

Leading Indicators of Rural Civic Engagement

Enthusiastic People, Positive Dialog Bring Results

“Are there activities or trends that point to the opportunity to take our communities to new heights?”

BY LANCE WOODBURY



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In many industries, people use leading indicators to understand what might happen in the future. Commodity prices are considered a leading indicator of land values, building permits are a leading indicator of construction activity, and the Consumer Confidence Index is a leading indicator of what might happen in the overall economy. Many of these numbers point to possible trends that help us develop a clearer picture of the world around us.

Now, consider your local community and most citizens' desire to have a well-functioning community. Are there leading indicators that point to the potential for robust civic engagement? Are there activities or trends that point to the opportunity to take our communities to new heights? Here are three possible statistics I would suggest:

U-Haul commissions: In one western Kansas community, a U-Haul rental franchisee told us that commissions were down. You see, the franchisee only gets a commission if he or she rents a U-Haul that is leaving the community. If there are more trailers coming into a community than departing it, then commissions will be down and U-Haul will come get the extra trailers. Thus lower U-Haul commissions, while unfortunate for the business owner, signify a trend of in-migration. New people moving into or returning to a community offers the potential to involve a new and different group of participants in a community conversation.

Trending age of elected officials: People generally tend to become more conservative as they become older. Their appetite for risk and new ventures decreases, their need for security and stability increases, their willingness to make major changes wanes. If you look at the average age of your county or city commission, or other

key elected officials or community leaders, what is your local trend? Are leaders getting younger or older? If they are getting younger, there may be a greater opportunity to introduce and implement new ideas in the community, to engage in new efforts that build bridges across the Public Square to improve the whole community. While older leaders have important wisdom and history to contribute, the younger leaders will bring a level of energy to implement and willingness to experiment, which are crucial components of a rural community's thinking about its future.

Improvements beyond economic development: When considering rural community development, there is often a tendency to think only about economic development. "If we can just get a large employer to move to town, all our problems will be solved," the thinking goes. But in order for a new company to move to town, or for a local company to consider expanding, there need to be other improvements in the community such as affordable housing, quality, well-maintained schools, and accessible health care. If you measure your community's assets beyond economic development, how do you fare? How would you rate your community's willingness to invest in such community infrastructure? If the willingness to invest in the broader community is strong, then so are the chances for a community that is engaged and growing.

Leading indicators only suggest the potential for what might happen. But if the right environment exists, if people are actively engaged, and if the conversation is positive, then I guarantee you good things will happen at your community's Public Square. **KCL**

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