Future of Small Town Iowa

Iowa represents 944 Incorporated Communities

864 communities have a population of 5,000 and under
The face of Iowa is reflected by the cultural and economic vitality of its small villages and towns. When they shine, Iowa shines!

We are fortunate Iowa offers a wide range of communities providing residents and businesses opportunities to thrive. Our small towns embody a sense of value and moral responsibility.

However, many of Iowa’s small towns suffer loss of residents, business, leadership, jobs, schools, churches, banks, medical services, communication, focus, vision and spirit.

Without a statewide policy and program of support for Iowa’s small towns, we send a message of indifference that in fact suggests we are making policy against their hopeful future. Focusing a balanced effort on the future of these 864 small communities could be the catalyst in reviving the economic health and vitality in Iowa’s small towns.
CRITICAL NEEDS & ISSUES FACING SMALL TOWN IOWA MUNICIPALS

These issues facing small town Iowa, while not exhaustive, represent critical needs for both civil and municipal bodies in Iowa.

- Access to broadband service is often limited and / or not available. The lack of connectivity in Iowa is a barrier to progress for students, businesses and families.
- Legal costs associated with taking action on public nuisances. These costs can limit the ability for communities to create positive change in their towns.
- State grant funding is difficult to win for small towns that lack skilled grant writers. Repeated losses in the grant application process are defeating to areas that badly need the funding. Recent changes with Iowa Economic Development Authority are committing one-third of their grant funds to smaller communities.
- Narrowing tax bases for infrastructure repairs and upgrades. From street and sidewalk repairs to lagging sewer and water projects, small towns lack the finances to keep up.
- Utility infrastructure unable to accommodate commercial or agricultural industries looking to relocate in these rural areas. The cost to accommodate typically exceed financial ability. It requires an innovative model to afford rural Iowa the opportunity to compete with larger communities as many other states are experimenting with or developing.
- Inability to recruit and retain city administration (staff and managers) enabling communities to develop future leadership and stability.
- Potential for various levels of professional and technical services and volunteer assistance is often limited.
- High cost of benefits and health insurance inhibits ability to hire and grow community development positions. This limits the focus on the future and vision planning as current staff is already taxed tending to daily business.
- Downtowns struggle to maintain a local business presence and vacancies look undesirable and suggest lack of progress.
- Declining federal funds for small community and rural area road and bridge repair / replacement and enhancement is critically impacting small towns.
- Natural disaster response rates slower and conducted at reduced levels for small towns.
- Leadership training for potentially emerging staff and volunteers is lacking. Often the only community evangelists are those that stay for a long time without welcoming new people and talent.

THE SMALL TOWN, RESIDENTIAL IMPACT

Like many overarching needs and critical issues of a community, it is the quality of life and the livelihood of residents that feel the trickle-down impact. Consider how these needs affect small-town residents.

- Broadband service is generally not available in rural areas. This is a crucial connection to the world and lack of Wi-Fi access for work, education, general business operations and more means Iowa communities cease to thrive. Creates a barrier to education as families must travel to other communities for students to complete online research or homework.
- Reduced job opportunities as small to midsized companies overlook these communities for new business opportunities.
- Fewer health care options and medical services (i.e. doctors, dentists) for business operations which require remote medical consultation and analysis.
- Lower percentage of college-educated residents in these communities thus impacting the quality of jobs available and the tax base to support services.
  - In tandem, charitable giving reaches fewer entities and is gifted at lower giving levels.
  - Transfer of business ownership stalls as the next generation of educated owners and managers in the community decline.
- When city administration and leadership in a community is stifled or underfunded, the effects slowly spread throughout the community.
- Facilities for recreational and cultural events tend to be old and deficient.
  - Many communities don’t have a community volunteer structure to support citizen involvement and participation in programs and projects.
- State grant funding is difficult to access, limiting ability to fund arts and cultural amenities.
  - Support of local schools becomes marginalized.
  - Fewer nonprofit and charitable organizations exist in these communities to provide needed services.
- Grocery and food service needs are frequently limited.
- Public transportation is limited or unavailable.
  - Lack of retirement and elder care options often force local residents away from the familiarity and comfort of their friends and relatives creating a disconnection from their communities.
In partnership with

Made possible through support from