



Towns capitalize on what makes them special ; Rural areas fighting loss of farmland and an influx of strip malls can get help.

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Orange County, N.Y., is where most of North America's onion crop is grown. But the local economy is shaky, so county executives want to expand and diversify without losing their agricultural base. The question is: How can they maintain their rural appeal while luring new businesses and additional residents to the area?

Five hundred miles away in Anne Arundel County, Maryland, constituents are facing a similar problem. How can they get an influx of new capital without compromising their open lands?

Farther south, the center of Port Gibson, Miss., (pop. 1,800) has been virtually abandoned as businesses struggle to survive encroachment by nearby "big box" stores.

Towns all over the country - in fact, throughout the industrial world - are facing similar struggles as the social landscape shifts. Strip malls and mass merchants multiply, leaving traditional downtowns abandoned. Owners of farms with low (or no) profits are tempted to sell out to realtors.

One group that's trying to help is the Countryside Exchange. Since 1987, it has addressed the issues of reduced agriculture and increased urban sprawl in 110 communities across North America. The group, a nonprofit arm of **Glywood Center** in Cold Spring, N.Y., brings together experienced international teams of volunteer professionals to work with

community representatives. Their goal is to improve the local economy without losing rural appeal - pristine forests, open land, or clear-running trout streams.

"We've found that the reason folks choose to live in small communities is because of the open land," says Judith LaBelle, president of **Glynwood Center**. "Any advice we give concerning community growth has to preserve that."

When community leaders approach the exchange, often they know they want to revitalize but are at a loss as to where to start.

So the exchange first tries to determine if it can have an impact. It considers similar communities where it has done work and then looks at the assets of the town and neighboring communities (landmarks, thriving businesses, agricultural potential, and nature "potential").

What they seek is an undeveloped strength - perhaps a historic cohesiveness in the center-city architecture, an unrecognized tourist site, or proximity to cultural events. (Anything that can be exploited for the good of the community.)

Next, the exchange looks for funding to support the town's improvement efforts. For example, a village on New York's Hudson River may be eligible for Historic Waterways money. Or, as was the case in Port Gibson, the National Park Service had funds available for the preservation of neglected Civil War battlefields.

"What we try to do," says Ms. LaBelle, "is find key issues and focus on three or four. The initial grant covers our cost of research, travel, and administration [on average, around \$60,000], and the preliminary development of a primary asset that can be the anchor to move the community forward."

Help is on the way

Once funding is in place, the exchange sets an agenda and selects a team of six to eight professionals from around the world who are willing to share their expertise.

Past exchanges have drawn on the talents of Cheryl Brine, for example, an economic development consultant for the Ontario Ministry of Agriculture, Food, and Rural Affairs. Her specialty is helping municipalities recruit new businesses. Another alumnus is Pete Frost, a community action officer in the Countryside Council for Wales. His area of expertise is conserving the aesthetic quality of the landscape and preserving diversity and richness of wildlife.

The team, chosen from a network of enthusiastic volunteers (800 have participated to date), then makes a seven-day visit to the town, during which members focus on how to confront and overcome the community's problems.

But they don't do it alone.

The exchange always works with a local organizing committee (LOC), a "spokesgroup" for the town made up of people from all walks of life - perhaps clergy and forest rangers, labor leaders and teenagers. Before the team visits, the LOC submits information that identifies the problems, desires, and fears of community residents.

When the exchange team finally travels to the site, the LOC helps it meet with various groups and study the issues in-depth. Sometimes this means talking with people over a plate of chicken at a potluck supper.

But no matter what the setting, the visiting experts spend much time listening to what townspeople have to say. A typical day's agenda may include separate meetings with pastors, realtors and developers, police and emergency-services officials, and the public works department. There might also be a trip to a local school to talk to students and an economic development meeting with the Chamber of Commerce.

Each meeting may include hundreds of questions and answers. The more enthusiasm the visitors can generate, the more active community groups will be once they leave.

At the end of the week-long visit, the exchange leaves a thick book of recommendations. This detailed report, which can contain as many as 100 specific suggestions, becomes the town's "bible," the idea pool to build its future.

When the exchange wrote its report for one community project, the Northern Dutchess (N.Y.) Alliance, it included 14 suggestions for addressing public concerns about developers destroying historic or picturesque countryside.

A top suggestion was to be proactive about development rather than reactive by creating "shovel ready" sites where all the regulatory and fiscal requirements for a proposed development are established and ready for an appropriate developer.

Another tip: Draft zoning ordinances that promote growth in village centers - thus protecting gateways to villages and the surrounding countryside.

"We always recommend setting some priorities," says LaBelle about the exchange report. "Start with some easier things that can be accomplished quickly. This will keep the enthusiasm level high and give community members a sense of accomplishment."

The hard work finally pays off

Each recommendation that's achieved is progress and, over time (often as little as a few months), towns notice improvement - more traffic downtown, more revenue at lunch counters, more activity at real estate offices.

But because tougher issues take longer, sometimes enthusiasm wanes. That's why exchange administrators remain available to give advice and clarification long after the volunteers have gone. If necessary, they can even provide seminars, for a price. For

townspeople who may be implementing suggestions years after the fact, this continued support is crucial.

"We've been working on executing the Countryside exchange recommendations for almost eight years," says Al Hollingsworth, a Port Gibson community activist. "We started out working on fairly simple suggestions - like making a list of local restaurants that will accept bus tours [to the battlefield]. Then we had to make repairs to a couple of downtown buildings before they could be sold [revitalizing the center city]. That took a lot longer. Now renovation of the key building at the battlefield has almost been completed. Between applying for additional grants and raising matching funds [both suggestions from the report] the town has been steadily improving."

For Port Gibson, the hard work has paid off. The town, which was declining at one point, now boasts a 90 percent occupancy rate on Main Street and has even sold an abandoned building to an arts organization. Local officials expect this will diversify and multiply the visitors coming into town.

"One of my favorite stories," says the exchange's LaBelle, "goes back to a community we worked with a few years ago. At an annual event, we met this man named Ted who ran the haberdashery. He said, 'My favorite thing about this Exchange program is, people used to come into my store and say, 'Ain't nothin' ever happenin' here. Nothin' ever will.' Now, no one says that anymore.'"(c) Copyright 2004. The Christian Science Monitor