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A REGIONAL APPROACH TO COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT

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Stagnant or negative growth in population and reduced economic well-being are threatening the future of small towns and rural areas in Iowa and the Midwest, especially those communities with less than 5,000 inhabitants. Clusters of similar-sized towns are in desperate need of strategies for survival. The problems behind these trends will not disappear in the near future. The depth of these problems will require long term planning and the coordination of resources of state, regional, and local government--as well as the private sector, and the land grant universities. A brief summary of recent trends in the rural Midwest is presented below:

1. Greater international competition in agriculture and manufacturing has dealt a severe blow to Iowa's two major economic sectors. The farm debt crisis and the national trend of declining employment in manufacturing have made evident the need for changes in economic development strategies in the state.
2. The internationalization of agriculture, Iowa's major economic base, has made the state increasingly sensitive to international economic and political conditions. Iowa is the nation's number two farm state, behind California, but is number one in the value of farm exports. Since 1980, the agricultural sector of Iowa's population has steadily eroded, with the number of farms decreasing while average farm size has increased.
3. A restructuring of national and regional economic bases has caused changes in the type of jobs, shifts in required skills and training, relocation of jobs, and a continuing decrease in agriculture related business.
4. Continued changes in the composition of the rural and small town population have affected the educational needs and problems of businesses, social services, families, and local governments. A particular challenge to the future viability of small towns is the outmigration of young people, and the increase in the number of residual elderly.

5. Recent federal budget cuts have forced a greater emphasis on local self-help approaches to solving problems, and a corresponding need for information, education, and local empowerment.

There is currently a rapid growth in private and public sources of information on the above problems. This information needs to be organized and analyzed to: (1) clearly understand the problems; and (2) develop a comprehensive strategy for long-term economic growth and community development in small towns and rural areas.

The Northwest Area Foundation grant to Iowa State University is an experiment to see if the expertise of a major land grant university can be harnessed to aid the community development efforts of a predominantly rural region. An underlying premise is that small rural cities and counties have a greater opportunity to achieve community development if efforts are pooled as a part of a regional approach, rather than via a series of individual, isolated, and competing approaches based upon town-by-town strategies.

Funding was provided for a three-year project, and the first year of activity is nearly completed. Among the most crucial first-year organizational activities was selecting specific boundaries for the region and constituting a regional advisory committee to provide advice to the project technicians and to act as a sounding board.

THE SOUTHERN IOWA DEVELOPMENT DISTRICT (SIDD) AREA

The SIDD area is comprised of nine rural counties, containing 62 incorporated communities ranging in population from 31 to 8,429. Most of the region is far enough away from the Des Moines and Omaha-Council Bluffs metropolitan areas that it is not influenced by spill-over growth from urban areas. The SIDD area also met the Northwest Area Foundation's criterion of an area similar to other rural areas served by the Foundation. The Foundation's service area included Minnesota, Iowa, both Dakotas, Montana, Nebraska, Wyoming, Idaho, Oregon, and Washington.

PROJECT RATIONALE AND OBJECTIVES

The underlying rationale for the project is based upon four assumptions:

1. Predominantly rural areas with small communities have a greater opportunity to achieve community development if efforts are pooled as part of a regional approach.
2. There are many examples of successful community development activities that can be transferred and used elsewhere as pragmatic steps to be taken to address specific issues.
3. Pragmatic community and regional development efforts can be enhanced if supported by a theoretical undergirding, with emphases on: (a) understanding the current and past situation; (b) use of central place and related theories to help describe and understand regional linkages; (c) identification of general directions for development; and (d) completing specific analyses, such as developing an import substitution strategy or a strategy to capture trade leakage.
4. A strategy and agenda for community development can be forged for a regional setting. Local entrepreneurial energies and activities can be made supportive of regional, rather than individual city, goals.

Specific Project Objectives

A series of eight objectives were developed for the project. These objectives, listed below in conjunction with the rationale for the project, are used to guide the project work program.

1. Identify specific successes in small cities and towns.
2. Identify economic sectors which would be most appropriate to target for regional industrial recruitment.
3. Identify approaches for job retention and business expansion within the region.
4. Develop a program for building leadership capacity for self-sustaining regional development.
5. Explore the concept of community specialization within the region.
6. Develop a regional model for community development.
7. Test the validity of the regional model for community development in the SIDD region.
8. Suggest policy changes in state and federal grant-in-aid and related programs.

THE SIDD REGIONAL ADVISORY COMMITTEE

A regional advisory committee was established to act as a representative body for the region. There are many regional

bodies already constituted in the general SIDD region, and these bodies were consulted with and used as parent organizations from which to draw SIDD Regional Advisory Committee members. Unfortunately, Iowa has many different sets of regional boundaries, so no universal system of regions exists for the state. The logical region to use for this type of project, of course, is the regional planning commission (RPC) or regional council of governments (COG). To the degree possible, this was done. However, in 1986, the State of Iowa created a new set of regional actors, the Regional Coordinating Councils (RCC), whose job it is to assist these new regions in economic development activities. These regional boundaries coincided with the community college districts set up by the State. However, they did *not* coincide with the RPC or COG boundaries. In order to accommodate the regional boundaries of the two organizations most likely to interact with the SIDD program, it was decided to set boundaries that would encompass both the established RPC and the new RCC. As a result, one county was added to the Regional Planning Commission area.

The following table lists the parent bodies of the representatives of the SIDD Regional Advisory Committee and the number of persons from each parent body.

**SOUTHERN IOWA DEVELOPMENT DISTRICT
Regional Advisory Committee**

Private Industry Council	1 member
Southern Iowa Council of Governments	3 members
Regional Coordinating Council	3 members
Agricultural Research Group	1 member
Southwestern Community College	1 member
ISU cooperative Extension Service	1 member
Rural Development Commission	1 member

The Private Industry Council is a consortium of organizations all working on economic development and job training activities within the general region. The Agricultural Research Group is an ad hoc group composed of farmers and agriculturally-related persons, such as people from financial institutions. It was formed to identify agricultural opportunities in the area. The Rural Development Commission is a supra-body composed of members of state and federal agencies active within the general area. A considerable amount of effort was expended to identify parent organizations crucial to success of community development efforts, and a similar effort was aimed at selecting individuals from the

parent bodies who would represent both a good mix of interests from the region and all counties within the region. With one exception, this two-pronged effort was successful. The final Regional Advisory Committee selected by the parent bodies has only one woman.

Technical Advisory Committee

To help coordinate on-campus efforts, a technical advisory committee composed of faculty, representatives of state agencies, and other interested people was formed. This committee serves several purposes. For example, it serves a pool from which to draw specific expertise to assist on the project work program and as a brainstorming group to generate (and react to) ideas. The committee has about 30 members representing a variety of disciplines and interests. Membership is completely open, depending only upon interest, and attendance at the meetings varies considerably, depending upon the topic under discussion.

SPECIFIC STUDIES

The focus of the project's first year activities has been on identifying and inventorying data needed to design a regional community development strategy. The following analyses and data gathering efforts were addressed as first year priorities.

Attitude Survey

A survey containing about 120 variables has been designed and sent out to 1,800 households within the nine counties. Approximately 45% of these have been returned. Initial analyses for the entire region and by each county will be completed. This study will provide an "attitudinal benchmark" and information useful to many other project phases.

Population and Demographic Data

A complete population file has been compiled for the region. This includes population from each incorporated community by decennial census, from 1900 through 1980. A series of central place analyses have been completed, based upon the population data.

Retail Trade Leakage

Complete data for the last three years on retail sales, including estimates of leakage or surplus, have been compiled. These data help provide a profile of the region and will be essential in devising strategies to capture trade leakage.

Regional Image Study

A field survey of all of the communities and other significant facilities (e.g., state and county parks) has been completed. This includes generalized land use maps and a photographic record of each town.

Public Finance Trends

Public finance data for all counties, cities, and school districts have been compiled and analyzed, including especially information about cash reserves available.

Import Substitution

An inventory of industries and services within the region has been compiled. This provides data for an input-output model used to identify goods and services now purchased outside the nine county region which could be made available within the region. Insights gathered here will help guide business recruitment/enhancement efforts.

White Papers and Memoranda

A series of white papers and staff memoranda on topical items have been prepared to capture initial concepts, to focus discussion, and to set the stage for subsequent project planning and implementation phases.

SUMMARY

Iowa State University, with funding from the Northwest Area Foundation, is in the first year of a three-year project designed to focus the expertise and resources of a major land grant university on the community and economic development needs of a nine county rural region in southern Iowa. The region shares many characteristics with other predominantly rural areas, and it is anticipated that results obtained from this project will be useful to guide similar efforts elsewhere. The three primary goals of the three-year project are to create a regional planning and development strategy for the region, to develop a model of the regional planning and development process, and to suggest specific implementation steps for private actors and public agencies at the local, regional, and state levels.

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