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Strengthening Quality of Life in Small Towns

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Cornhusker Economics

Strengthening Quality of Life in Small Towns

Market Report	Year Ago	4 Wks Ago	10-13-17
Livestock and Products.			
Weekly Average			
Nebraska Slaughter Steers, 35-65% Choice, Live Weight.	97.40	*	*
Nebraska Feeder Steers, Med. & Large Frame, 550-600 lb.	126.96	177.83	180.66
Nebraska Feeder Steers, Med. & Large Frame 750-800 lb.	132.73	160.86	170.20
Choice Boxed Beef, 600-750 lb. Carcass.	182.43	191.03	197.50
Western Corn Belt Base Hog Price Carcass, Negotiated	47.14	52.30	59.57
Pork Carcass Cutout, 185 lb. Carcass 51-52% Lean.	72.41	78.52	73.45
Slaughter Lambs, woolled and shorn, 135-165 lb. National.	150.90	168.50	150.49
National Carcass Lamb Cutout FOB.	56.94	403.44	389.35
Crops.			
Daily Spot Prices			
Wheat, No. 1, H.W. Imperial, bu.	2.81	3.22	3.15
Corn, No. 2, Yellow Columbus, bu.	NA	3.09	3.07
Soybeans, No. 1, Yellow Columbus, bu.	NA	8.84	9.01
Grain Sorghum, No.2, Yellow Dorchester, cwt.	4.80	5.21	5.46
Oats, No. 2, Heavy Minneapolis, Mn, bu.	2.65	2.83	2.92
Feed			
Alfalfa, Large Square Bales, Good to Premium, RFV 160-185 Northeast Nebraska, ton.	160.00	*	*
Alfalfa, Large Rounds, Good Platte Valley, ton.	68.75	87.50	83.75
Grass Hay, Large Rounds, Good Nebraska, ton.	67.50	87.50	82.50
Dried Distillers Grains, 10% Moisture Nebraska Average.	109.00	115.00	117.50
Wet Distillers Grains, 65-70% Moisture Nebraska Average.	41.00	40.00	44.00
* No Market			

Quality of life is often mentioned as the reason why some people choose to live in a small town. But if you try to get a definition of what quality of life means, you quickly discover that there are all kinds of answers. For instance, it may be the low student-to-teacher ratios in the local school, or it may be the friendly check-out person at the grocery store or the variety of activities available through civic organizations and local churches which come to mind when people define small town quality of life.

Each of us can come up with a unique list of attributes but typically employment, schools, medical services, housing, local government, child and senior services, retail and entertainment are often directly or indirectly a contributor to our mental list of factors impacting quality of life.

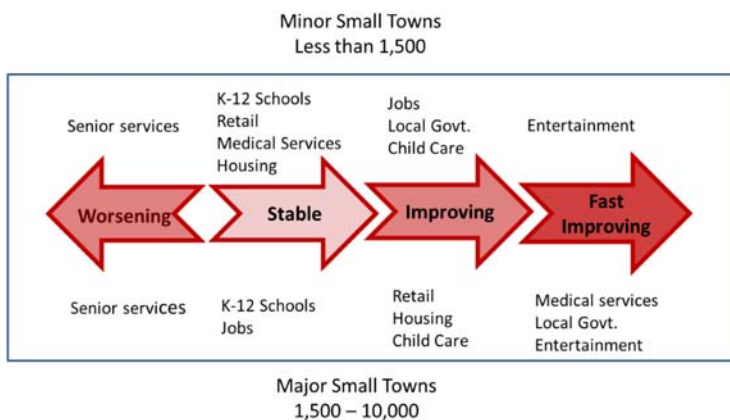
Recently a researcher at Iowa State University, Dr. David Peters (2017), looked at these attributes to see what has really driven the quality of life in Iowa small towns over a 20 year period. Using data from a long-term USDA funded research effort that polled residents of Iowa small towns in 1994, 2004 and 2014 and socioeconomic data from the U. S. Census Bureau, he was able to compare quality-of-life data and social conditions over time in both minor and major small towns. The project defined minor small towns as having a population between 500 and 1,500 with major towns having a population between 1,500 and 10,000.

Key Findings

Some of the major findings of the study include:

- * Residents of both major and minor small towns rated their schools and local government as very good with jobs and local retail rating poor;
- * When major (averaging 3,000 in population) towns were compared to minor (averaging about 1,000 residents) towns, larger communities rated their medical services, entertainment, recreation, retail and shopping options higher than the smaller communities;
- * Over time most small towns, regardless of size, felt that quality of life had improved, with the larger improvements occurring in major small towns; and
- * Over time small towns saw specific improvements in quality of entertainment, child care, and local government since 1994 but little change was seen in the local schools. In terms of senior services, quality of life seemed to decline or worsen in that same time period.

Graphically the comparison of quality of life attributes over time for the minor small towns vs. major small towns could be depicted on a continuum of change:



The study also focused in on what really contributed or impacted the quality of life in small towns. The data revealed that communities with high quality of life scores had:

- * More elders aged 65 years and older (demographic indicator);

- * Growing numbers of jobs in goods-producing industries over the past 20 years, in areas such as manufacturing, construction and mining (employment indicator);
- * More people involved in community improvement projects (civic engagement indicator); and
- * Members in more local organizations but members of fewer non-local organization outside the community (social capital indicator); and
- * Ratings given by residents that showed themselves more well-kept, supportive, open to new ideas, trusting, safe, tolerant and friendly than other communities. They also saw themselves as having strengthened these characteristics over the past 20 years (social capital indicator).

Implications for Midwestern Small Towns

You may be asking yourself, “Why would these indicators be linked to high quality-of-life scores?” The Iowa State University researcher shared these insights:

- * Community elders have the time, connections and often financial resources to support community projects. Retirees also have leadership experience in the town and are often a large segment of the community’s population. Finding ways to keep elders in the community through senior services or housing projects enhances the asset base of the town.
- * Job gains or losses do play a role in quality of life. The goods-producing sector offer many middle-skill and full-year opportunities with decent benefits. It is really about the “growth of *quality* jobs suited to small town economies that promotes overall community quality of life” (pg. 7.). Research showed that a particular community economy, whether it was based on services, agriculture or manufacturing, did not really impact quality of life.

- * Civic engagement as an indicator measured the community's actions to identify and address community issues. Social capital measured the trust, reciprocity, cooperation, networks and attachments that energize and improve coordinated actions within that community. Growing both of these areas should be considered a priority for small towns because there are actionable, short-term and often inexpensive ways to increase these attributes without outside help or intervention. Getting people involved in community projects and organizations is also something many communities do naturally. It shows their commitment to improving show up there no work their community and often build more social capital increasing the number of people involved and also helps building trust and networks. Getting involved and keeping that engagement at a high level in a small town is simply a spiral upward toward increased quality of life.

Reference:

Peters, David, J. (2017, May). What drives quality of life in Iowa small towns? Iowa State University, Rural Sociology (SOC 3082). Available at: www.soc.iastate.edu/smalltowns

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