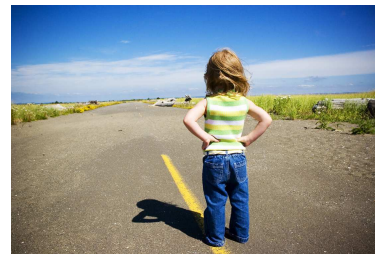


The Next Generations

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Concern in the northern plains regarding youth migration from rural communities to urban areas continues to be a hot topic. Public forums, newspaper exposés and university research projects regularly seek to address this ongoing issue. But what if attention really needs to center on community attitudes, economic development foci or long-term planning efforts? Are we asking the right questions as we work to build resilient rural communities? Could the real question be “Who should community development efforts most impact, people that are 50 or 55 today and will be 60 and 65 in ten years or those that are 20 and 30 today and will be 30 and 40 in ten years?” If rural development efforts are mostly focused on serving the interests of those who are 50 to 60 years old today and will be 60 to 70 years old in ten years, then the final question is “Will there be any 30 years old left in the region in ten years?”

It has become clear that any rural development strategy must recognize the importance of defining what kind of region young people today will want to live in the future and work towards it. However, these same efforts must maintain a balance between the interests and needs of young families and workers and the desire of the region’s older population to remain in the region and live in a safe and comfortable environment. The challenge economic developers and city planners face is one of creating rural places that will be welcoming for young people and also making it the passion of older people to create a region for both young and old to live in.



Powerful forces are changing the future of rural areas, including many that are affecting how young people decide what careers they choose and where they live. The challenge for business people and policy makers in rural areas is to recognize these changes and build a future that is inclusive of them. A significant difference between the youth of today (and the future) and the current generation of business owners and policy leaders is the source of their personal identity. In the past a person’s identity came primarily from their parents and the land they lived on. And their parent’s identity came from their parents and the land and so on. Today land plays a defining role in the lives of only a few people on the plains. As the number of farms and ranches continue to decrease, direct connections to the land is also decreasing. Young people will no longer find or attach a significant part of their identity to place.

Because they are not as attached to place as their parents, young people do not have time for the old rivalries between communities that often determined who a person was, who their friends were, and where they worked or went to church. Today efficiency in function plays a greater role in a young person’s life than attachment to a single community. This means younger tax payers will expect greater efficiencies from their local governments. They will expect them to work more closely together and use communications technologies to deliver services and information quickly and efficiently. They also recognize that they will need fewer local governments to meet their needs. States that are used to having 60 or 70 or 80 counties will need to make adjustments. This does not mean that young people are any less willing to pay for their state and local governments providing good services, they ask only that it be done better and more efficiently using the same technologies that they use every day.

In addition, with global communications only a keystroke away, young people have become global citizens. They are finding their identity in a shared environment with other young people around the world. Just as information is mobile, so too is sense of place. Young people around the world listen to the same music, wear the same clothes, play the same electronic games and perhaps most importantly, use a range of social/communications technologies to communicate with each other and to effect social change.

[More Details](#)

Finding identity has shifted from a vertical world of parent to child to a horizontal world of peer group to peer group. Rural areas must recognize this and work towards creating a region that young people will want to live in that understands this change and does not try to force an old world system upon them. This is especially important as the US economy continues its shift from an industrial economy to an information economy. We are not just faced with the age old struggle between parent and child regarding future and past ways of doing things, we are also faced with a fundamental change in the kinds of technologies we are using and how they effect how we communicate. The change is not just from one level of sophistication in machinery to another, it is a basic change from mechanics to electronics.



Technology has changed every facet of our lives. Farmers and ranchers are using global positioning technology, electronic sensors and monitoring equipment, and computers to guide them in management of their fields and animals to maximize production, while minimizing inputs. When faced with problems on their farms or ranches younger operators are using the Internet to get information and answers to questions. And when their equipment needs repair, it is more and more likely to be serviced by an electronics technician. These technicians are using advanced interactive technologies with video visors connected to CD Rom players that they wear to guide their efforts. Technicians are using technologies worth tens of thousands of dollars to repair equipment costing hundreds of thousands of dollars. This is not agriculture as we once knew it.

Educators are using distance learning technologies to bring access to the world into rural schools. Nurses and doctors are using telecommunications technologies to practice medicine in rural locations. And rural businesses are using these same communications technologies to serve their customers around the world. Young people expect this to be a part of their everyday lives. They are trained to seek answers to questions not from the person on the next farm or in the next repair stall or down the street, but from colleagues around the country and the world. We cannot expect that people with the skills to use global communications technologies every day will accept things being done just like they have been in the past.

Businesses and policy maker in the region must also dedicate themselves to creating the kinds of employment opportunities that meet the interests and skills of young people. They must also recognize that they will have to pay competitive salaries in order to be attractive to a skilled workforce. Just as we must recognize we are no longer competing with our neighboring rural community for identity, we must recognize that we are competing with urban areas for the skilled workforce we will need to bring and keep technology related skills in our rural businesses.

Finally, we must be careful as we talk about preserving our culture or heritage that we are certain of what it is we are trying to preserve. If we are trying to preserve past ways of doing something, based on old economic premises and assumptions, we will fail. Young people are not interested in returning to the old ways. This is not to say they don't respect and value wisdom learned over many generations. It is to say that we must find ways to bring the best of the past forward and work to manifest that wisdom in ways that are meaningful for today's young adults and families.

These are important issues that will drive the future of the region. We know that many business magazines rate our region high for its quality lifestyle. They do so because of our safe communities, quality workforce, low absentee rates, good schools and quality health care. These are things the region must dedicate itself to preserve. Young people want to live where they can work and play without fear; where they can come home at night and feel safe; where young families can raise children and not fear for their children as they play in the yard or walk down the block to see a friend or bike to a local restaurant for a snack with friends. If we dedicate ourselves to keeping our remaining technologically advanced, paying good salaries keeping our communities safe, maintaining education systems of the highest quality, providing a place for families to connect with each other, and supporting a thriving and diverse cultural life, then we will find a ready partner in young people.

