

Researcher: Vibrant Small Towns Can Attract Young People, Families, the 'Creative Class'

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to the things people say they want to see in a community they want to live in," he said. "They want cultural assets and a walk-able community because young people are trying to be more physically active and are concerned about their health. They want more opportunities to enjoy the outdoors, and some people want natural amenities like trails and water faucets near recreation places."

Studies have also shown that young people say they are attracted to places with a commitment to historic preservation, he added.

"There's something to say about historic structures. They give a sense of place, and they have a place in the community," Mr. Ivan told *The St. Ignace News*, noting that Niles is spending about \$1 million to remove a modern facade from some buildings as it restores the historic character of the town.

Mr. Ivan also delves into the concept of "third places," which are important to most people. The "first place" is home, the "second place" is work, and the "third place," which serves as a community gathering center to talk about things and meet new people, he said. In many towns, it is a coffee house or a restaurant.

Mr. Ivan's research examines the qualities of small communities that bring residents together through commerce, education, and a sense of personal identity, and he identified 10 keys for success in those places. He does not consider those keys a hard formula for success, however, and encourages citizens and community leaders to find what best works for their town. The 10 keys are characteristics shared by the communities he analyzed and should serve as inspiration for community planning, he said.

"I don't think everyone is hitting on all these things, and the fact our research focuses on small towns . . . provides something our communities can relate to," he said.

The goal of the program is to generate excitement about possibil-

ities available outside the community, and to get people thinking about unconventional ways to achieve those goals. It can be as simple as the community-wide calendar of events, made by, and hand-delivered to, the citizens of St. Joseph.

His presentations have stimulated some communities to implement some of the concepts. The towns of New Baltimore and Marine City, for example, applied to be pilot cities in the **C** **r** **e** **a** **t** **i** **n** **g** **E** **n** **t** **r** **e** **n** **t** **r** **e** **n** **n** **i** **a** **l** **C** **o** **m** **m** **u** **n** **i** **t** **y** **P** **r** **o** **g** **r** **a** **m** **Entrepreneurial Communities** program to teach as many as seven towns how to create a community for people who want to create and manage businesses.

The program is co-sponsored by MSU Extension and University Outreach, the Michigan Department of History, Arts, and Libraries, the Small Business, Technology, and Development Center, and the Edward Lowe Foundation. Mr. Ivan said the Entrepreneurial Communities program has twice as many applicants as it can accept. The towns picked for the program will be assigned community coaches who will work with them to introduce some of the characteristics business owners are seeking when choosing a place to locate.

An industrial park has a role in creating a business community, and most towns have accepted the fact that such parks "are one of the things you have to do to attract business," Mr. Ivan said.

"Businesses need a place to go that has the infrastructure (roads, water, sewer, electricity, high speed Internet) necessary to support a business," he said. "But some of the communities that are the most vibrant are the ones that have gone beyond that and are looking at what

they can do for the non-traditional businesses."

St. Joseph, he said, has established an arts incubator for the local artisan community.

"It gives them gallery space and a place to create and share equipment, which can be very expensive for artists just starting out. It's a place for artists to develop and flourish," he said. "When you talk to artists, they like to hang out with each other, so people should consider providing not only a physical space, but also a community to spend time in."

He cited another example in New York Mills, Minnesota, a town of fewer than 1,000 people that sponsors an artist-in-residence program. The town's New York Mills Art Retreat offers artists a home and gallery space and a competitive scholarship to visiting artists. The scholarship recipient receives a living stipend and donates 15 hours to the community during the month term. The artist is encouraged to experience the local culture and rural living, while developing skills.

Mr. Ivan said programs like these are an asset to the community because residents have contact with artists, who will fill gallery space, may create works for the town, and may come into the local schools and teach or do demonstrations.

"It's really this outside-the-box thinking that has allowed communities like this to flourish," Mr. Ivan said.

Entrepreneurial or philanthropic investment can also spur development in a rural town, and is one of the 10 keys he mentions in the program. The investment can be a catalyst for other private and public investments, Mr. Ivan said. New

York Mills' artist retreat program is helped by a scholarship provided by the Jerome Foundation, a charity that gives grants to emerging artists from New York City and Minnesota, and was started by the artist Jerome Hill, who once lived in Minnesota.

Other characteristics of successful small towns include strong engagement between citizens, community organizations, and government. Citizens need local government buy-in for things they want to accomplish, just as government needs the people to support its initiatives.

"If you don't have the citizenry engaged, it's difficult to move forward on any positive action or other initiatives to add vitality to the community," Mr. Ivan said.

Some of the thriving small communities Mr. Ivan profiled have strong communication between citizens, organizations, and government through township newsletters, e-mail announcements, and community bulletin boards. Township boards have up-to-date announcements, posted utility rates, rental rates, and newsletters posted on their Web sites. The government institutions and citizens sit down and communicate "eyeball to eyeball," he said. Some have improved communication by holding special town meetings, Sunday gatherings, or by going out into neighborhoods and meeting at people's homes. One town started posting information in restrooms, banking on a captive audience to spread the word.

"That's the out-of-the box thinking that some of these towns have had great success with," he added.

Regarding the role elected officials play in communities, Mr. Ivan said they are mainly in a position to allocate community resources, but the best "empower their citizens to be part of the progress of the community."

"We've found it doesn't begin and end with officials. Successful communities don't focus on who's going to get the credit for stuff," Mr. Ivan said. "As we look at communities, we see it's not always

officials that get things done. They get engaged at the right time. Often it's the grass roots initiatives that have the ways and means to marshal widespread support."

At the January 9 presentation, Mr. Ivan will also discuss ways to fill vacant storefronts, successful approaches to land use opportunities, willingness to adapt zoning regulations for new opportunities, and other ideas progressive communities are embracing around the Midwest and East Coast.

"Can Small Towns Be Cool?"

will be presented from 1 p.m. to 3 p.m. The program is open to the public and costs \$25 to attend. Afterward, the St. Ignace Chamber of Commerce, which is co-sponsoring the program with the Mackinac County Extension office, will host a networking reception at the Colonial House Inn on State Street in St. Ignace, and participants are invited to attend.

Register for the program by calling the Mackinac County MSU Extension office at (906) 643-7307.

Kierra Kangas Wins Art Contest



Kierra Kangas (left) is the Engadine Consolidated Schools winner of the Lions International Peace Poster Contest. Miss Kangas is a sixth grade student at the school. She is pictured with Barb Hobbs, contest chairperson. (Photograph courtesy of Engadine Consolidated Schools)

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