

Seeing the Small Town Future

Welcome

Deb:

- This video is your chance to see the future for small towns
- We won't be doing a separate Q&A session, but we want you to take notes right now, write down your stories, ideas and questions. Put them in the comment box on this page and we'll answer you personally.
- Be sure that you, every one of you, signed up to get the free weekly email newsletters. Those will help you keep your motivation up and give you great ideas to discuss with each other every week.

Intro & Big Insight

Do small towns have a future?

BECKY:

Not everyone sees a future for small towns. That's clear from media reports that call small towns "sleepy" and articles that talk about what's wrong with us. It's clear that rural people are assumed to be less ambitious than urban people. Rural is often mentioned as some place that humanity should leave behind in the inevitable march of progress and urbanization.

People in our own town reinforce this. They compare us to their version of the past and say things like, "I

remember when I was a kid, this town had so many stores downtown and now there's nothing."

Even when we're confident about our own town, we're left wondering whether it's the destiny of all small towns to die out eventually.

At SaveYour.Town, we see things differently. We know that small towns as a whole aren't going anywhere. We won't all pack up and move to the big city next year, and we know for a fact that small towns are actually necessary for the future of our society.

DEB:

In our 2017 trends video, we explained 3 good reasons small towns definitely have a future:

- Agriculture and food production,
- Energy and natural resources production, and
- Wildlife and nature conservation

Today, we have a new reason for you to add to your list:

- **Small towns grow strong people.**
 - Countless national leaders and people who have changed the world for the better in all fields have credited their small town upbringing for their character and strength. Supreme Court Justice Sandra Day O'Connor, singers like Taylor Swift and Carrie Underwood, actors like Jeff Daniels and Charlize Theron, artists like Grant Wood, athletes like Charles Barkley, scientists Norman Borlaug and George Washington Carver, and countless other strong people come from a rural background.

- We've heard company recruiters say they actively look for small town applicants because they make the best hires. We've seen news stories that colleges have begun to discover that rural students are well worth recruiting.
- Bottom line, rural people are resourceful. We have a strong sense of community. We survive when things get tough. We're resilient. ***Rural places grow strong people.***

With that foundation, knowing that we have a future, let's start seeing what that will look like.

BECKY:

Trends

Our first major trend for the future of small towns is ...

Growth isn't everything

We've all been told, "If you're not growing, you're dying." It's usually followed by a census report that says you're dying.

But that may not be a helpful way to look at small towns. If you think about it, why is population the only thing we measure? Is that really what matters in our towns? Growth doesn't tell us anything about our *quality of life*. And really, the quality of your life matters much more than whether the town is growing.

Growth isn't everything, and it's not the only thing. Today we have several alternative ways to measure how well our small towns are doing.

- **The first alternative is called "Shrink Smart"**
 - Important research from Iowa State University points to small towns that are shrinking, but where people report an excellent and even improving quality of life.
 - The researchers have been following 99 small towns for over 20 years, and they've found that it's possible for a town to "shrink smart" -- to lose population without losing quality of life.
 - They point to characteristics like openness to new ideas, to people being involved in the community, being trusting and supportive and tolerant, and where newcomers can be leaders involved in meaningful ways.
 - In other words, following the Idea Friendly method can improve your town in all the major characteristics that researchers say are critical to "Smart Shrinkage."
- **The second alternative view of growth comes from the Strong Towns Movement, where they point out "The more we grow, the poorer we get."**
 - Strong Towns has been demonstrating for years that chasing continuous growth is driving our local governments into insolvency.
 - Charles Muh-roan said "In the current approach to managing local governments, the more they grow, the poorer they become. While that growth

may improve a city or county's short-term cash flow, it destroys the long-term solvency."

- As we have let our towns spread out more and more, we've expanded the amount of infrastructure that we have to maintain for each person to the point we can't sustain it. Meanwhile, our older infrastructure is in desperate need of maintenance and replacement that we can't pay for.
- The solution is to stop chasing car-oriented growth like businesses with big parking lots and drive-throughs, and spread out housing developments.
- Charles said, "Instead of focusing on new growth, we need to obsess about making more productive use of that which we've already built."
- We want to return to our downtowns and the surrounding neighborhoods, which is a lot easier in a small town than a big city. We built those the Strong Towns way: slow incremental growth of one building, one floor at a time.
- And that's a pretty good pattern for small towns to follow to stay strong.

DEB:

- **The third alternative to chasing growth is called Doughnut Economics**
 - Instead of trying to achieve ever-increasing growth, Doughnut Economics by Kate Raworth tells us to shoot for the doughnut: the happy space where we meet everyone's basic needs

without overshooting the resources available to us.

- If we don't meet the needs of our residents, we're stuck in the hole in the middle of the doughnut. If we are sprawling out with bigger and bigger development and all that new infrastructure that we'll never be able to pay for or maintain, we're overshooting. We're past the doughnut and spending more than our resources can sustain.
- When we maintain a good quality of life for our people without overgrowing our resources, we're just right, right in the tasty part of the doughnut. And that's Doughnut Economics.
- **And finally, a fourth alternative to growth is the Happiness Index.**
 - The nation of Bhutan measures Gross National Happiness, and considers it more important than Gross National Product. Besides basic standards of living, they put a big emphasis on community life, participation and sustaining their culture. These are things that are important in small towns.
 - What would you measure if you wanted to measure happiness in your town? How could you represent almost everyone in that measurement? What factors matter most? What wouldn't matter as much?

So there you have it. Knowing that growth isn't everything, we have new ways to measure how vibrant and resilient our towns are.

The next big trend we'll turn to is about how we organize ourselves to get things done.

BECKY

Our second major trend is...

The end of "Meet and Plan"

For a lot of small towns, formal organizations, bylaws and committee meetings are still a way of life. That's how everything is organized, and how everything has to be done. But some fundamentals of our society have changed, meaning committees and organizations aren't the best tool for the job anymore.

That's almost a sacreligious statement to some people, so let's look at how we got here and where we are going next.

- **We'll start with the revolution in civic organizations and the dawn of the "Meet and Plan" era.**
 - Just before the turn of the 1900s, we saw the introduction of new communications tools like the typewriter, the telegraph, regular mail service.
 - The result was a revolution in how people organized themselves to accomplish things together. Right around this time the organizational chart started to be used in business. In case you ever wondered, this is where that multi-level committee/subcommittee structure comes from that we're still stuck in today.

- All this innovation kicked off a revolution of new civic organizations that lasted from the 1910s into the 1950s. People had new ways to coordinate using these new communications tools, and new organizations were the result.
- You could call this the “meet and plan” approach. The basic method was for people to meet, develop a plan, and try to reduce the risk of failure through formality of organization. All those layers and all that process was supposed to weed out the bad ideas.

DEB:

- **Now it's time for the revolution in individual empowerment that we'll call the “Do and Learn” era, or the Idea Friendly era**
 - Just before and after the turn of the 2000s, we saw email, text messages, the world wide web, smartphones, and social networks become common. This is another huge revolution in communications!
 - Now we can communicate and coordinate without planning, without multi-level committee structures, without formality.
 - That's why we call it the “Do and learn” approach. Instead of holding a meeting to make a plan, we can skip straight to testing, trying and seeing what happens on a tiny small scale. Then we can learn from it and try again. Thanks to our new communication tools, we can do all that faster than the old committee structure ever could.

- This is where we are now, and where Idea Friendly comes in. It teaches us how to coordinate and accomplish things without reverting to that earlier method of meet and plan.
- We don't need formal structure, organizations, officials in charge. It's up to us, the people. We are crowdsourcing our future, the future of our communities. The power to shape our cities and towns is no longer just in the hands of officials, but now in all of our hands.

That's a lot to take in, but it's essential because it reflects the world we live in now, the tools we have today, and the way we can make the most of what we have.

BECKY:

Now, you may be wondering, what's the next revolution? We had the revolution of organizations, then the revolution of individual empowerment. What's next? Get ready to stretch your Idea Friendly think with...

- **The revolution in assistive technology**

- Right now we're watching the next revolution as it emerges. Tools you're already familiar with and already using are leading us into the revolution in assistive technology. Artificial Intelligence, Augmented Reality, Virtual Reality, Blockchain, Robotics, Voice Recognition, Smart Assistants, Sensors, are all emerging and they're changing the way we'll work together in the future.

- The result is going to be *instant, effortless coordination*. We'll be able to accomplish a lot more together, because instead of us having to do the work of coordinating with each other, much of it will happen instantly and without any effort on our part.
- It's going to be much easier to plant your flag and Gather Your Crowd when assistive technology automatically and proactively takes your message to everyone who aligns with your crowd.
 - Smart digital assistants will tell their people about your event because it knows they care about things like that.
 - This is going to address one of the challenges we face in small towns: it's hard to get the word out about our projects and ideas, so we end up overlapping or missing each other.
- Building Connections will be so much easier when you can just ask your smart assistant, "Who can help me with this?" and get instant connections to people. You will have access to the assembled knowledge of humanity, with a smart assistant to bring you what you need. You'll be able to talk with real experts regardless of their location. So you'll spend less time finding things out and more time doing things.
- New layers of information will start appearing on top of the real world around you. Maybe you'll view them through your phone, or special glasses, or your smart earphones will tell you about them.

- We might have Augmented Reality murals digitally displayed to look like they are on the sides of buildings. Maybe those virtual murals could teach history, or play 3D video art, or change when you touch them, or the mural could let you play a virtual game of handball. Who knows!
- You'll be able to plant digital flags in the real world, like flyers posted in windows only these are virtual. You could post things related to your big goals or projects, like "Would you love to see an ice cream parlor open on this corner? Help make that happen by..." or "Join me here Thursday at 6 in real life and in Virtual Reality for a bluegrass jam."
- You'll be able to choose what new layers of information you want to see on the world, so you can make choices based on your values. If you care about the arts, or business or community sports, that's what you will see more about.
- It may be possible to help people be instantly aware of how their decisions shape your community. Maybe when you look at the outside of a locally owned business you can see a list of products they carry that your smart assistant knows you might be interested in, or a list of ways they support the community. When you know how your choices shape your town, you can choose accordingly.

In the Assistive Technology future, the old “Meet and Plan” approach would be impossibly clunky. It would just hold us back from our potential. The Idea Friendly Method becomes even more important, giving us an easy to understand framework we can use over and over to get things done together even as our tools change.

Now that we’ve started thinking about new technology and how our lives are slowly changing right now, let’s think about what that means for the future of work, as well.

DEB:

The future of work leads to our next big trend:

Everything’s big split

- **We talked in 2017 how customers are changing retail, and in our 2018 Future of Retail video, we talked about retail’s big split.**
 - All our boring, routine and everyday purchases are being outsourced to assistive technology. We are already seeing that happening today. Today, hidden Artificial Intelligence makes the recommendations you see at Amazon. Today, Alexa and Google Assistant pull up products for you to buy. And today, you are already signed up for automated re-orders and subscriptions from any number of companies. That’s the robot side of the big split.
 - The human side of the big split is the personal, the local, and the meaningful. Those purchases are going to small local stores and local artisans.

- You can go into this in depth in the Future of Retail video.
- **All our work and businesses are going to go through a similar big split**
 - Manufacturing is going through a big split:
 - Additive manufacturing, Augmented and Virtual reality and more new technologies are combining to rewrite the rules of manufacturing.
 - Bell Helicopter just used a combination of AR, VR, and modern prototyping to cut the design process of their new helicopter from 6 years to 6 months
 - At the same time, we're more interested in the handmade, the local, the artisan, and the craft. We're buying more handmade, local, quirky and real-world items direct from the makers.
 - Farming is undergoing a big split
 - Large scale mechanized production is increasingly automated and constantly growing in size.
 - At the same time, small scale agriculture is more responsible, wholistic, personal and meaningful.
 - Services are going through a big split:
 - Transcription used to be a service, but now PowerPoint, YouTube and Skype are creating transcripts on the fly, by computer. That technology is available right now.

- You don't have to go to the hospital for an ECG. Your Apple Watch does that.
- Expect to see more services that used to be done by people be done by robots.
 - At the same time, we crave person to person interaction for services that involve caring, humanity, and human connection.
- **How will rural people survive this big split?**
 - Let robots do robot work
 - let the routine, boring, soul-sucking work be done by robots. A lot of jobs that are considered rural, like factory work, mining, mills or field agriculture, fall squarely into this category.
 - Let people be people
 - Focus on the humanity of what we do. Let people do the most meaningful work available. Rural people have a big place here, too. We create, we care for each other, we generate meaning in the world through our culture.
 - We also have the chance to let robots help us do our work better, just like we've always adopted labor saving devices and tools. It's just that now that includes robotic exoskeletons to help us carry heavy weights and glasses that let us see those new layers of information we need when we're working.

- One secret business opportunity that is emerging right now is building connections between people.
 - If we the customers want to personally be involved in the purchases that are meaningful, we need new connections between the meaning makers and the customers.
 - Who will help individual makers connect to local stores? Who will help caring people connect to people who want their caring services? Those are business opportunities that rural people can build on.

With all of those trends, it's time to look straight at small towns and the future, with a trend that sums up the timeless appeal of rural places.

BECKY:

This trend is Small Town Cool

Small towns are still cool, with some special advantages that urban areas can't match.

- **First, Rural is the perfect place for experimenting with the future**
 - I just read an article where an urban expert said we'll never have drone deliveries because the skies above cities are too crowded
 - Then I saw articles on rural areas doing drone deliveries right now. Medical supplies like blood and perishable drugs are delivered by drone to remote locations in Africa, and a remote First Nation island community in Canada is getting

supplies and mail by drone starting in the spring.

- Urban experts are writing about driverless cars and how they're a mess, and people hate them because they tie up city traffic.
 - Rural areas have been using autonomous vehicles in mining and farming for years now.

In Australia, elders in regional towns are excited about driverless shuttles being tested to help them get around after they've given up driving themselves.
- Another recent article pointed out that 3D printers are great for seniors, helping them print out adaptive tools to make everyday life easier.
 - Suddenly, our older rural population seems like an advantage. We can add makerspaces to our senior centers. We are the perfect place for Old Geezer Clubs, where older people teach younger people how to use tools and make things by hand.
- Actually, you can add this to your reasons small towns have a future: small towns and rural places are perfect for experimenting with new technology, learning how to implement and regulate it, long before it's practical to use in crowded cities. OK, back to the reasons small town are cool.

DEB:

- **The Second SmallTownCool factor, rural places are the only place for digital detox and off-the-grid vacations.**
 - People want to escape their lives and de-stress. They want to quit being addicted to their phones. They want to learn how to interact with people around them.
 - Getting away from the big city, rural places are perfect to get off the grid.
 - For every small town that has complained about their terrible cell reception and internet capacity, here's your chance to turn that to your advantage.
- **Third, Nature is good for you, and we have the nature**
 - There is a large body of science on this, Berkeley University summarized by saying: "Over 100 studies have shown that being in nature, living near nature, or even viewing nature in paintings and videos can have positive impacts on our brains, bodies, feelings, thought processes, and social interactions. In particular, viewing nature seems to be inherently rewarding, producing a cascade of positive emotions and calming our nervous systems. These in turn help us to cultivate greater openness, creativity, connection, generosity, and resilience. In other words, **science suggests we may seek out nature not only for our physical survival, but also because it's good for our social and personal well-being.**"

- That's a lot of reasons for people to come to rural areas and connect with our natural resources. Urban parks and green spaces inside buildings are OK if that's all you've got, but rural is where the BIG nature is! And people are starting to act on this.
- **Young families are camping more**, J Walter Thompson Intelligence reports. "According to the 2018 North American Camping Report, more people are camping than ever before in the United States and Canada. In 2017 alone, it said, there was an increase of 2.6 million camper households, and millennials make up 40% of these. New campers are also more diverse than the overall population, with a nearly even split between white and non-white campers."
- **You've probably heard of the Japanese practice forest bathing - *shinrin yoku***
There are several new books out on the topic this year, and you'll be hearing more about it in coming years. Japan now has 62 designated therapeutic woods, attracting about 5 million visitors annually. Sounds like a big opportunity for rural, and not just in Japan.
- **Nature is not just for visitors: it's for us, too.**
There are widespread efforts in the American Southeast to get people outside for their health, from simple beginner nature walks to new hiking clubs. This is something any town can do more of.

Clearly, there are plenty of reasons that small towns are still cool, and that rural definitely has a future.

BECKY:

Conclusion

To wrap up, I want to share something that Seth Godin said about how change like this really happens, how the future comes to pass.

- “There’s nothing in the dentist’s office that was there fifty years ago. Every device, every compound, every technique has been changed. Bit by bit. Involving thousands of people and organizations. Improvements large and small (mostly small), in every corner. And every one of those improvements was met with resistance. Every change was fought, tooth and nail. Every one had critics and skeptics and hold outs. That’s how the world changes. By drips. Persistent, generous, tiny drips.”
- That’s you. You’re the one to bring Idea Friendly to your town, persistently, one Small Step at a time.
- You play the key role in leading your communities, your county to capitalize on the future. You are the venture capitalists of new ideas. The work you do is enormously important.
- You’ve made a commitment by being here. You are the ones leading and cheering on the change to shape

the brightest future for your rural place. Thank you for letting us be a part of it.

Closing

Deb:

We would love to have your stories, ideas and questions about the trends you see in small towns. Put them in the comment box at the bottom of the page, and we'll answer you personally.

Thank you!