

Overview

"Can Small Towns Be Cool" is an example-driven, visually graphic interactive presentation that showcases successful community initiatives. Based on visits to more than 250 best-practice communities in 12 states, the 60-75 minute adaptable presentation provides 10 success themes with actual community examples that build vitality. Designed for community leaders, including elected and appointed officials, business leaders, and individuals with a passion of making their community a better place to live and work, follow-up opportunities for facilitated discussion and community coaching is available.



To request a "Can Small Towns Be Cool?" presentation in your community contact:
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Presentation Available: Can Small Towns Be Cool?



"Can Small Towns Be Cool helps communities to consider new opportunities for success."

—Dave Ivan



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***Can Small Towns be Cool?* Presentation helps communities grow smart.**

“Cool Cities” has increasingly become a buzzword among both community and economic development practitioners. The opportunity to reverse the brain drain that has plagued communities has become a hot topic throughout the United States. While much research has centered around urban centers, the struggles and successes of larger cities is oftentimes amplified within rural areas. It is the small town that brings its residents, often defined by school district boundaries, together through commerce, education and a sense of personal identity. Although these communities play a critical role in shaping the overall landscape in rural America, some towns teeter on the brink of extinction while others enjoy envious prosperity. It is this dichotomy, and the opportunity to learn from successful communities, that is discussed in this presentation.

Success Themes

Based on four levels of analysis, keys for community economic development success include:

- Strong engagement between citizens, community organizations, and government.
 - Government actively reaches out to citizens and residents in setting the community’s agenda and future vision.
- Successful approaches to land use opportunities.
 - Successful communities know they must take a more realistic approach in considering their community from a regional context relative to future opportunities.
- Willingness to adapt zoning regulations for new opportunities.
 - Beyond joint planning efforts with neighboring jurisdictions, there is a willingness to adapt/change zoning regulations to capitalize on changing trends and new opportunities.
- An organized and active cultural economic development approach.
 - Beyond historic preservation, successful communities have organized to pursue an active cultural economic development approach that capitalizes on their authentic cultural assets.
- Deliberate effort to engage youth.
 - Successful communities realize that the first step in reversing the “brain drain” is to reach out and engage their youth on a variety of levels.

- Attention to a community’s natural assets.
 - Thriving communities recognize the natural amenities that exist within their community and focus on capitalizing on these natural features for the enjoyment of all citizens.
- Local entrepreneurial investment.
 - Changes in community momentum are oftentimes initiated by a local entrepreneur or philanthropists who has made a significant investment, or reinvestment in their community.
- Willingness to seek help from the outside.
 - These communities understand the system of identifying resources and accessing expertise to improve their community.
- Community improvement is a pro-active assignment.
 - Making their community a better place to live is a proactive assignment and successful communities, and their leaders, know that.
- Lessons are learned from setbacks, successes are celebrated.
 - Thriving communities recognize that setbacks go hand-in-hand with success. They learn from their failures and celebrate their successes.



Community building, in every sense, has become a hot topic. And while “cool cities” may not be for everyone, the themes highlighted from the project represent common approaches among successful communities – approaches that are more about long-term sustainability than simply being a “cool” place to live.

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Dave Ivan conducts community and economic development programs on behalf of MSU Extension. A frequent guest lecturer on small town success at state and national municipal conferences Ivan has conducted previous research on community sustainability, including a 2002 USDA Fund for Rural America project entitled “Small Town Success Strategies.” He serves as a member of the MSU Extension community development, economic development and land use area of expertise teams.