

NORTH DAKOTA STATE UNIVERSITY

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# HOW CAN DECLINING RURAL COMMUNITIES IN NORTH DAKOTA BE SAVED?

A CRITICAL INVESTIGATION

SYDNEY SEAMANDS

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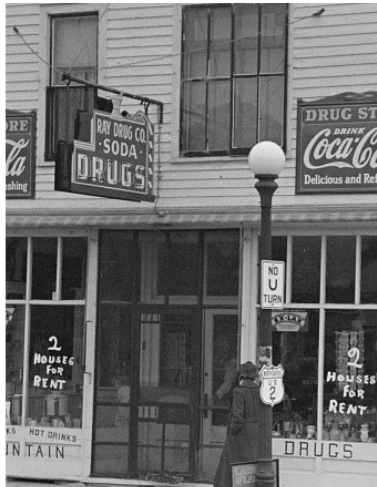
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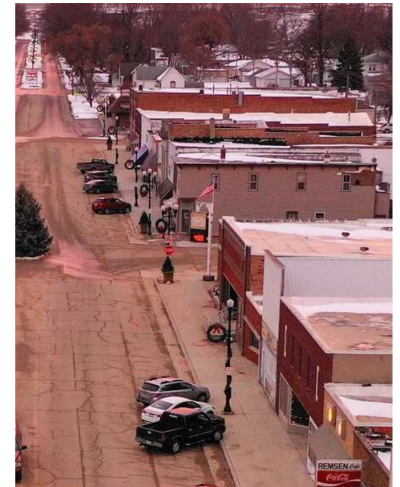
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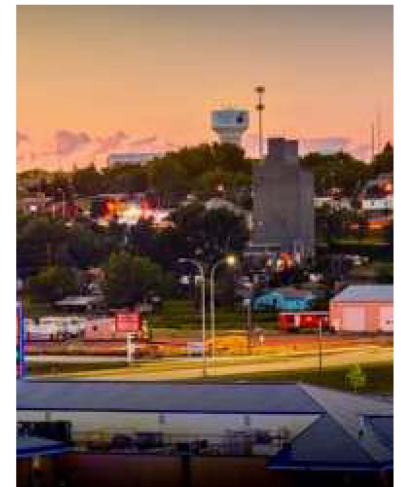
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# INSPIRATION

**R**ural North Dakota has become somewhat of an abandoned land. There are dozens of small communities, with major service gaps and unsustainable populations. With the death of each rural town, the state loses pieces of its history, as unique cultures, and buildings decay alongside the highways. Witnessing these townships fall into despair, going unused with years of embodied energy wasted, has partly inspired this investigation. Why didn't these towns survive? Are all of North Dakota's small rural communities destined to meet the same fate? Exploring the possibility of reviving historically declining rural towns would not only breathe new life into the state, but also respond to modern challenges. Urban areas have become exponentially more expensive to live in than their less densely populated counterparts. Although rural areas are diverse and unique, the gap between prosperous urban and distressed rural areas continues to widen (Economic Innovation Group, 2017). As rent and mortgage prices reach new highs, costs of goods and services are also driven up. Wages are not being equitably increased with these changes, so this model of living is quickly becoming unsustainable. Inversely, rural communities continue to deteriorate as their young populations leave, bringing economic activity and viable workforces with them. The nation has also been experiencing a housing crisis on and off for the better part of the last decade, with supply shortages and inaccessible prices (Betancourt et al., 2022).

Revitalizing rural communities could be a potential solution addressing these issues. This research aims to identify a program for successful rural revitalization in North Dakota. Socioeconomic policies and facility updates and additions will inform best practices for the prosperity of rural towns looking to attract residents, businesses, and opportunities.

## SECTION 01

# INTRODUCTION

BACKGROUND. AIM. SIGNIFICANCE.

**W**hile rural communities have been the backbone of American agriculture, energy, and manufacturing, they've experienced more economic decline than their urban counterparts. With aging populations and the outmigration of their young workforce, these areas are struggling to maintain economic health. Between 2010 and 2020, the 2020 Census revealed that rural populations declined, making it the first decade-long rural population loss in history (Johnson, 2022). Rural America's population decline can be attributed to a variety of factors, with perhaps the most imposing issue being a lack of opportunity. Small towns struggle to maintain vitality with limited educational, professional, and recreational

opportunities. While small-town life offers many benefits, many Americans leave for urban amenities. As these areas experience both economic and population decline, a critical investigation must be done into the identity of these communities, their declining factors, and the validity of reviving them.

How can small rural communities be revitalized? These towns need to attract businesses and residents while reinvesting in their community development. Is it worth the effort? To understand the scope of rural revitalization, it is important to first identify the economic viability of rural areas, the quality of life in small towns, and the environmental impact of reviving rural communities.



Abandoned Schoolhouse in Crystal Springs, ND. Photo by Troy Larson and Terry Hinnenkamp, © 2017 Sonic Tremor Media

Investigating the potential for new industries in rural communities may prove to be an effective way to introduce new life into dying small towns. Rural areas are often remote and have small populations, which can make it difficult to attract businesses and create jobs, but perhaps these communities would benefit from creative enterprises rather than relying nearly exclusively on manufacturing and agricultural operations.

Small towns often have a strong sense of community and a lower cost of living than urban areas. As urban areas continue to become more expensive to sustain, small towns could offer a more accessible living environment. Rural areas are often

more environmentally friendly than cities, with less pollution and more open spaces. With underdeveloped existing infrastructure, rural communities also have the potential to further develop their towns with sustainable practices and policies for the future.

The universal charm of main street as a public realm has resurfaced, after many urban areas have lost their relationship with locally owned businesses and historic buildings (Jaffe, 2018). As many rural communities have maintained these qualities, their downtown environments should be regarded as important assets for revitalization. Restoring historic downtowns with preservation and



adaptive reuse techniques would improve economic and social vitality in the community. Re-purposing existing structures should be prioritized to maintain the identity of small towns, but also because sustainably, it's less disruptive to the environment.

Revitalizing rural communities requires a comprehensive and integrated approach that addresses economic, social, and environmental issues. The best approach to rural revitalization will vary with the needs of individual communities. Employing personalized strategies, along with strengthening existing physical and economic infrastructure, will be critical to ensure lasting developmental success.

Rural North Dakota has become somewhat of an abandoned land. There are dozens of small communities, with major service gaps and unsustainable populations. Small towns have the potential to blend all the history of their pasts with

sustainable design practices and modern amenities, resulting in functional and beautiful built environments tucked into rural landscapes.

Economic and social development of rural communities can help to reduce poverty and inequality among rural residents and enhance community vitality. Rural revitalization can also promote environmental sustainability by supporting sustainable agriculture practices, protecting natural resources, and integrating renewable energy sources. By improving the living standards and economic opportunities in rural areas, rural revitalization can help to reduce the migration of people to urban areas. This can help to alleviate overcrowding and pollution in cities, reducing the gap between rural and urban areas and improving the quality of life for both urban and rural residents.

Rural revitalization is essential to the preservation of culture and history in North Dakota.





Historic buildings and landmarks located across the state in rural areas cannot develop connections to the future if they are permanently lost to the past. Rural communities have the opportunity to embrace the historic architecture that often remains in their built environment, whereas urban cities have lost many of these connections.

This research will be universally beneficial to rural communities with revitalization aspirations, as many of the challenges facing North Dakota's rural communities also affect rural areas nationally and globally. It would be irresponsible to ignore rural revitalization opportunities, as many urban areas around the world struggle to accommodate for the needs of their individual residents.

Images from left to right:

LaMoure County Courthouse in LaMoure, ND. Photo by Mitch Wahlsten

Assumption Abbey in Richardton, ND. Photo by Thaddeus Roan

ROXY Theater in Langdon, ND. Photo by Adam Johnston



SECTION 02

# LITERATURE REVIEW

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As part of the research methodology, literature reviews primarily focused on the decline of rural communities in America and the recommendations made to save them, along with an investigation into sustainable design implementation in these areas.

**T**o propose a potential method of revitalization, it is important to understand the causes of declining rural communities while considering sustainable development practices for the future. These pieces of literature are not specific to the rural communities of North Dakota, however, much of the research can be applied to rural communities everywhere. Information is included as it can directly benefit rural revitalization efforts in the state and elsewhere, as most of these small communities face the same challenges.

During the selection process of literature to review, research topics were chosen as they relate directly to rural communities, the revitalization efforts made in rural communities, and the incorporation of sustainable design practices into revitalization efforts. Four literature reviews were performed on resources ranging in topic, format, and year published. This range of resources informs the final set of proposed strategies and facility implementations proposed for rural revitalization in North Dakota.

# Rural Community Decline and Revitalization: An Annotated Bibliography

Brenda L. Ekstrom and F. Larry Leistritz

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**P**ublished in 1988, this annotated bibliography by Brenda L. Ekstrom, and F. Larry Leistritz addresses the community decline of rural towns and the economic revitalization topics applied to them. While this piece of literature is dated, much of the information remains applicable to the rural communities of today. Many of the same challenges from 30 years ago still affect declining rural communities, especially in North Dakota.

Rural areas dependent on resource-based industries such as agriculture, mining, and forestry have been hurting since the 1980's. After a period of population and economic growth in the 1970s, rural communities began to see growth rates substantially lower than surrounding metropolitan areas. "Despite acknowledging that economic decline and stagnation is a major



problem in many rural areas and that substantial development efforts will be required to reverse these patterns, major questions remain concerning the complex interrelations that are central to the process of economic development." The annotated bibliography goes on to emphasize four major focuses of rural economic revitalization that are most important and still relevant today.



Sveum's Store in McLeod, ND. Photo by Andrew Filer

Firstly, greater attention must be paid to retaining and expanding existing firms, rather than just attracting new businesses. The authors stress the importance of quality over quantity in rural communities. Heightened interest in attracting and supporting entrepreneurship among residents was also noted to support economic growth. The research found growing recognition that some

communities would be able to strengthen their economies by providing more social services to their individual and surrounding communities. Currently, rural communities lack access to many facilities providing things like healthcare, so it's interesting to see this was already identified as an area for improvement more than 30 years ago. The final identification was the importance of recognizing changing processes. During the late 1980s, state and local governments were assuming more active stances as federal roles were diminishing. The authors noted how rural civic engagement would be necessary to maintain the health of rural communities.

One significant finding from this literature review is that over-generalizations concerning rural communities should not be made. "National and even regional averages can conceal great disparities in economic structure, population characteristics, resource endowments, and economic development potential." The appropriateness of certain changes and policies will vary with each individual declining rural community.

This source has provided valuable insights into the potential scope of rural revitalization projects. Understanding the causes of the initial decline facing rural communities in the 1980s is helpful to consider along with modern issues.



Holiday Park in Indianapolis, IN. Photo by Charles A Birnbaum

# Thriving Communities, Thriving State: Recommendations for Thriving Rural Communities

Published by the IU Public Policy Institute with Project Co-chairs Kathy Davis and Randall Shepard

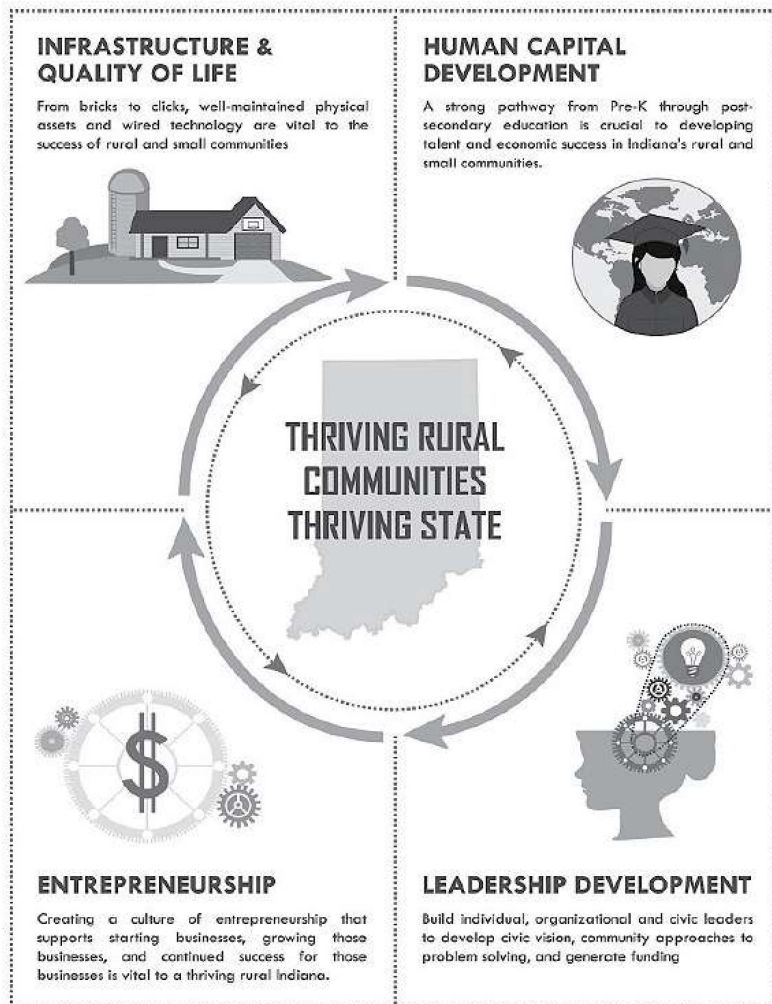
**A**s a Policy Choices Initiative project of the Indiana University Public Policy Institute, *Thriving Communities, Thriving State* explores state and local policies that can help Indiana communities fulfill their critical roles. The publication is informed by a representative group of community leaders and other stakeholders, focusing on how to attract businesses, new business investments, and workers to the area. By examining issues on a localized scale affecting changing demographic and economic communities, this research is published as it's specific to rural and small towns. A Rural and Small-Town Commission analyzed issues important to 58 rural counties and small communities throughout the state of Indiana.

The report provides insight specifically on how to maintain and grow rural populations. While the information in the project is responsive to Indiana's rural areas, the findings are easily applicable to other rural communities, including those in North Dakota.

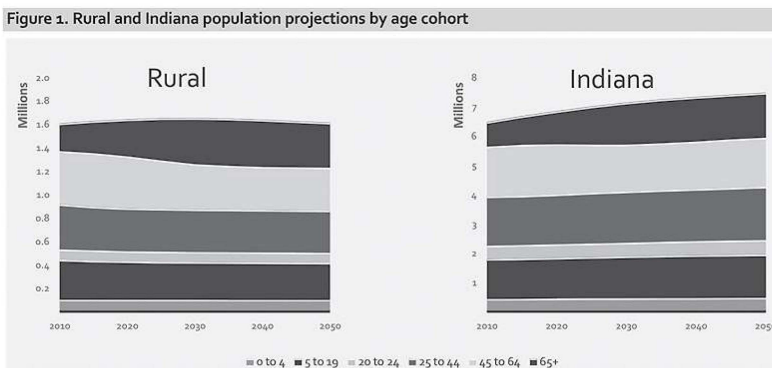
The report acknowledges that while small towns have charm and economic potential, they face significant challenges. Demographically, rural areas are composed of older populations. The 65+ populations grow in these areas, while every other age group declines. Rural communities have been losing their younger populations. The out-migration of rural youth is creating gaps in the economy of these communities. Young people are often responsible for maintenance and growth of

infrastructure and economic development, but with these populations missing, small towns are suffering. Causes of out-migration are often young citizens pursuing postsecondary education or employment opportunities. "Indiana's rural counties specifically, have experienced disproportionate population loss as rural-educated youth enter college and then do not return to the community after college."

The IU Public Policy Institute suggests investment in infrastructure, human capital development, entrepreneurship, and leadership development as focus areas to address declining population issues. Improving these subjects will build the foundations of communities and drive them towards future growth. According to the commission, entrepreneurship will create jobs and retain young residents. Increased access to quality education will also be critical to rural workforce development. Quality of life and the quality of place in small towns can only grow as access to modern infrastructure and amenities evolves. Applying these same principles to the rural communities of North Dakota could develop these areas into townships that not only support themselves, but also attract new opportunities and growth.



commission identified four priorities that modern rural leaders need to embrace



Source: STATS Indiana (2016)

Rural Indiana is expected to lose nearly 20 percent of its 2010 population by 2050



This publication explores international rural sustainability projects and practices. The image above shows the 'Children's Village', a school in rural Formoso Do Araguaia, Brazil designed by Rosenbaum + Aleph Zero Architects. Photo by Leonardo Finotti

## The Natural Step for Communities: How Cities and Towns can Change to Sustainable Practices

Sarah James and Torbjorn Lahti

In their guide, *The Natural Step for Communities*, Sarah James and Torbjorn Lahti share international examples of a science-based sustainability initiative. The approach is based largely on existing laws of nature. In order to be sustainable over the long term, laws and policies

developed by humans must cooperate with, mimic, or be consistent with laws of nature. While the effects of sustainable practices are desirable, the process of incorporating these practices can often be challenging. The book describes policies and practices that should be developed working towards



towards sustainability goals while also meeting the needs of the community. Upon review of this literary work, some of the practices that could significantly assist rural revitalization efforts have been identified.

Decrease community contribution to fossil fuel dependence and to wasteful use of scarce metals and minerals. While most rural communities, in North Dakota especially, won't be able to entirely eliminate their use of fossil fuels, developments to lessen overall use can be made. Focus on developing public transit and pedestrian-oriented travel during warmer months can minimize individual vehicular travel. In small towns, walkability should be prioritized since many of these communities are already localized. Harnessing renewable energy as a supplemental source of energy could also minimize reliance on fossil fuels.

Eliminate community contribution to encroachment upon nature. Rural communities are in part so special because of their connection to the land surrounding them. Preserving the integrity of the open plains in North Dakota will continue to be important. During revitalization efforts, redevelopment of existing sites and buildings shall be prioritized before building new ones. Building "from inside out" development and infrastructure policies shall be incorporated while preserving open spaces, forestry, or wildlife habitats.

Finally, it will also be important to meet human needs fairly and efficiently. Affordable housing should be accessible to a variety of diverse residents. Locally based businesses and food production will help the community sustain itself along with participatory community planning and decision-making.

The image below is featured in the New York Times, addressing climate change and promoting sustainable agri-food systems in rural areas. Photo by Harry Rose





# Working Together: A Guide to Collaboration in Rural Revitalization

Ann Savage, Sara Brune, Merideth Hovis, S. E. Spencer, Maude Dinan, and Erin Seekamp

**T**his publication done by the NC State Extension, a cooperative based at North Carolina's two land grant institutions, highlights small-town society as an asset that must be considered while working toward rural revitalization. Rural communities are unique in their varied demographics, histories, resources, and geographies. "If you've seen one rural town, you've seen one rural town" (Schwartz, 2012). It is important to include a variety of representatives from social, economic, and environmental perspectives while planning and implementing rural development initiatives. Involving small-town community members and leaders inspires the beneficiaries of these initiatives. Collaboration between local residents and external organizations can help to identify and achieve desired community improvements.

The publication explores the structure of successful collaboration, to establish a productive and enduring process of rural revitalization. Coming together, staying

together, and growing together are the most important factors in a collaborative revitalization effort. Shared concerns and expectations can establish common ground between residents and developers. Rural communities are powerful places because the sense of community is often very strong (McGehee, Kline, and Knollenberg, 2014). Community support of the revitalization process can heavily influence the success of the project. The possibility for new and innovative opportunities increases when relationships are formed and maintained through demonstrated trust and commitment (Wondolleck & Yaffee, 2000).

With these facets of collaboration employed, the disparity between urban and rural communities can be addressed through a shared vision. "Rural communities should feel optimistic in these endeavors. Given the strong sense of place and deep-rooted social networks, rural communities are uniquely equipped to capitalize on the benefits of collaboration."

Image left: Fairfield, IA rural revitalization referenced in publication. Photo by Stephanie Taleghani

## SECTION 03

# PRECEDENT STUDIES

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As part of the research methodology, four primary precedent studies were conducted on previous rural revitalization projects investigate successful implementations ranging in strategy.

**T**he following precedent studies were conducted to investigate the strategies previously used in rural revitalization projects across the nation. These communities were selected based on similarities to North Dakota's rural communities in location, demographic information, and strategic use of surrounding resources. North Dakota's small rural communities face a variety of challenges, as a result precedent studies were selected as their revitalization strategies may be applicable to local townships. A variety of strategies are evaluated, ranging from economic development and technological pursuits to downtown restoration. Informing the project program, these precedent studies will establish feasible guidelines for revitalizing North Dakota's rural communities.





Main Street in Remsen, IA. Photo by Josh Berendes

# ORD, NEBRASKA

**W**hile facing dramatic population decline, the town of Ord built local capacity to pursue its four pillars of community economic development: youth outreach, leadership development, and entrepreneurship. In 2000 Ord had a population of 2,300, with a median household income of \$27,300 (Lambe, 2008). The small rural town in central Nebraska is surrounded by hundreds of miles of rich agricultural land. The community was noticing a dwindling population as census data from 2000 indicated a 10 percent population loss for the preceding decade (Lambe, 2008). Loss of youth and vitality was influencing the health of Ord. As a small town built on agriculture, Ord's success was also heavily dependent on Valley County's farm economy.

To save their dying community, the City of Ord and Valley County took action in 2001. Focusing on improving the retention of young population demographics and diversifying their economic investments, Ord was able to see tremendous small town development. Working with the Chamber of



Aerial View of Ord, NE



Mainstreet Development Ord, NE

POPULATION (2000)	2,300
MUNICIPAL BUDGET (2006)	\$16 MILLION
PER CAPITA INCOME (2000)	\$15,340
MEDIAN HOUSEHOLD INCOME (2000)	\$27,300
POVERTY RATE (2000)	10%
MINORITY POPULATION (2000)	2%
PROXIMITY TO URBAN CENTER	165 MI LINCOLN, NE
PROXIMITY TO INTERSTATE HIGHWAY	70 MI
STRATEGIC APPROACH	INDUSTRIAL DEVELOPMENT, ENTREPRENEURSHIP, PHILANTHROPY, LEADERSHIP DEVELOPMENT
TIME FRAME	2001 - 2007

of Commerce, these entities committed to share the costs and revenues of community and economic development. Ord's community leaders became active in creating programs in entrepreneurship and business development to link generations together, hoping to build the community's long-term economic vitality. As farm economy shifted, farmers in Valley County had become willing investors in new approaches to community and economic development, hoping for a diverse range of investments to pay off (Lambe, 2008). In 2005 a random sample survey of Ord businesses revealed that economic development efforts had resulted in more than \$4 million in new investment, 25,000 square feet of expansion, and the creation of 24 jobs (City of Ord, Nebraska, n.d.). Since 2000, these community revitalization strategies along with the establishment of a \$75 million dry mill ethanol plant, created roughly 100 new businesses and 350 new jobs (City of Ord, Nebraska, n.d.).

Ord's focus on entrepreneurship and business development while diversifying their economy resulted in higher population retention and millions of dollars reinvested in the community. The town was able staff an economic development office that markets the area to outsiders, works with existing small businesses and entrepreneurs, and



Ord's New Pk, K-12 Public School

attracts new industries into the town (Lambe, 2008). Ord's success highlights the importance of community involvement, establishing programs to increase young population retention, while attracting new residents and businesses. Linking generations of community members together proved to build the town's long-term vitality. Incorporating this approach into the project would be advantageous, as North Dakota's rural communities also struggle to maintain vitality.



Industrial Development Just Outside of Ord, NE

# MITCHELL, SOUTH DAKOTA

**A** As the first community in South Dakota to heavily invest in broadband infrastructure, Mitchell has maintained its traditional small-town identity while diversifying its technology-based economy. The town has become a growing technological center in rural South Dakota while the U.S. Census Bureau (n.d.(b)) estimated Mitchell's population to be 15,727 with a median household income of \$46,661 in 2022. New challenges in the agricultural economy, the outmigration of young community members, and interest in global economic participation inspired the City of Mitchell to strategize its growth in telecommunications and information technology.

Mitchell's educational institutions and

local businesses were the primary advocates for enhancing the town's existing infrastructure. Mitchell Technical Institute invested in a center for students to access and learn about advanced technologies, receiving federal funds to enhance the infrastructure, which spurred private network carriers to install networking infrastructure across the community (Belson, 2020). Tech-based companies grew within Mitchell, with companies like Innovation Systems, LLC and Vantage Point growing and connecting with local institutions to match business needs with the education and training of young residents. For example, another local educational institution, Dakota Wesleyan University, collaborates with Innovative Systems, LLC to provide internships and project opportunities to students learning about software, mobile-platforms, and information technology (Greenblatt, 2020). These initiatives create potential for education-to-local-work channels for young residents to be trained and educated, then find work staying within the community.

South Dakota does not have state income tax to share with local governments, so Mitchell's technological revitalization relied on partnerships and collaborations between different community institutions, businesses, and agencies. Along with improving human capital, the city itself has a couple of economic development funding tools to support business growth and revitalize parts of their downtown. Mitchell Downtown Business Improvement District helps downtown businesses





Aerial View of Mitchell, SD (Above)

Downtown Mitchell, SD (Below)



physically improve the streetscape, and Mitchell Main Street Revolving Loan Fund targets loans to improve historic buildings (City of Mitchell, South Dakota, n.d.).

Mitchell's economic development strategy began with networking infrastructure investments from private and educational institutions and has evolved into a highly collaborative effort across sectors. Mitchell has witnessed a diversification of its economy from heavy agriculture and manufacturing to growing employment in tech-based industries, engineering, and medicine (Belson, 2020). The town's successful integration of tech-based enterprises has generated more income for Mitchell's residents, and more reinvestment into the town. Mitchell's establishment of a Downtown Business Improvement District and a Main Street Revolving Loan Fund has dramatically improved streetscapes and improved historic buildings, maintaining the integrity of the town's architectural history. Introducing a new way to generate revenue for the town directly benefited Mitchell's downtown environment. Mitchell is now able to attract new residents, offering authentic small-town living with plenty of professional opportunity.

# RUGBY, NORTH DAKOTA

**R**ugby's rural location on the northern plains established the town with an agriculturally dependent economy. While most of Rugby's workforce is involved in agriculture, the town also has a significant government sector as the county seat of Peirce County. Historically, Rugby's economy struggled to grow as the agricultural and government service sectors were not generating new jobs (Lambe, 2008). Rugby's Director of Jobs Development Authority, Gary Satern aimed to enhance the opportunities for the town's workforce stating, "We had to invest in our people first."

Partnering with the Center for Technology and Business (CTB), which is a statewide

technical assistance provider, Satern worked to administer a low-cost computer training program to Rugby's workforce. Rather than sending teachers throughout the state, CTB was able to select and train local residents, who were then free to administer and manage the program to other community members. Between its beginning in 1999 and 2005, more than 400 residents, about one-third of Rugby's population had completed the program.

Workforce investment can be a catalyst for improving a town's economic prospects. Rugby's revitalization strategy focused primarily on producing technologically proficient members of the workforce. By improving the skills of their workers, Rugby increased their value and pursued a strategy that was able to attract and retain better-paying businesses.

Rugby's success enhancing the job skills of its citizenry has allowed the unemployed and underemployed labor force in this rural outpost to

Prairie Village and Museum's 23 Historic Buildings and Exhibition Halls in Rugby, Nd





Geographical Center of North America Monument in Rugby, ND

to link into the local economy (Lambe, 2008). The educated labor force positioned Rugby as an attractive site for new businesses. A broadband network model pool cue manufacturer and a similarly operated company, Variety, established occupancies in Rugby. With their new skills, Rugby citizens were also able to save a local auto body shop from permanently closing after solving major problems with its computer system.

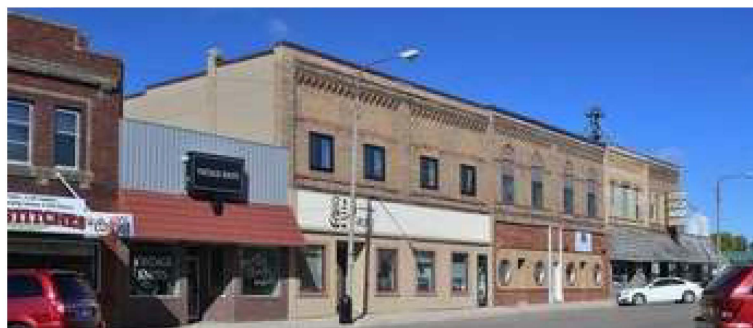
Rugby's commitment to an educated and appropriately trained workforce resulted in increased economic opportunities for the town. By bridging the gap between their rural community and external companies through tech-based strategies, Rugby attracted new businesses without sacrificing any of their resources. This rural community in North Dakota has established themselves with a well-trained workforce, capitalizing on the same potential as Mitchell, SD attracting new residents and revenue to the area. This intervention positions Rugby as a strong potential site for my project, with existing tech and professional infrastructure in place.



Downtown Rugby, ND on Vintage Postcard



One of Rugby's Oldest Surviving Buildings (1907)



DOWNTOWN RUGBY, ND

POPULATION (2000)	2,030
MUNICIPAL BUDGET (2006)	\$500,000
PER CAPITA INCOME (2000)	\$14,380
MEDIAN HOUSEHOLD INCOME (2000)	\$25,482
POVERTY RATE (2000)	14%
MINORITY POPULATION (2000)	2%
PROXIMITY TO URBAN CENTER	152 MI BISMARCK, ND
PROXIMITY TO INTERSTATE HIGHWAY	110 MI
STRATEGIC APPROACH	WORKFORCE DEVELOPMENT
TIME FRAME	1995 - 2005

# NELSONVILLE, OHIO

In the foothills of Southeastern Ohio, Nelsonville is surrounded by thousands of acres of national and state forests that attract millions of tourists annually. Hocking College, a local two-year college on the outskirts of town, and Ohio University which is 12 miles away have significant influence on the civic, social, and economic infrastructure of Nelsonville. Efforts were made in the 1970's to preserve some of the town's historic buildings when Hocking College purchased several downtown square buildings, but by 2001 much of Nelsonville was crumbling. Most storefronts were boarded up with a downtown occupancy rate of only 25 percent (Advisory Council on historic preservation, n.d.). Two buildings out of the entire downtown square were open for business, with most of the historic storefronts used for student housing rentals.

Nelsonville's revitalization strategy was developed organically, as the Foothills School for American Crafts moved into a downtown storefront in 2000. By leveraging this local asset and embracing a creative economy, Nelsonville aimed to attract artists to the town by subsidizing their rent for downtown spaces. New artistic residents were able to breathe life back into Nelsonville's downtown square, rehabilitating the historic buildings in

buildings in exchange for low rent costs. Not only was the built environment visibly improved, but local commerce was also boosted.

Nelsonville's successful revitalization can be attributed to a small group of residents actively working to jump-start development. The arts community created economic activity, helped to maintain historic buildings, and have recreated Nelsonville's regional reputation. The presence of art studios and creative energy attracted local and regional investment into the community, generating new businesses and high tourism levels. Nelsonville's economy has shifted from an industrial enterprise to a creative agency, as downtown occupancy rates increased from 25 percent to 85 percents in four years (Lambe, 2008). The Nelsonville Public Square was also added to the National Register of Historic Places and designated as a Preserve America Community in December 2008 (Advisory Council on historic preservation, n.d.).

By embracing the adjacent art community, Nelsonville's downtown was completely transformed. The town is now able to attract tourists and new residents, with a vibrant and attractive built environment. The creative energy in Nelsonville is unique, as most rural communities don't possess these same characteristics or have the young community members responsible for Nelsonville's newly generated activity. Studying Nelsonville's success has influenced the site selection process of the



Historic Public Square in Nelsonville, OH

of the project. It would be advantageous to designate a site that is near an educational institution or similar system that would encourage young interaction with the area. This case/precedent study also shows how preserving historic buildings can benefit a community. Federal funding can be accessed for buildings and sites on the National Register of Historic Places, so investigating this opportunity will also be important.

POPULATION (2000)	5,230
MUNICIPAL BUDGET (2006)	\$2 MILLION
PER CAPITA INCOME (2000)	\$11,600
MEDIAN HOUSEHOLD INCOME (2000)	\$20,600
POVERTY RATE (2000)	34%
MINORITY POPULATION (2000)	5%
PROXIMITY TO URBAN CENTER	12 MILES FROM ATHENS, OH
PROXIMITY TO INTERSTATE HIGHWAY	50 MI
STRATEGIC APPROACH	ENTREPRENEURSHIP, DOWNTOWN REVITALIZATION, CREATIVE ECONOMY
TIME FRAME	2001 - 2006



Aerial View of Historic Public Square in Nelsonville, OH

## PRECEDENT STUDY ANALYSIS

Precedent studies were highly influential to the proposed program for rural revitalization in North Dakota.

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**B** By investigating the varying implementations used across rural communities in the United States, core strategies that have been most successful in past rural revitalization projects have been identified. A variety of strategies ranging from economic development to technological pursuits, to downtown development, with focuses on civic engagement and social health were implemented. Each of these strategies address issues relating to North Dakota's rural communities, as they've all struggled to maintain vitality with age.

Ord's revitalization strategy highlights the importance of community involvement, with programs to improve young population retention, while attracting new residents and businesses. By linking generations of community members with the project program, North Dakota's rural communities could improve professional relationships and retention of residents. Mitchell, South Dakota established themselves as a tech-hub in the region, while maintaining their small-town identity by training residents in telecommunications and information technology. Benefiting from their new economic development, Mitchell reinvested

in its downtown, enhancing the marketable skills of its residents and the built environment of the town. The project program for North Dakota's rural community should implement this practice as well. Improving factors affecting quality of life for the residents will benefit the community and its vitality.

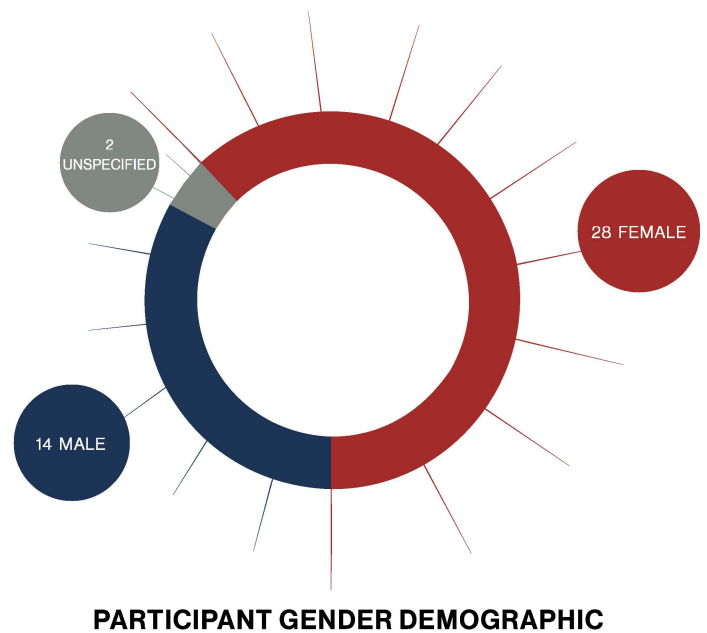
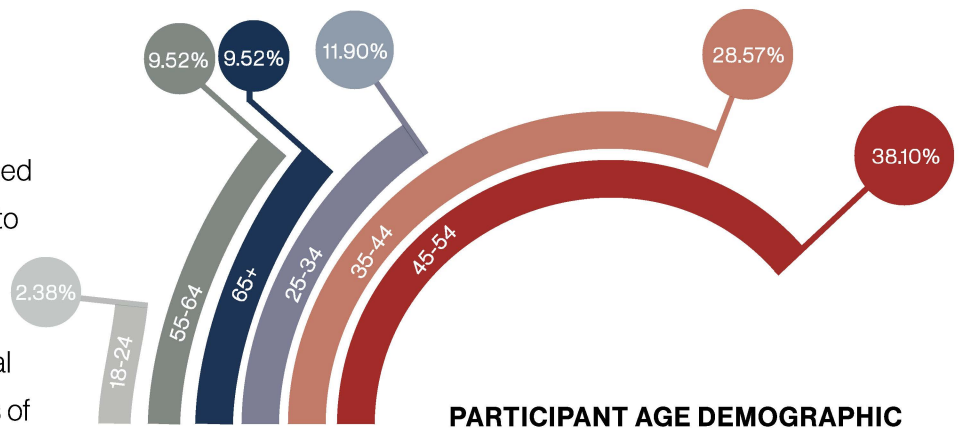
Investigating Rugby's strategy revealed how bridging the gap between their rural community and external companies through tech-based strategies, Rugby attracted new businesses without sacrificing any of their resources. The project program could include workforce investment as a catalyst for improving economic prospects, or perhaps the project site should be dependent on existing infrastructure for improved likelihood of success. Exploring the possibility of historic restoration into the revitalization project will also be helpful. Nelsonville's success illustrates how a community can attract tourists and new residents, with a vibrant and attractive built environment. The arts community in Nelsonville makes the town unique, perhaps integrating creative agencies into North Dakota's rural communities could also improve the attractiveness of the project site.

# RURAL COMMUNITY REVITALIZATION SURVEY

The purpose of this research is to determine the various factors that affect community revitalization in North Dakota's small rural towns. Sending the survey to NDSU's Rural Leadership North Dakota listserv along with a listserv of NDSU's Extension Leadership and Civic Engagement agents and specialists ensured a well-informed and personally interested set of participants for data collection.

**T**he Rural Leadership North Dakota (RLND) Program is a leadership development program offered through NDSU Extension. The program is designed for men and women who are dedicated to strengthening the agriculture community, their community, and the state of North Dakota for the future (Rural leadership North Dakota). The members of this program offer valuable insight into the needs and goals of rural communities across the state. A total of 174 people from RLND and NDSU's Extension Leadership and Civic Engagement Program were invited to complete the survey. Past and current members of RLND were included in the target population, providing a range of responses from varying towns and age groups.

Considering the cultivated set of participants, the survey prompted responses on a 5-point Likert scale regarding community identity, amenities, and safety. Opportunities for open-ended responses, specifically about revitalization implementations, were also provided. With these responses, the research identifies subject areas that are adequate, and subject areas that require intervention across several rural communities in North Dakota.





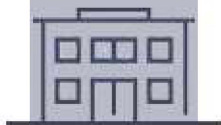
# CORE FOCUS AREAS IDENTIFIED



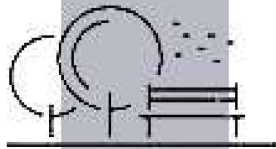
SINGLE AND MULTI-FAMILY HOUSING



DOWNTOWN DEVELOPMENT



EDUCATIONAL OPPORTUNITIES AND FACILITIES



COMMUNITY AND CULTURAL AMENITIES



CHILDCARE SERVICES AND FACILITIES

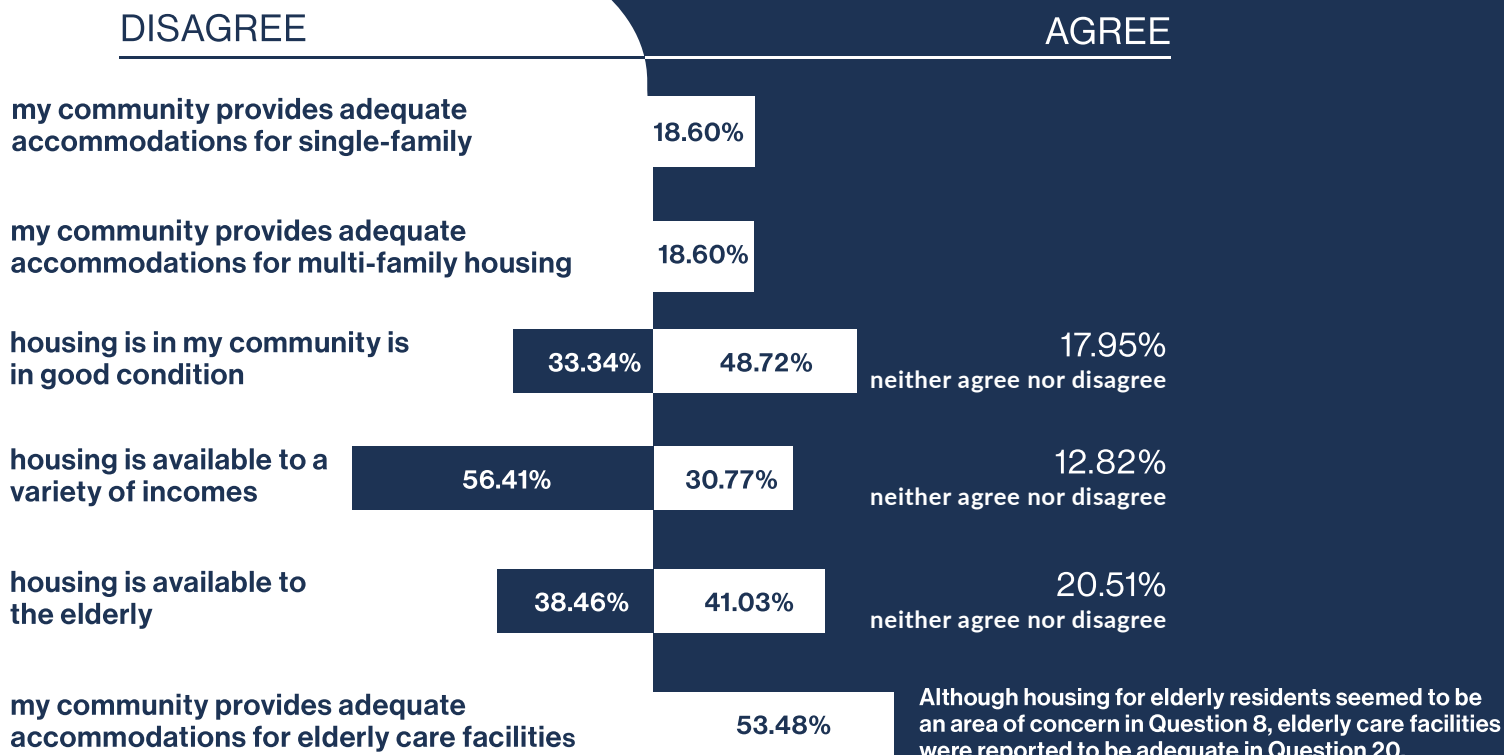
# SINGLE AND MULTI-FAMILY HOUSING

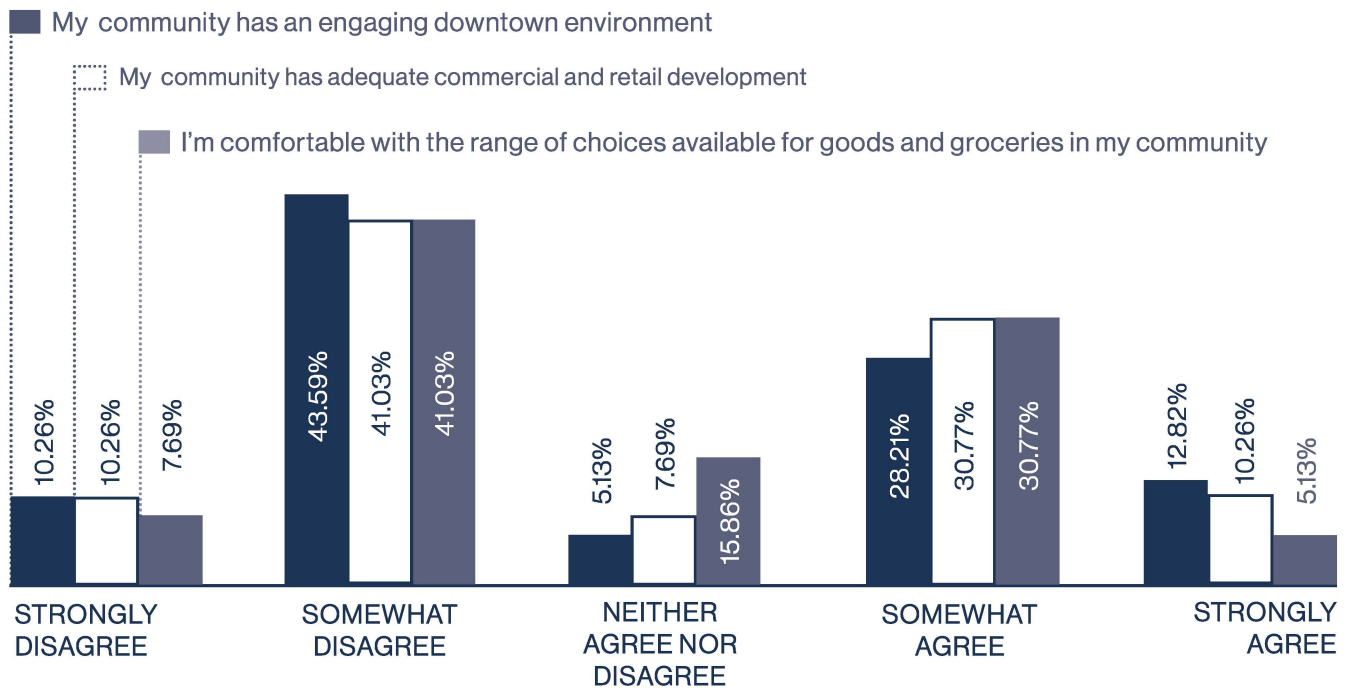
In response to Question 23: 'Are there are any implementations your community would prefer during a rural revitalization process?', answers included:

“MORE SINGLE-FAMILY HOUSING”

“NEED ADDITIONAL HOUSING, SAFE WALKING PATHS”

“HOUSING AND MAINSTREET DEVELOPMENT





Engaging downtowns are especially important to rural communities because they can facilitate impressive amounts of economic activity while enhancing traditional main streets. Revitalizing poorly used downtown storefronts could generate opportunities for new businesses, providing additional options for goods to residents.

# DOWNTOWN DEVELOPMENT

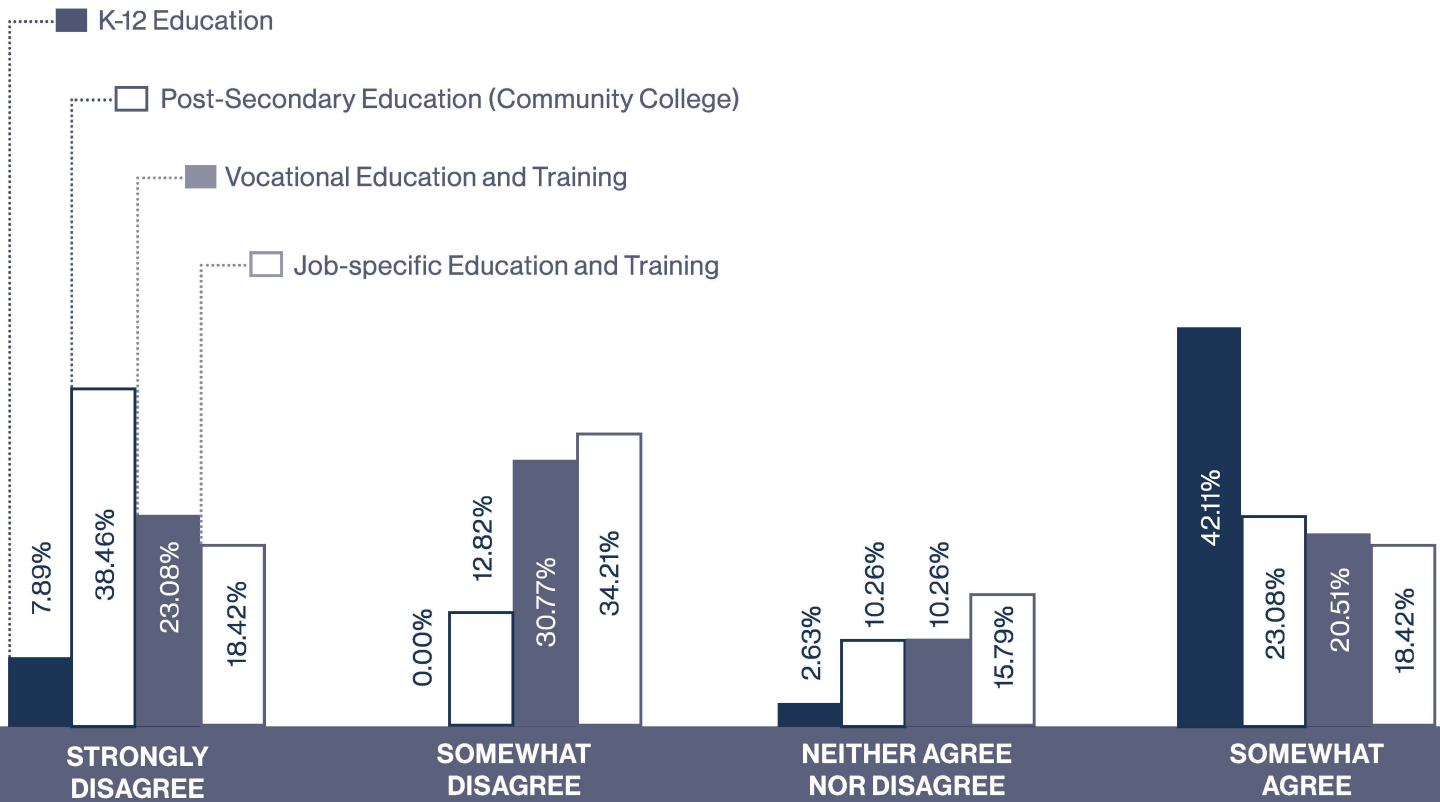
In response to Question 21: 'Are there are any implementations you've seen work well already?' responses from some ND rural areas included:

**"OUR MAIN STREET PARK PROJECT IS A CLEAR EXAMPLE OF A COMMUNITY PROJECT THAT WENT EXTREMELY WELL"**

**"DOWNTOWN SQUARE IN THE PROCESS"**

# EDUCATIONAL OPPORTUN

There are opportunities and services that meet the needs of my community for...



Data from the rural revitalization survey presents some contradicting assessments of rural education. For example, while most participants agreed that their community provides adequate opportunities and services for K-12 education, as shown in the figure above, several additional comments were made about desperate need for improvements.

Rural communities would also benefit from additional post-secondary services as their students and workforce could become better educated and more qualified.

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# INITIATIVES AND FACILITIES

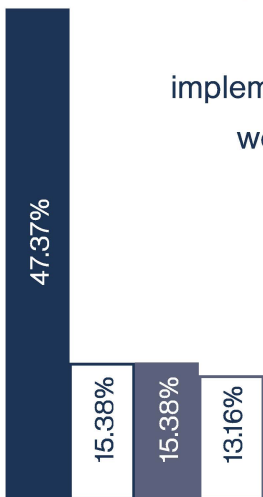
In response to Question 15:  
'What are some core challenges  
your community faces?'

“ADEQUATE EDUCATION FACILITIES”  
“K-12 EDUCATION QUALITY”

In response to Question  
22: 'Are there are any  
implementations you've seen  
work poorly in the past?'

“WE HAVEN'T FOUND THE RIGHT  
WAY TO CONVINC FOLKS THE  
IMPORTANCE OF UPDATING  
EDUCATIONAL FACILITIES.”

“SCHOOL BOARD IS DYSFUNCTIONAL  
AND TEACHERS ARE FLEEING.”



STRONGLY  
AGREE

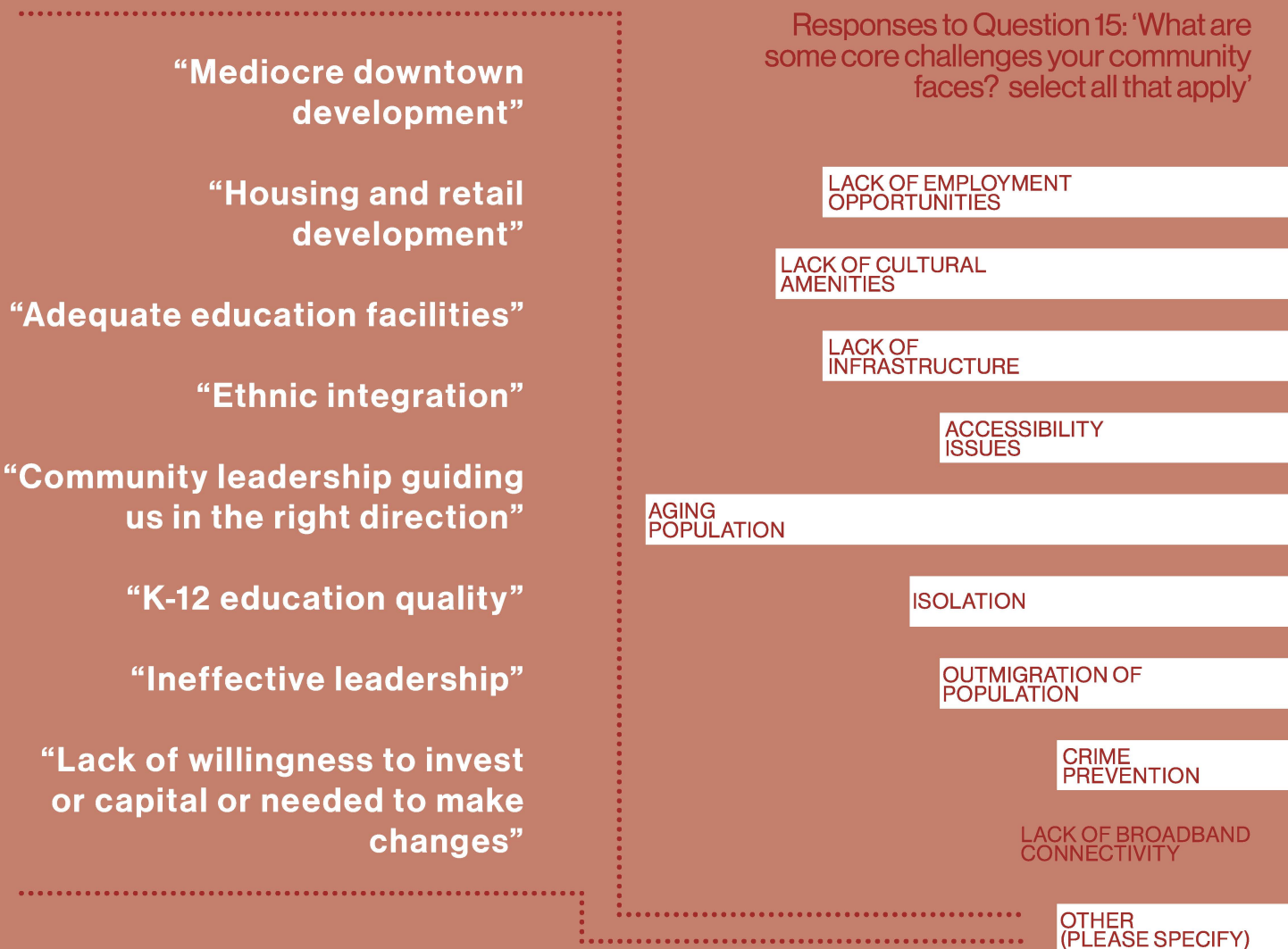
In response to  
Question 23: 'Are  
there are any  
implementations  
community  
would prefer  
during a rural  
revitalization  
process?'

“ENTICING YOUNG  
PEOPLE TO RETURN TO  
THE COMMUNITY AFTER  
EDUCATION, WHETHER IT  
IS TECH/TRADE SKILLS  
OR PROFESSIONAL JOBS”

# COMMUNITY AND

Rural small towns would also benefit from the addition of cultural and community amenities. Urban areas entice residents with exciting conveniences and luxuries, but they are also overcrowded and expensive.

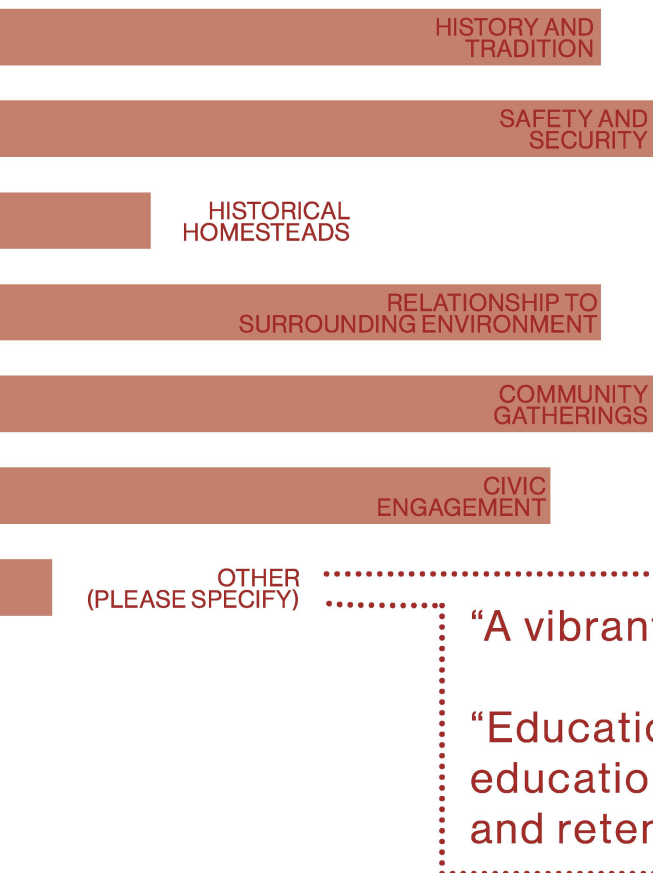
North Dakota's rural communities could compete with their urban counterparts by improving cultural and community comforts without sacrificing their small-town identities. Lack of cultural amenities was the second most identified core challenge facing North Dakota's rural communities (second only to aging population), shown in the figure below.



# CULTURAL AMENITIES

**‘History and Tradition’ was selected by 54.54% of survey respondents as an important community characteristic to maintain, shown in the figure below. Perhaps a cultural center or alternative multi-use facility could be proposed exhibiting local heritage, while integrating additional opportunities for cultural explorations as “ethnic integration” was submitted as an ‘other’ response to Question 15 regarding core challenges facing rural communities. A strong sense of community is one of the most important characteristics of rural small towns and should be maintained and enhanced during revitalization.**

Responses to Question 18: ‘What are some of the most important characteristics of your community to maintain? select all that apply’

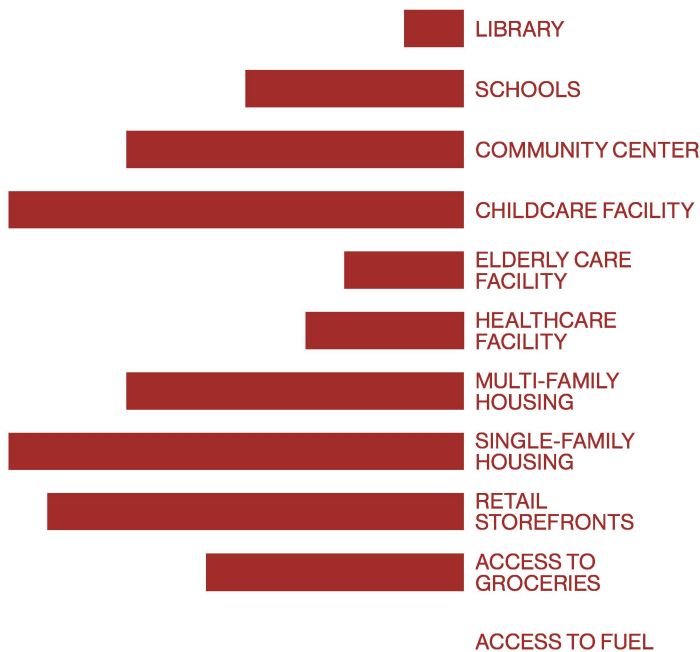
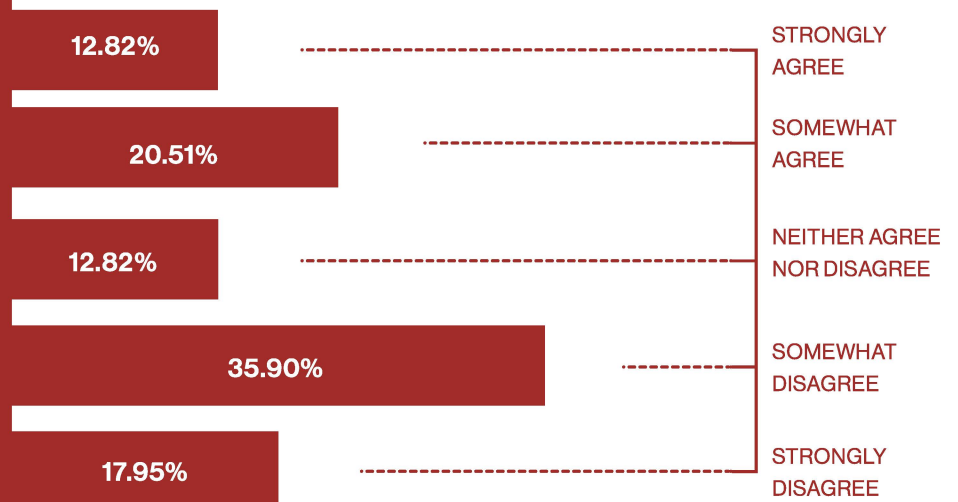


**As shown in the figure (left), ‘Safety and Security’ and ‘Community Gatherings’ were the two most frequently selected answers regarding important community characteristics. The establishment of a community gathering place will be important especially during revitalization, to facilitate civic engagement and ensure fair accommodations for future use.**

- “A vibrant downtown”
- “Educational facilities, adult education, employee engagement and retention”

# CHILDCARE SERVICES AND FACILITIES

In response to Question 12: 'There are opportunities and services that meet the needs of my community for adequate childcare options'



A major accessibility gap in rural North Dakota is childcare. This figure illustrates that childcare facility has been identified as one of the most popular potential additions to the community, tied for most popular response with single family housing.

Addressing this service gap in rural revitalization projects will be important as some young families may not be able to maintain residence in rural communities without adequate childcare accommodations, contributing to the outmigration of young populations.

Responses to Question 19: 'Which additions might benefit your community most positively? (new or updated facilities) select all that apply'

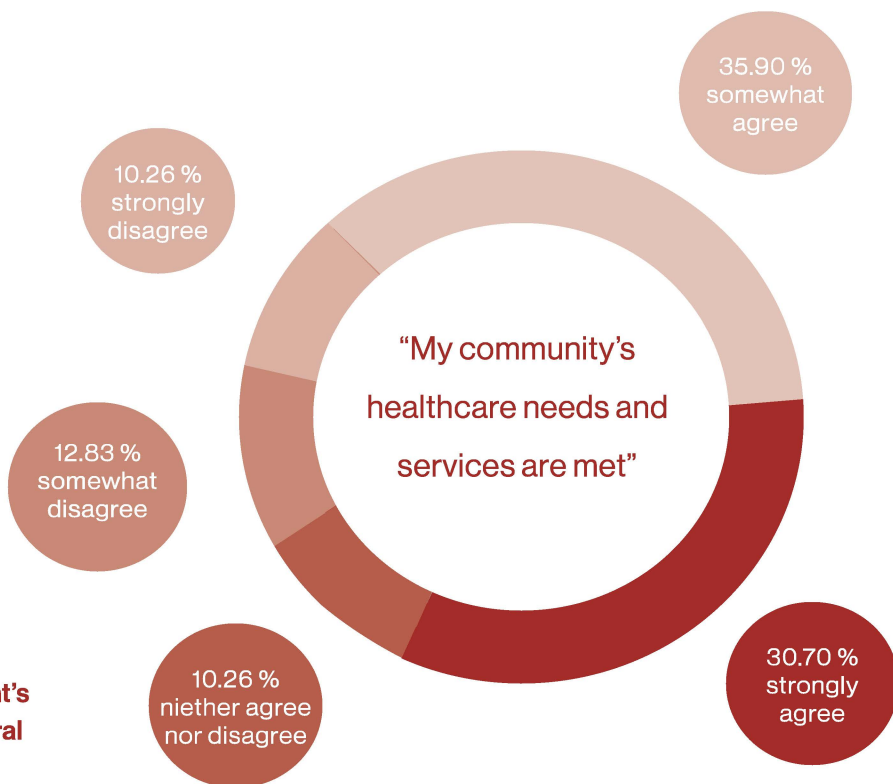


## HEALTHCARE

Accessible healthcare was expected to be an evident service gap in rural North Dakota; however, survey data reflected otherwise.

Considering this data, interventions to healthcare facilities will not be included in the project program for rural revitalization in the broad scope of North Dakota. Further research into the needs of individual communities should be investigated and accommodated as necessary.

The figure (right) illustrates survey participant's evaluation of healthcare adequacy in their rural communities



## LEADERSHIP

Lack of leadership was also identified as an issue. How can towns across rural North Dakota attract attention from financial partners to invest in rural revitalization?

The ND Department of Commerce has advocated for these communities in the past, with the Bank of North Dakota and the Flex PACE program referenced in some survey responses, but as funding tapers for projects, momentum is lost. Rural revitalization strategies must develop socioeconomic policies designed to encourage community involvement and lasting investments in revitalization projects.

**“THE CHALLENGING PART ABOUT COMMUNITY-FOCUSED PROJECTS [IS] FINDING THE RIGHT PERSON TO CHAMPION THEM. THERE [ARE] A HANDFUL OF PEOPLE DEDICATED AND KNOWLEDGEABLE ENOUGH TO CARRY OUT POSITIVE CHANGES IN COMMUNITIES AND THEY ARE ALREADY STRETCHED TOO THIN AND LACK THE CAPACITY TO ADD ADDITIONAL PROJECTS TO THEIR LIST. WE NEED MORE PASSIONATE, DEDICATED COMMUNITY MEMBERS WHO ARE WILLING TO DRIVE PROGRESS. AS A SMALL COMMUNITY, WE DO NOT HAVE THE FINANCIAL RESOURCES OR THE CAPACITY TO TAKE ON NEW PROJECTS.”**

Response to Question 22: 'Are there any implementations you've seen work poorly in the past?'

# OTHER CONSIDERATIONS

## SECTION 05

# PROPOSED PROGRAM

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Application of insight from precedent studies, literature reviews, and data collected from surveying members of rural North Dakota's leadership, has informed a typical program for revitalization projects in rural North Dakota.

**T**he intention of this program is to identify strategies for implementation while revitalizing North Dakota's rural communities. Small towns face distinct challenges stemming from outmigration and lack of opportunity, as shown in precedent studies and the Rural Revitalization Survey specific to North Dakota, but they also possess unique opportunities for developing their economies and built environments. Successful schemes will require a comprehensive program addressing socioeconomic policies and facility programs, designed to attract new residents and businesses while enhancing conditions for existing entities.





Post Office in Jud, ND. Photo by Andrew Filer

# SOCIOECONOMIC POLICIES

Economic development can provide strategies that rural, small towns can use to grow their economies, enhance their communities, and create viable opportunities for residents and businesses (White, 2022).

## SUPPORT LOCAL ENTREPRENEURS AND SMALL BUSINESSES

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As explored in the literature review of Rural Community Decline and Revitalization: An Annotated Bibliography by Brenda L. Ekstrom and F. Larry Leistritz, attention must be paid to retaining and expanding existing firms, rather than just attracting new businesses. Incentivizing development of local businesses will benefit the community by encouraging collaboration between residents. Regional collaboration of enterprises from neighboring communities could also help to address shared service gaps and opportunities. Policies should be established to support local entrepreneurs and small business through training, mentoring, and access to capital. Establishing professional relationships between young population members and local business owners encourages overall population retention as shown in the case study of Ord, NE.

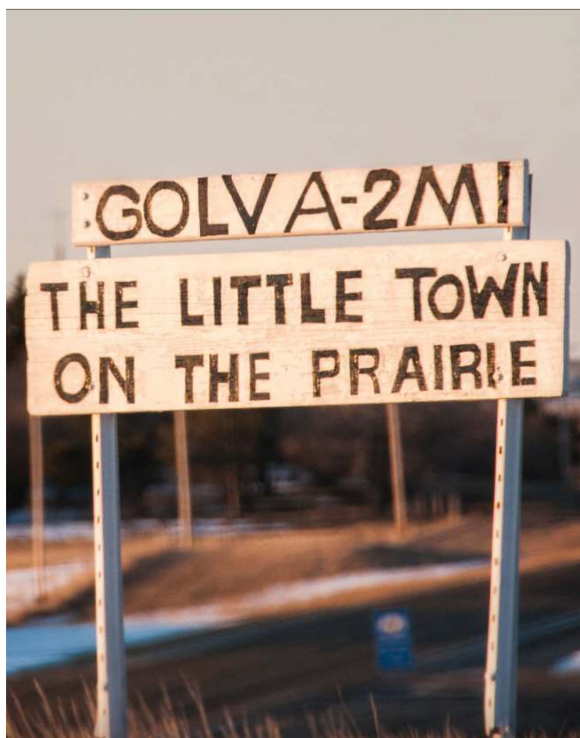


Grain Bin in Jud, ND. Photo by Andrew Filer

## SKILLS TRAINING PROGRAMS THAT ALIGN WITH THE NEEDS OF LOCAL INDUSTRIES

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Education and workforce development programs should also be implemented in rural revitalization projects. Skills training programs that align with the needs of local industries should be explored, as they've been proven to improve workforce marketability in rural towns such as Mitchell, SD, and Rugby, ND. Access to higher education would also improve the retention of younger demographics. Introducing a satellite campus stemming from a nearby institution could be a feasible solution to the general lack of higher education access in remote small towns.



Sign Advertising Golva, ND on North Dakota Highway 16.  
Photo by Mike, Mykuhlsphotography

## **INFRASTRUCTURE INVESTMENT**

Infrastructure investment will also support rural revitalization with transportation upgrades, enhanced utilities, and ensured broadband access. Transportation infrastructure should be well maintained and improved, when necessary, to improve connectivity and accessibility to important community sites. Upgrades to existing water, sewage, and energy infrastructure could be explored to support community needs and attract residents and businesses.

## **INTEGRATE SUSTAINABLE PRACTICES**

Natural resource management should also be explored. Rural communities have the opportunity to integrate sustainable practices into their communities during the revitalization process. Renewable energy initiatives could be developed to support renewable energy projects in the area, along with conservation initiatives for sustainable land use practices and efforts. Protecting natural resources and biodiversity in North Dakota's rural environment is important for agricultural health. These initiatives, and the exploration of others, could support local agriculture in rural environments.

## **COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT INITIATIVES**

Community development initiatives should be made to enhance the quality of life for rural residents. Community centers, libraries, and recreational facilities would support the vitality of the town and help to attract new residents. Community engagement is important to maintain during rural revitalization, so it will be critical to support local governance. Data from the Rural Revitalization Survey showed that ineffective leadership was a core challenge impeding the success of past revitalization projects in rural areas across North Dakota. Training and resources should be provided to community leaders and organizations to enhance their capacity to drive local initiatives through capacity building programs. Improvements to facilities could also encourage participation in decision-making processes.

# FACILITY PROGRAMS

In direct response to data collected in the Rural Revitalization Survey, a program for facility updates and additions will be vital to implement while making interventions to the built environment of rural communities across the state. Downtown development can improve the physical conditions of the community, while being used as a tool to facilitate economic growth. Gaps in educational building quality and childcare services were widely consistent. Accessibility to both single and multi-family housing is a core challenge that should be addressed with rural revitalization efforts, along with establishing facilities to provide cultural and community amenities for residents.

The historic integrity of small rural communities should be maintained by utilizing existing structures while revitalizing downtown districts. Several rural communities in North Dakota have buildings listed on the National Register of Historic Places, protecting these

structures for future generations to enjoy. The preservation of significant historic buildings should be prioritized over new construction projects, especially during downtown development. As discussed by Eric Jaffe in the Medium article, 'Quantifying the death of the classic American main street', main street's are social hubs that are integrated into everyday lifestyles. They're unique as a public realm because of the interactions they serve with business spaces, rather than parks or plazas for recreational use.

The historic charm of aged buildings helps to establish clear downtown realms, while preserving traditional ties to the history of the town. Restoring existing storefronts, and adding new retail storefronts, when necessary, while incorporating residential units into upper levels of these buildings will help to increase population density and facilitate healthy downtown engagement.

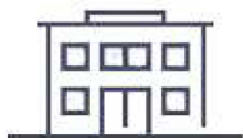


## DOWNTOWN DEVELOPMENT

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Updates to existing infrastructure such as improvements to pedestrian and vehicular traffic paths would also improve the vitality of rural downtowns. Accessible design features should be incorporated to

ensure enjoyable downtown experiences for people of all abilities. The downtown development stage of rural revitalization would be an opportune time to involve local artists and creative enterprises in projects, as evaluated in the Nelsonville precedent study. The physical conditions of the downtown should be updated for improved safety, comfort, and aesthetics as necessary. Appropriate traffic stops, additional street lighting, and clear signage for wayfinding can make downtowns safer and more secure for residents to enjoy. Providing street furniture such as benches or amenities like clean public restrooms can enhance the comfort and convenience of downtowns. Downtown development projects should preserve the existing character of buildings by implementing guidelines for consistent and attractive storefronts and streetscapes.



## EDUCATIONAL OPPORTUNITIES AND FACILITIES

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Plans to update existing facilities for K-12 schools should be established, exploring potential expansions or re-use possibilities. Connections to outside community colleges or vocational/trade schools would also be advantageous to young people in the area and

employers seeking appropriate training for workforce development. The integration of a satellite campus branching from a nearby institution should be explored for these opportunities. Adaptive reuse of an existing structure near a functioning school would be an ideal location for a satellite campus. Students enrolled in the high school could explore career paths and perhaps even complete dual-credit courses through the integration of a community college or vocational training program. Re-purposing an existing building would save costs, allowing for more money in the budget for establishing these programs. A satellite campus location could also be explored near the town's downtown district, stimulating economic activity between students and businesses.



## CHILDCARE SERVICES AND FACILITIES

---

Plans to update existing facilities for K-12 schools should be established, exploring potential expansions or re-use possibilities. Connections to outside community colleges or vocational/trade schools would also be advantageous to young people in the area and

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## SINGLE AND MULTI-FAMILY HOUSING

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Accommodations for both single and multi-family housing are insufficient in North Dakota's rural communities. Investigating the quality of existing residential units should be the first step towards strengthening access to housing in these towns. Are housing conditions the

problem, or is the quantity of homes available the core challenge? Research gathered from this investigation will inform the program for addressing single-family housing in rural North Dakota. Multi-family housing should be explored strategically in these areas, as apartment complexes are not typically characteristic of rural small towns. Constructing new townhomes and condos could offer affordable renting and buying opportunities for residents looking to explore multi-family units. Housing developments should be designed in response to existing residential neighborhoods while implementing future growth plans. Considerations must be made regarding scale and materials, respecting the character of the community and its rural landscape. Measures should also be established to protect agricultural land from encroachment, by providing buffer zones and easements during rural housing development.





Plantando Semillas Community Center in Ciudad De Guatemala, Guatemala. Photos by William Cuc



## COMMUNITY AND CULTURAL AMENITIES

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Finally, cultural and community amenities should be established in North Dakota's rural towns. A community center would provide physical space for gatherings, as community engagement is a defining characteristic of rural small towns. This building could be a potential adaptive reuse opportunity, or a new construction

project depending on the conditions of available spaces. The site should be easily accessible to the public, preferably located near the downtown square or otherwise centrally located within the public realm of the community. A program for this space should reflect the importance of cultural heritage and community engagement. Designing exhibition spaces for the community such as heritage displays or cultural education spaces would showcase the history of the town, encouraging resident and tourist activity. Community meeting rooms must be an important feature of the facility's program, along with a multipurpose space for potential presentations or performances. The needs of individual communities will influence this program, responding to specific requests for potential office spaces, wellness centers, or technology hubs.



## COMMUNITY ANALYSIS

**The proposed program for rural revitalization in North Dakota responds to the needs of rural residents in the state, while inadvertently aligning with the characteristics of an ideal community. Strong connections between the proposed program for rural revitalization and characteristics of an ideal community are evident, especially in policy guidelines. By encompassing these elements in the program, a revitalization project could develop a thriving rural space that offers enhanced economic opportunities, vibrant quality of life, a strong sense of belonging, and a harmonious relationship with the environment. By integrating the identified qualities of an ideal community, in response to rural needs, this approach will not only revitalize rural communities but also contribute to a more balanced and sustainable future for our societies.**

# CHARACTERISTICS OF AN IDEAL COMMUNITY

**A**n ideal community is a place where people can thrive, both as individuals and as members of a community. It is a place that is well-planned, offers a high quality of life, and is sustainable into the future. An ideal town cultivates a strong sense of community, fostering connections and interactions among its residents. An ideal community also prioritizes livability, ensuring its residents enjoy a high quality of life. It offers access to essential amenities within reasonable distance, providing a sense of convenience. The town boasts green spaces, parks, and recreational facilities for outdoor activities and relaxation.

An ideal town fosters economic vitality, providing its residents with ample employment opportunities and a diverse range of businesses. It attracts businesses from various sectors, creating a thriving economy that benefits the community. The community would nurture a vibrant arts scene, supporting local artists, musicians, and performers. By providing spaces for creative expression, the town would showcase the community's unique cultural identity. It celebrates cultural diversity, embracing the unique traditions, customs, and perspectives of its residents. The ideal community promotes intercultural understanding and respect, creating a welcoming environment for all residents.

Residents with a variety of abilities and incomes are accommodated because the town prioritizes affordability and accessibility, ensuring that its residents can afford housing, healthcare, education, and other essential services. It provides accessible transportation options and ensures that public spaces are inclusive and welcoming.

An ideal town invests in quality education, ensuring its residents have access to excellent schools and educational opportunities. It encourages lifelong learning and fosters a culture of intellectual curiosity. An ideal community embraces sustainability, minimizing its environmental impact and promoting a harmonious relationship between human activities and the natural world. It prioritizes renewable energy sources, encourages waste reduction and recycling, and preserves its natural resources. The community operates with efficient and responsible governance, ensuring transparency and accountability in decision-making. It prioritizes the needs and interests of its residents, creating a sense of ownership and engagement. To ensure lasting vitality, an ideal community adopts a future-oriented approach to planning, anticipating and addressing emerging challenges and opportunities. It embraces innovation and technological advancements while preserving its historical and cultural heritage.



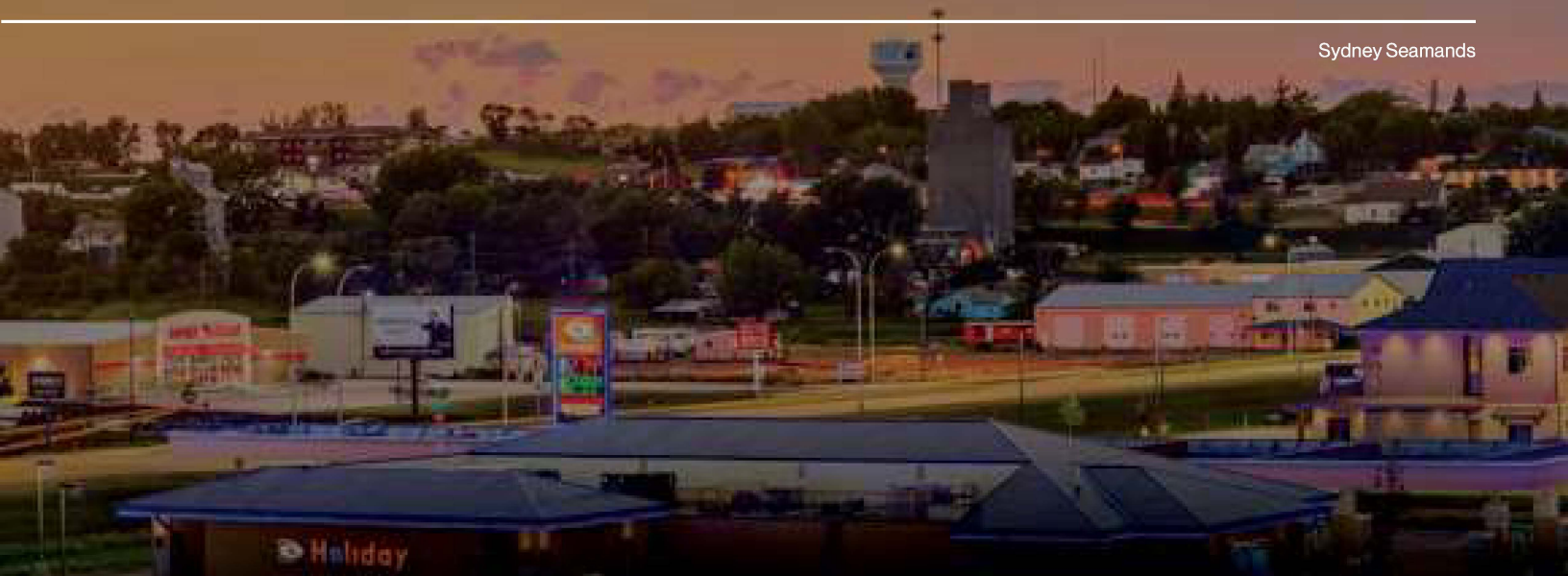
## SECTION 06

# CONCLUSIONS

**W**ith a clear set of strategies to implement, rural revitalization could be a valuable way to provide accessible and affordable places to live without sacrificing the amenities and opportunities currently exclusive to urban areas. Connecting these communities to integrated and intentional design will ease them into life with modern amenities and opportunities while respecting their small-town identities. This research, which investigates data from existing literature, precedent studies, and a rural revitalization survey, identifies a program for successful rural revitalization in North Dakota. Socioeconomic

policies along with facility updates and additions will inform best practices for the prosperity of rural towns looking to attract residents, businesses, and opportunities.

Rural revitalization projects are significant for a variety of reasons, with a myriad of beneficiaries. It's critical for governments to recognize the importance of developing rural communities to foster equitable, sustainable, and prosperous futures for everyone. These small communities provide opportunities to address modern challenges like urban overcrowding, the housing crisis, promotion of sustainable practices, and the preservation of



Watford City, ND Skyline. Photo by Chad Ziemendorf

history and culture. By improving the living standards and economic opportunities in rural areas, rural revitalization can help to reduce outmigration along with poverty and inequality among rural residents while enhancing community vitality. Addressing these problems with research and design solutions could offer insight into the future of rural communities.

Small rural communities are valuable links to the past, and should not be disregarded as society progresses into the future. A conscious effort must be made to protect and revitalize rural towns in North Dakota and across the globe.

Next steps will include identifying site selection criteria, evaluating viable rural towns in North Dakota, and a comprehensive site analysis of the chosen town.

Projects will be designed in response to the selected community's specific needs, prioritizing locally-sourced and long-lasting materials for high-quality interventions to the built environment. Sustainable design elements will be prioritized as they're appropriate to the region and project, with further research into those opportunities to be conducted.

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