

Case Studies on Transit and Livable Communities in Rural and Small Town America

Assembled by Sean Barry of Transportation for America



Featuring

- Huron, South Dakota
- Menominee Reservation, Wisconsin
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Livability in Small Towns and Rural Areas

What does “livability” mean in a smaller town or city? Some would have us believe that livability is a foreign concept for our small towns and rural areas. The reality couldn’t be farther from the truth.

This collection of 12 case studies provides examples of how small cities, towns and rural regions across the country are transforming themselves into more livable communities. While some of these communities face formidable threats – from job losses and shrinking populations to disappearing farmland and strained resources – their leaders have forged collaborations and created plans that are growing economies, benefiting people and protecting the land and lifestyles treasured by residents and non-residents alike.

The exact definition may differ place to place, but these case studies reveal some core values and needs that exist in these communities across America. It is about providing people, including seniors and those who cannot afford to drive everywhere, better choices about how to travel throughout their regions. It is about encouraging growth in historic small town Main Streets across America and a high quality of life with ample green space, biking or walking paths, and shopping, restaurants or health care located nearby and easily accessible.

Policymakers have taken significant steps to support coordination among transportation, housing, environmental and agricultural planning. Of particular importance is the Partnership for Sustainable Communities, a joint effort between the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, the Department of Housing and Urban Development and the Department

of Transportation. In his 2011 budget, President Obama proposed \$830 million for collaborative projects between these key agencies to improve quality of life in our communities and increase transportation options, affordable housing and economic opportunity – together.

Similarly, the Livable Communities Act, sponsored by Senator Chris Dodd, would build upon this concept by authorizing \$4 billion in competitive grants for communities with promising plans and projects. Without this kind of funding assistance, many small towns and rural areas lack the financial resources, planning capacity, or authority to implement forward-looking solutions.

The intention of this partnership is to support investments in one area that promote goals in others. For example, highway investments in a small town should strengthen the existing Main Street rather than undermine it – and we believe it takes a whole lot more than a highway to keep our economies sustainable and our communities livable. Whether that highway helps or hurts is very much determined by where it goes, whether it is safe for older residents and children, whether it brings jobs or pushes them away, whether it protects or destroys agricultural land and whether it increases or denies access for those who cannot drive.

If any part of the country is in need of a comprehensive, cross-departmental approach, it is America’s small towns and rural areas. Many communities have already adopted these principles and seen great success, as demonstrated in these case studies.

TRANSPORTATION FOR AMERICA (T4) is the largest, most diverse coalition working on transportation reform today. Our nation’s transportation network is based on a policy that has not been significantly updated since the 1950s. We believe it is time for a bold new vision — transportation that guarantees our freedom to move however we choose and leads to a stronger economy, greater energy security, cleaner environment and healthier America for all of us. We’re calling for more responsible investment of our federal tax dollars to create a safer, cleaner, smarter transportation system that works for everyone.

Huron, South Dakota

“Transit service is a critical element in our infrastructure. Without People’s Transit, there would be a lot of people here living a lower standard of life.”

David McGirr, Mayor of Huron, South Dakota

In Huron, many older residents are able to access groceries and services because of People’s Transit, and the town today is home to its first-ever transit center.

Huron is the county seat of Beadle County, at the midpoint of eastern South Dakota. The city, whose motto is “it’s a brand new day,” was named after the Huron Native American tribe and is home to the South Dakota State Fair, held annually five days before Labor Day. Its population was about 12,000, according to the 2000 Census.

Temperatures in Huron can drop as low as 25 degrees below zero, and with a large senior population, many residents were worried about how their older neighbors in this rural community could access life’s essentials without transportation options. This led, thirty years ago, to the Huron Area Senior Center’s purchase of a cargo van from a federal surplus warehouse. The Board had to round up passenger seats from a car dealer in Aberdeen just to ensure older residents could actually ride it.

People’s Transit, as the system is called, started as a pilot program for the state of South Dakota in the mid-1970s, receiving most of its funding from the Older Americans Act, until 1981 saw the beginning of federal dollars for rural transportation. The service quickly expanded, bringing seniors to meals, recreational activities and health services. In 1975, Huron officials added the first wheelchair-accessible van to the fleet.



In the late 1990s, a building committee was established. Then-City Commissioner and current Mayor David McGirr worked with community members to locate a site for today’s transit center, called Huron’s Great Station. Given South Dakota’s frigid winters, the center had to be energy efficient just to pay the bills. It takes a lot of work to shovel through the parking lot and thaw buses before they go out on the road, but the community has come to heavily rely on the system.

“Transit service is a critical element in our infrastructure,” McGirr said. “Without People’s Transit, there would be a lot of people here living a lower standard of life. If ever they went away, I don’t know how we’d replace them.”

Source: Community Transportation Association of America <http://web1.ctaa.org/webmodules/webarticles/anmviewer.asp?a=23&cz=2>

Menominee Indian Reservation, Wis.

“We’re very proud of our transit system and the work it does everyday in helping people get to places like the doctor or to the shop.”

Lisa Waukau, Menominee Tribal Chair

The Menominee Tribe in rural Wisconsin partnered with local schools and health providers to help residents navigate its sparse reservation while maintaining good stewardship of the land.

The Menominee Indian tribe’s reservation includes almost 250,000 acres of largely rural and forested land near Green Bay and has a rich history in the state of Wisconsin, with a treaty dating back to 1854.

With hundreds of miles of rivers and streams and dozens of native plant species, transportation was a significant challenge. Menominee Regional Public Transit was established in 1982 because people needed help getting around the reservation and accessing services, according to Shawn Klemens, Menominee Transit Director.

“We had so many people without vehicles, and with long distances to travel just to get to the nearest grocery store, transit made sense,” Klemens said. More than 90 percent of the tribal population of 3,200 use Menominee Transit, and the service makes more than 80,000 trips every year.

Partnerships with the College of the Menominee Nation (pictured above), as well as local schools, veterans’ services, Menominee County Human Services and other institutions help residents meet their unique needs while preserving precious natural resources.



“Good, efficient public transit is something that you don’t realize how important it is and how much it can help until you have it,” says Menominee Tribal Chairman Lisa Waukau. “We’re very proud of our transit system and the work it does everyday in helping people get to places like the doctor or to shop.”

Source: Community Transportation Association of America

<http://web1.ctaa.org/webmodules/webarticles/an-mviewer.asp?a=23&z=2>

Cache Valley, Utah

“If you fail to plan, you plan to fail.”

State Rep. Marc Gibbs, R-Idaho

Through a unique community planning process called Envision Cache Valley, residents in Cache Valley, Utah established strong benchmarks for preserving farmland, maintaining clean air and welcoming new development and housing.

Envision Cache Valley is modeled after Envision Utah, a similar statewide process widely praised in planning circles that operates under the banner “how we grow matters.”

Valley residents were motivated to take charge of their future in response to estimates that 2040 population levels would likely double to a quarter-million from present day 125,000. Air quality, a healthy economy and smart use of existing resources were identified as key priorities. The Cache Valley Regional Council, an agreement between Cache Valley jurisdictions and officials from both Cache County, Utah and neighboring Franklin County, Idaho, constituted the beginning of the visioning process.

According to the Envision Cache Valley website, “participants tackled such difficult issues as growth locations and patterns, private property rights, transportation, air quality, water quality, economic development, job growth, agriculture, land consumption, housing, environment, critical lands and recreation.”

Working off a baseline scenario that outlined the future of Cache Valley absent clear goals, residents asked themselves how they would preserve what was best about their community while embracing inevi-



table change.

During a 2009 Envision Utah meeting, Idaho State Representative Marc Gibbs, a Republican, said of the effort: “if you fail to plan, you plan to fail.”

Participants found that many of their goals – preserving farmland and open space, promoting recreation and community and maintaining air quality – would be best achieved through a more connected transit system. To that end, the final vision statement calls for higher capacity development to reduce infrastructure costs, enhanced peak-time bus loops, a potential bus-rapid-transit line and streets that accommodate walking and biking.

Source: Envision Cache Valley
<http://www.envisioncachevalley.com/>

Laconia, New Hampshire

“I think what the EPA process did is it really got the creative juices flowing. It gave the decision-makers and citizens the energy and the enthusiasm and the excitement to move forward with those ideas on their own.”

Shanna Saunders, Director, Planning and Zoning, Town of Laconia

Laconia worked with the U.S. EPA on three neighborhood plans to enhance the safety and accessibility of their streets and add more vitality to the community.

Laconia, New Hampshire is a longtime tourist destination and hotspot for vacation homes and retirees. However, the absence of a longer-term plan was putting a strain on year-round residents and had the potential to leave core neighborhoods in the dust.

In 2006, Laconia officials applied to participate in the U.S. EPA’s Smart Growth Implementation Assistance program. The EPA assisted residents and staff in a visioning process that eventually resulted in a comprehensive Master Plan.

“I think what the EPA process did is it really got the creative juices flowing,” said Shanna Saunders, Director of Planning and Zoning for the City of Laconia. “It gave the decision-makers and citizens the energy and the enthusiasm and the excitement to move forward with those ideas on their own.”

The Master Plan, titled “Three Neighborhoods, One Vision,” was designed to maintain the city’s small-town character while encouraging investment in core neighborhoods. Three major neighborhoods – Downtown Laconia, Weirs Beach and Lakeport – emerged with concrete plans as a result of EPA assistance.



In the Weirs Beach area, for instance, EPA traffic engineers helped transform a congested area that was unsafe for both driving and walking. Now, bicyclists and pedestrians have easy access and driving is safer as well.

Although the economic downturn forced Laconia to delay some improvements to downtown, officials said EPA assistance has created a foundation for future action.

“A lot of the information once we do hire professionals could easily be handed over to be used for the design,” Saunders said.

Source: Environmental Protection Agency: <http://www.epa.gov/smartgrowth/pdf/laconia.pdf> Saunders, Shanna. Telephone Interview. April 2, 2010.

Davidson, North Carolina

“To me, I have no problem with the government trying to look at the big picture. Livability and smart growth are in the interest of everyone and we all have the responsibility to be involved.”

Kris Krider, Town Planner, Davidson, North Carolina

Davidson faced a surge in population head-on by revitalizing its town center and improving transportation options, earning the 2004 National Award for Smart Growth Achievement from the U.S. EPA.

Davidson, North Carolina, a small community 20 miles from Charlotte, is noted for its small town identity and great neighborhoods. Davidson has seen a sharp hike in population since 2000, but by increasing transportation options and revitalizing Main Street, the town was able to preserve its character and community. Davidson was the 2004 recipient of a National Award for Smart Growth Achievement from the U.S. EPA.

The key to Davidson’s success, according to Town Planner Kris Krider, was connecting each new housing or commercial development with travel options and broadening the definition of how people move.

“Sitting in traffic is not one of the themes of livability that we think is valuable,” Krider said. “It could be a walking path. It could be bike paths. Connectivity is not just streets, it’s connecting people.”

Under current law, communities like Davidson that take a more comprehensive approach to transportation often get shut out of federal dollars. That is why Krider supports President Obama’s move to reward the efforts like the ones Davidson has pursued.



“To me, I have no problem with the government trying to look at the big picture,” Krider said. “Livability and smart growth are in the interest of everyone and we all have a responsibility to be involved.”

“I think the relationship between the DOT, HUD and EPA is a great way to start,” Krider added, citing the Partnership for Sustainable Communities that stresses collaboration between the three agencies. “I think it’s looking at things comprehensively. We don’t live in a world that’s just HUD and EPA, so the relationships between agencies in the federal government should mimic what towns are facing.”

Source: Environmental Protection Agency:
http://www.epa.gov/smartgrowth/sgia_communities.htm#nh

Krider, Kris. Telephone Interview. Monday, March 19, 2010.

Breckenridge, Colorado

“You’ve got to find ways to keep the police officers, the teachers, the managers in the community.”

Mayor Sam Mamula, Breckenridge, Colorado

Breckenridge is a resort destination for thousands of vacationers every year, but was unaffordable to the people working in the community until an effort between the EPA and the Colorado Department of Health launched new affordable housing options.

Local residents employed in the resort town of Breckenridge, Colorado were being squeezed. The median cost for a single-family home in Breckenridge was \$725,000, out of reach for the resort cooks, teachers and police officers, whom Mayor Sam Mamula described as “both the economic engine and the soul of the town.” Many workers had 45 minute commutes or longer.

Residents in the Wellington Neighborhood of Breckenridge chose to repeal restrictive zoning policies and reclaim a 22-acre brownfield site. With funding from the U.S. EPA and the Colorado Department of Public Health, officials approved 122 new market-rate and affordable homes built with a traditional neighborhood aesthetic. Twenty of those acres are dedicated to open space.

According to the EPA, “Wellington has increased the supply of affordable housing, cleaned a contaminated site and created a compact, walkable neighborhood with access to trails and open space.” Eighty percent of the new homes were reserved for people who work in Summit County at a cost that was one-third or lower than the median Breckenridge housing price.



Just as intended, many new homeowners were the very people the effort intended to help: shop owners, teachers, police officers and even the town manager.

“You’ve got to find ways to keep the police officers, the teachers, the managers in the community,” said Mayor Mamula. “There’s nothing else like the Wellington Neighborhood in the county and not much else like it in the whole country.”

Source: Environmental Protection Agency:
<http://www.epa.gov/smartgrowth/breckenridge.htm>

Meridian, Mississippi

“Some may think ‘livable communities’ is a phrase that refers only to urban areas. I assure you, it is not. A safe, strong and efficient transportation system in our small towns and rural areas, in addition to our larger cities, is necessary if we are to continue to grow our economy and provide access to the American dream.”

Mayor John Robert Smith, Meridian, Mississippi

Meridian revitalized its downtown and became a transit hub for rural Mississippi and the southern U.S., improving quality of life for residents and visitors.

Meridian, Mississippi is a small city of 40,000 near the Alabama border. Under the leadership of former Mayor John Robert Smith, Meridian reversed the decline of its city center and historic buildings through investment in downtown and in the creation of a transportation hub.

Today, Meridian’s Union Station hosts 250 events and services 300,000 passengers annually and has spurred millions of dollars of investment and revitalization in the area, with retail, restaurants and residential projects. A companion effort is currently underway to build new moderate-to-low income units on single-family lots.

The transit hub has turned Meridian into a destination and improved connectivity to rural Mississippi and the entire country. Investment in intercity transportation networks enabled leaders in Meridian to link public transit, passenger rail, high-speed rail, commercial air service and intercity buses. This greatly expanded the mobility of this largely rural pocket of the U.S.



Mayor Smith, who declined a bid for a fifth term to join Transportation for America in Washington D.C., says the kind of livability elements embraced by President Obama are welcomed in rural America.

“Some may think ‘livable communities’ is a phrase that refers only to urban areas,” Smith said. “I assure you, it is not. A safe, strong and efficient transportation system in our small towns and rural areas, in addition to our larger cities, is necessary if we are to continue to grow our economy and provide access to the American dream.”

Source: Transportation for America

Lancaster County, Pennsylvania

“Smart growth in Lancaster County thrives due to citizens’ dedication to maintain its unique sense of place.”

Lancaster County Resident

Lancaster County officials preserved acres of open space and planned effectively for future development with significant input from the community.

Lancaster County has faced the same squeeze as rural areas across the country: new growth, coupled with a yearning to maintain farmland and open space. The County Planning Commission sought to plan for the future without compromising what residents wanted to keep.

Envision Lancaster County was a “comprehensive, multi-staged countywide plan to...maintain the county’s distinctive sense of place over the next 25 years,” according to the EPA. The visioning process “directs new development to existing towns to protect the farmland, rural areas, and natural landscapes that define the county’s character.”

The plan recognizes that maintaining open space and welcoming growth is not an either-or proposition. Commissioners emphasized a “balance between protecting natural resources and farmland and encouraging growth and development in appropriate areas.”

The “Rural Areas” component of the plan is modeled after similar urban efforts that target new development in town centers and areas where retail and services are most accessible.



“Smart growth in Lancaster County thrives due to citizens’ dedication to maintain its unique sense of place,” said Harry Loshnowsky, an East Hempfield Township resident.

Source: Environmental Protection Agency:
http://www.epa.gov/smartgrowth/awards/sg_awards_publication_2009.htm#overall_excellence

North Dakota

“Through a unified vision called Smart Growth, we will build a dynamic new future for North Dakota. Working together, we can achieve this bright future and a quality of life second to none, for ourselves and for our children.”

Governor John Hoeven, R–North Dakota

Facing a decline in population and lagging job growth, North Dakota’s governor initiated a long-range process to attract new employers and prepare North Dakotans for the 21st century.

In 2003, North Dakota Governor John Hoeven, a Republican elected in 2002 and re-elected overwhelmingly in 2006, launched a statewide smart growth initiative. The resulting Vision 2000 drew from people with a diverse array of perspectives, including business leaders, public sector employees and agricultural workers.

“During the decade of the 1980s, our state lost almost 14,000 people in population, our ag base was declining, and we were creating few new jobs in other sectors of our economy,” Hoeven said in his 2003 State of the State speech.

According to Hoeven, the visioning process – combined with the overall strength of the economy in the 1990s – aided the state in attracting and retaining new employers.

“In fact, communities like Bismarck and Fargo have seen significant growth of 12 to 22 percent, while other larger communities, and some smaller communities, have held their own, and even grown some as well,” he said. “But much of rural North Dakota has continued to struggle, and today we need a new focus that begins a second chapter in our quest for prosperity and quality of life.”



Hoeven’s smart growth vision included a commitment to excellence in education, using new technology to make the state attractive to employers and targeting industries like agriculture, tourism and energy where North Dakota has a competitive advantage.

“Through a unified vision called Smart Growth, we will build a dynamic new future for North Dakota,” Hoeven said. “Working together, we can achieve this bright future and a quality of life second to none, for ourselves and for our children.”

Source: North Dakota Office of the Governor:
<http://governor.state.nd.us/media/speeches/030107.html>

Wyoming

“High on the list is how we can welcome growth and prosperity and still protect the things and the places that make Wyoming a special place to live.”

Governor Dave Freudenthal, D – Wyoming

The state of Wyoming put together a blueprint for getting infrastructure up-to-date and preparing for new business while preserving its unique quality of life.

Wyoming has faced similar challenges to North Dakota. Although the state is rich in coal and natural resources, its population is in decline, especially among college graduates. Democratic Governor Dave Freudenthal and state officials employed smart growth principles and visioning to keep talent in Wyoming and improve quality of life. Wyoming is one of the sparsest states in the country.

“We have arrived at a unique point in time in Wyoming,” Freudenthal said in 2008. “Our economy continues to surge ahead, unemployment remains at a record low and we’re seeing an encouraging increase in the number of companies that are looking to move to Wyoming and set up shop.” Although Wyoming has struggled alongside the rest of the country in the economic recession, it maintains one of the lowest unemployment rates of all 50 states.

Infrastructure in Wyoming has often failed to keep up with the movement of people in search of industrial jobs, and the state’s plentiful natural resources can be a mixed blessing. On the one hand, they have kept the economy strong, but overuse of the land could come at the expense of the Wyoming’s beauty and unique appeal. With the benefits of growth come “serious challenges,” as Freudenthal put it.



“There is growing attention being given to the pace and pattern of growth in the state, especially as it affects our wildlife, our characteristic open spaces, our breathtaking mountain vistas and our wild and pristine places,” he said. “There are also mounting pressures for housing and infrastructure in cities, towns and counties around the state, where an influx of people and an increase in industrial activity have strained existing resources.

“When considering the most significant challenges facing Wyoming and its future, high on the list is how we can welcome growth and prosperity and still protect the things and the places that make Wyoming a special place to live,” he continued. “We need to foster conversations about how to build the Wyoming that we want for our kids and grandkids.”

Source: Office of Governor Dave Freudenthal
<http://governor.wy.gov/blog/infrastructure/building-the-wyoming-we-want.html>

McCall, Idaho

“Working with [the Environmental Protection Agency] gave citizens a vocabulary that they didn’t have. People know what they want, but they don’t know how to express it. What the team was able to do was put the tools in the citizens’ hands to say, ‘This is what we want – it looks like this.’”

Roger Millar, Deputy City Manager, McCall, Idaho.

McCall officials worked with the EPA on effective planning along the town’s major corridor, resulting in new businesses and preserved open space.

McCall, Idaho has a population of less than 3,000, which fluctuates wildly by season. The city is located near the middle of the state on the Southern end of Payette Lake.

People in McCall were concerned that the demands of new residents and visitors would interfere with the town’s history and charm. In response, city officials applied for and were granted EPA assistance in planning for new development along the East-West Loop Road, the roadway that runs through the town’s core.

The EPA worked closely with local officials and community members on a plan that brought in new business while meeting the needs of neighborhoods. McCall leaders were confident enough in the EPA’s work that they adopted the comprehensive plan. McCall’s former chief planner, Roger Millar, said the EPA let residents take charge, while giving them the confidence and the tools they needed.

“Working with [the EPA] gave citizens a vocabulary that they didn’t have,” Millar told the Associated Press. “People know what they want, but they don’t know how to express it. What the team was able to do was put the tools in the citizens’ hands to say, ‘This is what we want – it looks like this.’”



Source: Allen, Anne Wallace. “EPA Planners Help McCall Prepare for Change.” Associated Press. December 26, 2005

Taos, New Mexico

“The Town of Taos benefited from [EPA] assistance through increased public awareness of the traffic and development issues along the Paseo del Pueblo Sur Corridor.”

Town of Taos Resolution No. 07-10

The EPA helped Taos officials improve access for bicyclists and pedestrians, make streets safer and pursue commercial and residential growth that fit with the town’s character.

The town of Taos, population 4,700 as of the 2000 census, is the county seat of Taos County in north-central New Mexico and adjacent to a major ski resort.

Town officials requested EPA assistance in their drive to increase development and economic opportunity along the Paseo del Pueblo Sur corridor on New Mexico State Highway 68.

The EPA, local residents and officials together identified three steps for meeting objectives: improving traffic management through increased bicycle and pedestrian access; street design policies that create distinct sections of town and make roads safer for drivers, bicyclists and pedestrians; and pursuing mixed-use zoning along the corridor, including commercial and residential, in a style that fits the town’s character.

“The Town of Taos benefited from [EPA] assistance through increased public awareness of the traffic and development issues along the Paseo del Pueblo Sur Corridor,” according to a Town Resolution.

Following the EPA’s role in planning for the corridor, the Town Council authorized funding for additional assistance.



Source: Environmental Protection Agency
http://www.epa.gov/smartgrowth/sgia_communities.htm#nh

Town of Taos:
<http://www.taosgov.com/legalordinances/resolutions/2007/07-11.pdf>