtually no involvement in the long term process of their town's economic development or stability.

The bare reality of the situation is that an almost opposite policy should be promoted. The very policy that the rest of the developing world has found it necessary to enforce upon our generosity, which is don't be so generous--it ruins us, is the very policy that also harms rural America's farming, housing, energy, etc. as potential economic stabilizers.

These elements create a different problem to planners requiring a type of knowledge not possessed by most rural planners, sociologists or economic development specialists. Required is knowledge in the natural sciences including, for example, ecology, micro industrial development, and sustainable economics in order to properly assess resource potentials to best serve our rural population on an everyday basis. This does not mean that concentrated valuable resources should not be developed if they exist. What it does mean is a consistency in economic planning that factors in the long term as a critical determinant. This long term perspective includes the community's capacity to provide for its staples of food, energy, water, waste, and housing using local resources and local skills whenever possible and despite external pressure to do otherwise. It requires land planning to be thought of more as resource planning, through which every soil type, vegetative type, and geologic formation is thoroughly understood as to multi -use potentials at the local scale.*

*In a recent survey of soil and geological strata we found a coal seam covered with mesquite which had higher BTU value per pound than the coal. We found the overburden was pozzolanic (able to produce low energy cement). This pozzolan in turn was associated with a layer of mineral called zeolite very useful in farming for improving soil water retention and also being the major component in a simple solar refrigeration technology. It was interesting to find the coal perhaps more valuable as a provider of trace elements for growing biomass and food when mixed with organic fertilizers than as a fuel.

The process requires measures which are constantly being tried, including certain land use and zoning regulations, to be hyperactivated information becomes focused on how to use the resources we have, which into a new value set that more seriously confront the future where ultimately becomes more valuable than economic aid. Thus, we envision what might be termed sustainable planning methods which place a series of basic life support resources into a local resource pool to be factored into long term decision making processes.

Natural resources as they relate to a wide range of basic human need and the associated skills required to use them have been the mainstay of rural communities throughout history. Food production at the local level, building material processing and manufacturing, energy generation and production are fundamental processes that, by applying a new library of knowledge, can be rejuvenated in exciting and meaningful ways. Only recently have these fundamental relationships been discarded and replaced by disruptive subsidy programs and economic development policies that undermine the inherent stability of small town economic reality.