

MID-AMERICA RURAL COMMUNITIES BECOMING SUSTAINABLE COMMUNITIES, Joslyn Institute for Sustainable Communities (JISC)

December 24, 2018, W. Cecil Steward, www.joslyninstitute.org

“Rural America is getting old. The median age is 43, seven years older than city dwellers. Its productivity, defined as output per worker, is lower than urban America’s. Its families have lower incomes. And its share of the population is shrinking: the United States has grown by 75 million people since 1990, but this has mostly occurred in cities and suburbs. Rural areas have lost some 3 million people. Since the 1990s, problems such as crime and opioid abuse, once associated with urban areas, are increasingly rural phenomena.”

The distress of 50 million Americans should concern everyone. Powerful economic forces are arrayed against rural America and, so far, efforts to turn it around have failed. Not every small town can be a tech hub, nor should it be. But that can’t be the only answer. “The Hard Truths of Trying to Save the Rural Economy” Eduardo Porter, N.Y. Times, December 16, 2018

Actually, in Nebraska and many other areas of Mid-America, especially where food and other agriculture products dominate the economy, it is not the economy that needs fixing. It is the livability, maintenance, development and governance of the rural human habitats that need new visions, new relationships, new organic development, and constant

leadership. Such regional economies and local communities of support systems need each other. Neither can prosper, long-term in non-sustainable conditions. And, in such conditions America's urban cities will also suffer unintended consequences.

After twenty-five years of research and case building for making communities sustainable, it is the Joslyn Institute for Sustainable Community (JISC) mission and belief that practical answers to the transformation of small cities and rural communities into high quality-of-life and sustainable living environments rests within the ability of leaders and citizens to see the community, be it rural or urban or suburban, as a whole, organic enterprise. Our historic entrapment into a culture of disposable products, a consumer-driven economy, and the resulting environment of non-disposable waste has unconsciously and consequently driven mankind into the making of communities by parts and separated pieces of economic priority, largely unplanned, as contrasted to parts of an interrelated whole system of conservation living, culture and lifestyles.

We need visions, plans, and strategic thinking that will lead to interrelated collections of single designed solutions which solve multiple related problems; plans and decisions that are people-centered, interactive and accessible government and operations, systemic metrics of progress, and celebrations of wise thinking and good democratic results.

To aid in envisioning of a community as one whole organic enterprise, with interrelated parts or elements the JISC recommends identifications of the following typology of twelve interactive elements:

TWELVE ESSENTIAL COMPONENTS FOR A SUSTAINABLE COMMUNITY

- People/Citizens/Leadership/Visions for the Future
- Affordable, Sustainable Housing
- Schools/Quest for Education and Learning
- Comprehensive Health Care
- Food/Clean Water/Clean Air/Natural Resources
- Clean Energy
- Communications Technology
- Commerce/ Economic Resources/Inventive Making
- Good Government/Democracy/Justice/Equity Driven/Public Safety
- Faith Based Institutions/Social Services
- Transportation Services
- Community Character/Place-based Assets/Cultural History

To overlay this list as a guide to assessment of almost any community in mid-America will reveal that practically every component is broken, or bent, in any performance measure or as being a positive asset to

sustainability.

Every community has, or should have, a distinctive profile. This list can be used to define the community's assets and profile; it can be used to define sustainability gaps, plans and operational priorities. When used as the data source input to the Joslyn Institute's copyright and registered tool, "Sustainometrics"©, for creating and measuring progress, or regression, toward a condition of sustainability, the list can be an asset to the definition of interdependent, measurable indicators.

For instance, affordable housing is a critical need in all rural communities, but in Nebraska, which has resettled more refugees per capita than any state, and which also has lower-than-average incomes, housing - especially workforce housing - can help provide a multi-pronged solution to problems of safe, affordable housing, joblessness, derelict and stagnant neighborhoods, food deserts, transportation deficiencies, and more. Lack of affordable housing is the leading cause of homelessness among families with children and can jeopardize a child's performance and success in school. This problem contributes to health issues, neighborhood quality and can also seriously affect the growing population of low-income elderly. The dilemma of affordable housing thus has interdependent ripple effects, and solving this problem would have similar, positive ripple effects for the entire community and region.

An applications process defined by the Joslyn Institute for Sustainable

Communities for assessment, planning, and development for any community, neighborhood, or region would be guided by the following six-step process:

- The users of this tool must first accept a Philosophy, Principles, and Values Process of Sustainability (The Five Domains: Environment, Socio-Cultural, Technologies, Economics, Public Policies (EcoSTEP®), and
 - Accept the values concept of conservation of non-renewable materials and the limitations of rate of usage of renewable materials; and
 - Accept the eco-system concept of interdependence of the five domains. *Ref.: Sustainometrics©, W. Cecil Steward, Sharon B. Kuska, 2011, Ostberg Press, Atlanta, GA*

SIX STEPS TO CREATING A CONDITION OF COMMUNITY SUSTAINABILITY

1. Awareness Sessions, Community Leadership;

- Identify responsible elders, youth, and elected civic leaders
- Engage elected and citizen leaders in philosophy, process, and values discourse around case studies of the Sustainometrics© Matrix
- Collaborative consideration of hypotheses of key local issues
- Discuss Visions, community futures

2. Assessment (Inventory of Community Assets, Issues, Problems, and Opportunities);

- Use the inventory to define a consultant's external definition of the project(s) and its potential contribution to a sustainable community future

3. Setup of Project Sustainometrics© Matrix;

- Define the problem(s) and its context;
- Define a PROJECT VISION;
- Analyze the mathematical set of the algorithm of the Five Domains, in the context of the defined "problem" and the Vision;
- Set the relative values for each of the Five Domains;
- Identify a minimum of three measurable Sustainability Indicators within each of the Five Domains (specific information discovered within an Assets Inventory);
- Assign relative values to each Indicator, according to relationships defined during the Assets Inventory (place value plots in the "present", or "near-term" matrix diagram);
- Conduct training for administration, stakeholders, and planners;
- Focus on responsibilities of a designated "Planning Director's" local responsibilities, and a "Project Director's" external consultation responsibilities;

4. Prescriptions: (Identify Metrics/Indicators/Time Targets) for each sustainability goal or project;

5. Applications: (Planning, Design, Implementation Decisions for Interdependent Sustainability Indicators/with Time Targets);

6. Establish planning objectives and priorities over a three phase time

scale (near term, mid-term, long -term).

- - Display the Sustainability Indicators and their objectives, priorities, and degrees of urgency in the format of the Sustainometrics© Matrix diagram.

- Establish a Post Application Cycle of Future Assessments (Sustainometrics©)
 - The matrix becomes a key source for plotting annual measurement, or periodic reviews of progress and priorities toward sustainable conditions.
 - Adjust priorities and values for the next cycle of planning.

Reference: Revitalization:

Lincoln Land Institute's eight step recommendations for revitalizing America's small and mid-size cities' Sustainability Model (*Land Lines, July 2017*):

1. Build civic capacity and talent. 2. Encourage a shared public- and private-sector vision. 3. Expand opportunities for low-income workers. 4. Build on an authentic sense of place. (VISION) 5. Focus regional efforts on rebuilding a strong downtown. 6. Engage in community and strategic planning. 7. Stabilize distressed neighborhoods. 8. Strategically leverage state policies.

Reference: Values

The Sustainability process will be conditioned by a person's, or organization's Values System. The value system influences behavior. Through the held value system we prioritize our judgements. The values people have integrated into their character are made apparent by their attitudes, beliefs, and actions.

Values are attitudes about the worth or importance of people, concepts, or things.

Examples:

- If your values do not embrace conservation of natural, non-renewable resources, most likely you will not be interested in “helping to create green, sustainable communities.” (Opposite view, Ray Anderson, previous CEO, Interface Carpet Corp.)
- If your world value view embraces “do what I can, where I am, to assure sustaining the earth for future generations”, you will most likely seek the local, “little” solutions. (Chef Dev Patel, Seattle, Washington (Farm Manager at Tom Douglas Restaurants -)

In addition, to leadership and a guiding process for sustainability our settlement habitats need continuous resources devoted to an on-going mission of enhancement of the twelve components of sustainable communities, as well as a sustainable oversight public/private organization. In the late 1960's the University of Nebraska and State Government created a jointly operated “Nebraska Community Improvement Program (NCIP)” to bring principles, consistency, training, and recognition to the sustenance and quality improvements to the

rural communities within the state borders. Unfortunately, for various cultural, leadership, and economic reasons the enterprise disappeared in 2005.

The JISC proposes the recreation of a similar organization. The new organization would facilitate demographic planning and incentives, education, leadership training, entrepreneur training, processes and concepts testing, and public and individual recognitions for community transformations. The service and oversight organization would be a great asset to the sustainability of rural communities. We propose that it be branded as the “(State) Community Homestead Organization”, and that, collectively, they would have the historical recall and authorizing policies of state and federal law to sustain the various state organizations.

Reference: The Original Homestead Acts

The **Homestead Acts** were several laws in the United States (passed at different times from 1862 to 1916, and as part of the New Deal, 1930) by which an applicant could acquire ownership of government land or the public domain, typically called a “[homestead](#).” In all, more than 270 million acres (1.1 million km²) of public land, or nearly 10% of the total area of the U.S., was given away free to 1.6 million homesteaders; most of the homesteads were west of the [Mississippi River](#). Wikipedia

There are parallel needs, economic opportunities, and habitat rationale for a new consideration of public assistance to settlement patterns in the U.S., between conditions of the 1860’s and the present time. Originally, the railroads west of the Mississippi River were new and the leaders of the Industrial Revolution were envisioning the opportunities for a spread of farming commodities, new communities, and networks

of rail shipping for goods and services from coast-to-coast. Today, there is a need for new sources of labor to support agriculture and the global food industries; for increased population to stabilize rural communities and small cities; and for incubation in affordable locations of new entrepreneurship that will incorporate new, diverse technologies. In an emerging culture of conservation of land, water, energy, food, and materials, the communities within the heartland of the U.S. have some distinct advantages over older, larger, urban and suburban agglomerations – not to mention an emerging cultural quest for smaller, affordable, safer, family friendly, and spiritually grounded communities.

The supporting resources for such state Community Homestead Acts and Organizations need not depend upon public financing, but should be primarily supported by business enterprises that depend upon viable communities for the sustainability of a business (i.e., banks, philanthropic foundations, energy generation and distribution, utilities, communications, tele-communications, broad band technologies, etc).

We propose these philosophical, process, and organizational strategies as an approach to answers to ***“Not every small town can be a tech hub, nor should it be. But that can’t be the only answer.”***

“The economy, the nation, and the world are all facing a set of circumstances whose component parts are individually massive and collectively daunting: inclusion, depletion, depression, lack of resilience. To truly solve any one requires also solving for the others. If we want to keep the American experiment going, we’ll have to confront this thorny, seemingly unsolvable knot.” The New Grand Strategy: Restoring America’s Prosperity, Security, and Sustainability in the 21st Century, Mykleby, Doherty, and Makower, 2016, St. Martin’s Press, N.Y.

