

**Entrepreneurial Rural Communities:  
1993 Governor's Conference on  
Community Development  
-Keynote Address-**

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Let me begin by thanking Bill Zillmer of the Department of Development for providing me with the opportunity to share with you my thoughts related to community economic development. Let me ask each one of you a relatively simple question; *why is it that some communities are "successful" in their development efforts, yet many others struggle?* I imagine there are as many ideas as there are people in this room. What I would like to do with the next half hour or so is to dissect many of your ideas, then provide, I hope, some insight into future directions for action at both the state, but more importantly, the local level. Then with the time remaining, we can open the discussion up to your own thoughts, then I, or anyone else can react.

At the top of your thinking might be physical infrastructure. Things like access to interstate highways, rail transportation, air travel, and more importantly telecommunications. You might also be thinking of physical infrastructure such as water and wastewater infrastructure. With the Clean Water Acts that have been passed by the Federal government and embraced by state and local governments, potential physical barriers to economic development might have been erected for many communities. Many smaller communities have not made the necessary investments or previous investments have been inadequate. Coupled with the fiscal limitations of the federal, state and most local governments, the prospect for physical infrastructure investments appears limited.

The research results that we have at our disposal would concur with your thoughts, but only up to a point. Studies have been consistent in their findings. If an adequate stock of physical infrastructure is not present in the community, economic development can be hindered. However, why is that many communities that do not have ready access to interstate highways, air travel, rail transportation, or fiber optic telecommunication technologies have grown and prospered?

Part of the problem is accessing what is an "adequate" level of these types of infrastructure. We can think of a local economy as a balloon that is trying to expand, or

grow in size. But there are constraints to that balloon, or economy, expanding. The question to be asked is if the current stock of physical infrastructure is the constraint that is binding the balloon. Now what makes our task as community economic development practitioners challenging, is that the constraints are uniquely different for each community.

To be sure, a quality transportation system, for example, is necessary for economic development and growth, but is it enough? We need to take care not to place too much emphasis on one aspect of the problem. Some states, specifically, Georgia and Missouri, have seriously considered investing billions of dollars into intrastate highway systems to the following specification: each community in the state will be within 20 miles of a four-lane intrastate. Important decision-makers in both these two states have been quoted as saying that such an investment would be the "cure" that all the economically distressed communities are seeking. They have found the "magic bullet." They have found the single constraint that is preventing the balloon from expanding. I hope you are as troubled by this approach as much as I am.

What research has suggested is that certain types of economic development are not necessarily dependent upon these types of investments. For example, does the development of a successful tourism economy depend upon access to an interstate highway? No, tourism, which is a key industry for many communities in Wisconsin, and one that will become even more important, is more dependent upon the natural amenities of the area and increasingly the culture of the community. The "success" of many of the gaming casinos in very remote parts of Wisconsin and other states is evidence to this point.

Access to natural amenities, however, does present many communities with opportunity. I would suggest that natural amenities could be considered part of the physical infrastructure of the community. Investments in parks, lake and river access, and public forested lands are all part of the community's physical infrastructure.

Throughout the 1970s and 1980s one of the fastest growing sectors for many communities has been the increasingly footloose retirement population. Non-metropolitan areas that have been classified as retirement destination regions, of which Wisconsin has 16, mostly in the central and northern parts of the State, consistently outperformed all

other non-metropolitan areas in terms of growth in population, jobs, and income. Many of these retirees are comparatively well to do and they are seeking the "good life" in small town America. As the baby-boom generation ages, the number of footloose retirees will grow at a rapid rate. The converting of a summer home to a year round residence is often at the center of the decision where to locate. These trends point not only to potential development strategies, but also potential areas of conflict. For example, we are already seeing increased pressure on many of our lake resources.

Research, as well as casual observation, also suggests that the presence of these types of physical infrastructure do not ensure economic success. There are many communities both within and outside of Wisconsin that have access to these types of infrastructure that have not experienced economic growth and development. Yet, on the other hand, there are numerous communities that are deficient in one or more of these types of physical infrastructures that have prospered.

This observation leads us to one conclusion: certain levels of physical infrastructure are necessary for economic development and growth, but its presence is not sufficient for it to occur. In other words, if the basic physical infrastructure is lacking, or deficient, the community will probably face an uphill battle in its development efforts.

Another key that you may be thinking about is proximity to fast growing urban areas. For a small number of communities in Wisconsin, having a large, growing urban neighbor may help in the community's development efforts. More likely, however, is the possibility that the community is being consumed by growth and development. Here the balloon may be expanding too rapidly. The problems faced by these communities are fundamentally different and residents of these communities may be seeking ways to constrain growth, or I would suggest, direct growth. Attempts to stop growth in the short-term will only create greater long-term pressures that will hurt the community. An example of these longer-term pressures might be rapidly accelerating housing prices.

But if proximity to a growing urban area is the key, why are so many smaller, more remote communities prospering? What are we left with so far? A certain minimum level

of physical infrastructure is necessary for economic development and growth. Proximity to urban areas helps. And access to natural amenities such as lakes, also helps. But, we're still missing part of the equation to "success." What about the social infrastructure of the community? Lets back up a minute. What do I mean by the social infrastructure of the community. Generally, social infrastructure refers to the people within the community.

At the top of the list might be the educational level of the community's residents. Much attention is being paid to the ability of our educational systems to shape the future members of our communities. Concern has been expressed that with the rapidly changing technologies driving our economy, our educational system is falling behind. A recent task force appointed by Tommy Thompson concluded that a major barrier to the future economic competitiveness of the State of Wisconsin is the quality of the new entrants to the labor force. Educators, economists, sociologists, policy-makers and media commentators have all elaborated on the negative impact this "education crisis" may have on our economic competitiveness.

But, the problem we are facing is not necessarily a local problem, but rather is a national problem. While local education initiatives are important to maintaining a high quality social infrastructure, these efforts can not occur in isolation. Unlike physical infrastructure, social infrastructure, as we are discussing it here, is very mobile, or footloose. By raising local education standards, residents will feel the need to locate the employment opportunities that best match their skills. Often these opportunities are not in their home town.

Investment in education is an excellent people strategy, but it has been questioned as a place strategy. As a personal development strategy, the value of a better education is undeniable. Individuals with more schooling generally earn more money, work in better jobs, and are less likely to face financial hardship than those with less schooling. But, as workers gain greater skills and training, they are increasingly likely to move to urban areas to find better, higher-paying jobs than those generally found in areas outside of urban markets.

But we need to be careful here. It is very possible to take this logic to absurd ends. For example, a few years ago I was working with a group of small fishing communities located on coastal Maine. These are rough communities, lobstermen are a breed apart and these communities reflected this. One of the concerns expressed in the community was the extremely high drop out rate amongst students. Parts of the community were convinced that the poor performance of the local schools was at the root of the towns' problems. But, attempts to experiment with school programs were met with violent opposition by the lobstermen. What was their objection? If you improve our schools, our children will move away.

Unfortunately, the "brain drain" argument has been used explicitly, as well as implicitly, to maintain the status quo. In the poorest communities, and these Maine fishing communities were poor, a cycle of mediocrity is bred. And this cycle can be and is self-reinforcing. As it becomes more apparent that our educational system is broken, more research has been undertaken to better understand the educational process. Specific questions have been addressed in these studies. For example, does teacher certification help improve student performance? Or, does minimum teacher salary levels help or lowering student-teacher ratios in the classroom? The results of this extensive line of research are consistent; traditional education reform efforts, like those I just mentioned, do not help improve student performance. In other words, throwing money at the school system does not appear to help. Granted, there needs to be a certain minimum level of investment, and in many inner-cities and remote poorer rural communities, this minimum level may not be achieved, but above that level, additional money does not seem to help the situation.

What then are the key factors that leap out of these studies? The home environment and the network of peers. Remember the Dan Quayle--Murphy Brown debate about a year ago, well they were both right. A friend of mine teaches at the first grade level in a medium size school district that services an urban population of about 30,000 people and numerous surrounding smaller rural communities. She claims that she can predict with a high degree of accuracy which 1st graders will do well in school and which ones will struggle after spending only about a month with the students. Do you know what she bases this on? Can the child read certain simple words? If the child can, this indicates that

the child has been read to at home. If the child can not, it indicates that the child has not been read to at home.

Part of the problem, as well as part of the solution, becomes so incredibly obvious. If there is a literacy problem in the home, the child is starting with a foot in a hole. If the value of an education is questioned as well, the child starts with both feet in a hole. The cycle repeats itself. Child psychologists are debating amongst themselves when a child's attitudes and self-esteem are fully developed. Some say by age two, others say by age three. To us its irrelevant, by time the child enters the first grade their personality has developed to such a stage that the education system can have little influence.

We can use this information to explore new directions when investing in social infrastructure. For example, in some of the poorer sections of the Mississippi delta, the Extension Service has been experimenting with adult literacy programs that target families with young, pre-school age children. The program uses the premise of reading to children as an entree into the home. Results have been very promising. Another possibility is quality day-care. Programs such as HEAD Start have been extremely successful in urban areas. But please realize that these types of alternative strategies to social infrastructure investment are not quick-fixes. For these types of investments to payoff, the community must be willing to wait 10, 15, or maybe even 20 years. But these are the types of investments that are just as important, if not more important, that investments in physical infrastructure.

A second aspect of the social infrastructure within the community is a natural outgrowth of the previous discussion. If we are finding that attitude is so fundamental to the outcome of the educational process, does this spill over into the larger community as a whole? Definitely yes. As our economy has undergone a fundamental shift through rapid changes in new technologies and our borders have been opened to the global economy, communities need to adapt in order to survive and prosper. For most communities these changes have not occurred spontaneously. Rather, key individuals have needed to assume a leadership role to guide the community through the necessary changes. Here, successful communities require effective leaders who, as individuals, take risks in order to propose new alliances and to find new solutions to old problems.

Community leaders can come from any corner of the community, from elected officials, to members of the local business community, to clergy, to concerned homemakers. Effective leadership within the community is often a collective action rather than a solo act. The authority of the leader does not come from the leader alone, but it rests in the social structure of both the leader and the follower. It is important that followers within the community see themselves as equals to the leaders, not subjective. It is equally important that the community leadership recognize the fact that it is vital at times to step back and let someone more effective carry out the next step of the development process. Effective followers will take the opportunity to lead and embrace it. Indeed, effective followers do not wait for enlightened leaders to speak, but often show their leaders the direction to move. Finally, both effective leaders and followers are eager to learn more and will seek outside advise in order to achieve that end.

This give and take of leadership roles is possible because the residents of the community are committed to a cause or crusade outside their own self-interests. Still, it would be naive to think that private special interest and the public good is always completely resolved in the community. Residents of the community must constantly struggle with the tendency to look out for ones own self-interests, rather than the community at large.

Residents of many communities often fail to assume a leadership role because it is assumed that the local municipal or county elected official is the community leader de facto. Often locally elected officials run for office because they have an "agenda" that does not coincide with the overall goals of the community. This does not mean that the official does not agree with the overall goals of the community, but rather, limited resources and energies are devoted to that special cause, for example limiting the property tax.

To overcome this all too common situation, involvement in the development process, and indeed, all community activities, must be as wide spread across the community as possible. Development efforts must be founded in the grassroots of the community. This approach helps ensure that all the human resources within the community are built upon, the pool of potential leaders within the community is

maximized, and potential opposition to community efforts are minimized. To return to our original premise, a key to the necessary social infrastructure of the community is the potential pool of leaders within the community. The kiss of death to a community is apathy on the part of residents. We return to the attitude of the community in helping explain why some communities succeed while others struggle, why some students do better in school than others.

We often hear people state, "...if only the town was run more like a business..." The problems with this approach are profound. First, businesses expect short-term payoffs, community economic development is a long-term process where only a few may benefit from any particular action. Indeed, this is a key to community-wide grassroots efforts, local residents are usually committed to the community over the long-term. They can afford the luxury of accumulating the benefits of several small steps over a longer period of time. This is where local efforts truly have a comparative advantage, even over larger efforts at the state level where political pressure to "do something" often overrides sound policies. A second problem with the business approach to leadership is that it is often task oriented. Once the assigned tasks are completed, the leadership arrangement dissolves. The relationship is relatively short-lived. Another limitation is the inability to fiat barriers to progress away. In a business you can fire someone who is creating problems, this is not an option in a community setting. Let's fire all the lobstermen from the community. A colleague of mine has a sign in his office, it reads "Lead, Follow, or Get the Hell Out of the Way!"

There are, however, certain elements of the business community that we can turn to for insights to help us think about the community economic development process. When we think about leaders in the business world certain names come to mind, Iaccoca, Sam Walten, and Steve Jobs, to name a few. Characteristics describing these people include:

- independence
- risk takers (or more likely risk managers)
- self-confidence
- optimistic

- hardworking
- achievement oriented
- innovative
- self-starter.

Each of these characteristics have been used to stereotype the entrepreneur. Are these also not characteristics that we might use to stereotype leaders within the community? I suggest that the attitudes that define successful entrepreneurs are the same attitudes that define successful community leaders. *Indeed, where it is through entrepreneurship that an economy adjusts to change, it is through effective leadership that a community can adjust to change.*

Our challenge in fostering community economic development is to foster these attitudes within the community. The problem is that these attitudes, or personal characteristics are developed early in life, it is something that can not be developed in a three hour evening workshop, or even a two day weekend retreat. I would suggest that while leadership within the community, or alternatively, an entrepreneurial attitude within the community, is the key to development efforts, targeting the individual may be a misuse of resources. Remember, community leadership is not an individual, but rather a collection of people within the community.

Researchers in Georgia surveyed a sample of small business owners in rural communities with the intent of addressing the question; Why do people start their own business. Here's sampling of the responses that they received:

- I want to work for myself
- no other choice
- at my age, its all I can do
- its the only thing I truly love
- I want to achieve my goals in life
- to get my son a job
- I like the challenge
- to keep from being idle

Based on these responses you can easily separate those that simply own their own business and entrepreneurs. Entrepreneurship and leadership is defined by attitudes of the people involved.

The importance of this distinction in community economic development is, I believe, so important that it needs to be separated on its own rights. Thus we have three types of infrastructure that must be present in the community if its development efforts are to succeed: physical infrastructure, this would include roads and bridges, telecommunications, and water and wastewater infrastructure; social infrastructure, this would include the raw human resources within the community; and finally entrepreneurial social infrastructure, which describes the attitude of the community.

There are three components of entrepreneurial social infrastructure that I would like to expand upon.

1. Diversity As previously stated, effective community economic development requires grassroots involvement from across the community. Excluding groups within the community either implicitly or explicitly, creates an atmosphere of distrust within the community. Diversity requires acceptance of controversy. In smaller communities, to publicly disagree can often create unpleasant situations that spillover into other community activities. A high level of entrepreneurial social infrastructure allows for conflict to occur in a positive manner. Statements along the lines of "...well I don't like it, but if you think its better for the town, I'll back it..." is an indication of the positive attitudes that are necessary. Disagreements do not become moral battlegrounds.

Diversity also requires a depersonalization of politics. We must recognize and accept that all disagreements are not self-interested, politically motivated positioning. More directly, we must struggle to leave personal disagreements, or even personal dislikes, at the door.

An example where this depersonalization of politics did not occur is in a small farming community in Kansas. Due to a poor farming economy and, to be honest, poor management decisions, the local grain elevator closed. Farmers, still needing to truck their

harvest to an elevator, realized that it was not cost effective to continue to use the smaller trucks that they had traditionally used. Slowly most farmers purchased larger trucks with which to transport their grain. In no time, these larger trucks started to do serious damage to the local road network. Seeing what was happening, the community decided to be very entrepreneurial, and buy the local grain elevator and run it as a community enterprise. The community moved forward and secured a loan from a local bank. Everything looked positive till the mayor realized the bank loan officer working the deal was the same loan officer that refused the mayor a line of credit to his own business. The mayor killed the deal, and the roads continue to be a problem.

Diversity requires that more attention is paid to the process with which the community proceeds in its development efforts. Too often we focus on short-time outcomes, much the same as under the business leadership model. Rather, we need to recognize that community economic development is a slow process that may cover many years, and is indeed, never really completed. The economy in which we live and work is constantly changing, and communities must be constantly at work to adapt to and capitalize on those changes.

Raising a child is perhaps a good analogy because it focuses on a never ending process rather than a final score. Parenting is never over. Just when you think you've done a good job, they flunk a math test, or stay out all night, or move home again. Child rearing has its ups and downs, but it is a process that is never over. What makes good parents is focusing on the process, not on some predetermined end result. We do not win as a parent if our child wins a scholarship to Harvard. The same is true of community. We celebrate when our efforts are successful, this is indeed, part of the process, but we do not stop our efforts.

2. Resource Mobilization Given the fiscal pressure that has hit at the national and state levels, local residents are being forced to become more resourceful in terms of identifying and organizing community resources. Resource mobilization in communities with entrepreneurial social infrastructure includes a willingness of the community to tax itself to pay for activities that can not or will not be provided through the private sector. For example, with the University of Wisconsin Extension System, there is a federal-state-local

partnership that requires the local community to devote a certain amount of resources. Many communities in Wisconsin have been willing to impose a tax upon themselves, or reallocate existing revenues, to ensure that the conduit to the resources of the University is maximized. These communities, to me, are exhibiting a certain level of entrepreneurial social infrastructure.

Communities must also be willing to mobilize private capital to support local activities. Take the Kansas farming community that lost a grain elevator. When the mayor killed the bank loan the enterprise effort stopped. What could the community have done to override the mayor's personalization of the effort? The leaders of the project could have turned directly to the residents of the community and seek small individual investments.

Access to capital is commonly cited as a barrier to economic growth and development. Communities that possess entrepreneurial social infrastructure have moved beyond complaining about the barrier and are attempting to mobilize local private resources. Community capital venture corporations are a product of entrepreneurial communities. These are locally controlled corporations that seek local investors to create a venture capital pool that can be used to support local businesses. In Wisconsin, many of our Development Corporations were initially financed by such a local investment. Residents of entrepreneurial communities are willing to invest private resources back into the community.

3. Network Capacity The final dimension of entrepreneurial social infrastructure within the community is networks. Networks, both formal, such as the community venture capital corporation, and informal, facilitate the flow of resources, particularly information. As our larger economy changes, and in the last decade, it has changed rapidly, access to information is a key to effective local action.

These networks must be horizontal and vertical if the flow of resources is to be maximized. With horizontal networks we return to the notion of widespread community involvement in the development process. Individual residents within the community have at their disposal vast arrays of information. Through horizontal networks this information

can be disseminated throughout the community as a whole.

But we must also be concerned with how we view the community. Because many of the key leaders within the community are elected officials of local government, artificial definitions of the community are often imposed to coincide with the jurisdictional boundaries of that local government. Entrepreneurial communities move beyond these artificial boundaries and recognize that their actions affect their neighbors, and their neighbors' actions affect them. A recent study by the University of Wisconsin-Extension Service revealed that the typical rural worker traveled 18 miles one way to work.

Entrepreneurial communities will seek out their neighbors to join in the development process. Not only will this approach draw in more resources to the development process, but will also take advantage of economies of scale in the development process and capture the spillover from collective action. In Wisconsin we have the infrastructure in place to help coordinate horizontal networks through the network of Extension CNRED county level faculty.

The importance of vertical networks comes from the fact that the community does not operate within a vacuum. There are regional, state, and national efforts underway that directly influence the efforts of the local community. In order to coordinate within these larger efforts, and perhaps help shape the efforts, entrepreneurial communities will work to network within these vertical relations. Your attendance to this conference is one example, although a simple example, of such networking. Also, active participation in the Wisconsin Rural Development Council, which is meeting tomorrow in Wisconsin Rapids, is another example. Indeed, I would suggest that the spirit behind the national Rural Development Council initiative is a move toward vertical networking.

Vertical networking also involves turning to outside the community for information and technical assistance. The University of Wisconsin is a world-class institution that has a wide expanse of resources and expertise. Again, these resources are available through the Extension network. The Wisconsin Department of Development, along with the regional planning commissions, the federal Economic Development Administration, and the Small Business Administration, to name a few, also have a vast array of information

and expertise at their disposal. Entrepreneurial communities take advantage of these resources.

### The Wave Approach

Entrepreneurial social infrastructure is becoming so important in the development process that investment in it has been deemed by some as the third wave of economic development. The first wave approach to development, which was prevalent through the 1960s and 1970s, focuses on efforts to recruit businesses to town. During this time, many of the industries in the US were maturing in their production processes and tended to be a bit more footloose than many industries today. Many of these recruitment efforts tended to emphasize investments in physical infrastructure.

During the late 1970s and throughout the 1980s to today, shifts in the economy has witnessed an explosion of small business startups and expansion. The second wave of development efforts tend to focus on strategies that supported these smaller businesses. Retention and expansion of existing businesses seems to play a focal point to the second wave. Attention has shifted to investments in the social infrastructure of the community.

But the proponents of the third wave of development efforts maintain that while specific strategies have shifted, the key to the successful implementation of these strategies is the entrepreneurial attitude of the community. Movement toward diversity in the development process, maximizing resource mobilization, and horizontal and vertical networking are all part of the third wave of development efforts.

The challenge that faces us is how do we, the community, become more entrepreneurial in our thinking and in our attitudes.

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