



HOMETOWN COMPETITIVENESS®

A Come-Back/Give-Back Approach to Rural Community Building

In Nebraska, HomeTown Competitiveness is not about towns competing against one another. It's about hometowns competing in a global economy. For a long time, “experts” have been telling our communities that unless they are located close to an Interstate or near an urban center there is no hope for the future of their small town. HomeTown Competitiveness communities in Nebraska are proving that sometimes the experts get it wrong.

HomeTown Competitiveness (HTC) is a partnership of three nonprofit organizations: The Nebraska Community Foundation, the RUPRI Center for Rural Entrepreneurship and the Heartland Center for Leadership Development. Numerous other community and agency partners are also collaborating.

HTC is a “come-back/give-back” approach to rural community building based on local assets. HTC harnesses the kinds of local resources that nearly every rural community – no matter how small – already has. Local task forces are organized around four HTC Pillars:

- Leadership – to mobilize communities with a long-term vision for prosperity
- Entrepreneurship – to support innovation and economic growth
- Youth Engagement – to cultivate a sense of belonging and opportunity
- Philanthropy – to provide financial resources for community and economic development

The first HTC initiative was launched in 2002. Leaders in Ord, Nebraska, which is located in Valley County (pop. 4,647) more than 50 miles north of Interstate 80, came to the HTC partners seeking advice. With more than 20 “priorities” for economic development, they were struggling to make real progress.

The HTC partners began an intensive on-site intervention with community leaders in Valley County. Within five years the economy in Valley County had changed: 104 new, expanded and/or transferred businesses; 332 new full-time jobs; \$89 million invested locally. New jobs created new opportunities for former residents to move back and new residents to move in. Ord, Nebraska, was growing again for the first time since the 1930s.

The success of HomeTown Competitiveness in Valley County stirred interest throughout the state, across the nation, and won the 2004 Innovative Program Award of the international Community Development Society. Our “come-back/give back” approach was reported in many articles, including in The New York Times. But most importantly, people in small towns were watching and thinking, “If they can do it in Ord, we can do it here.”

In 2005 University of Nebraska Cooperative Extension became a key collaborative partner in HTC's work with youth engagement. The most significant outcome is the development of the 4-H curriculum, EntrepreneurShip Investigation (ESI). The curriculum is used in a variety of settings beyond 4-H clubs, including home schools, clubs, camps and community-based organizations. It was developed in collaboration with other organizations including the Nebraska Department of Education, the Nebraska Entrepreneurship Task Force, the Krieger Foundation, the Gallup Organization and Nebraska Farm Bureau. Nebraska 4-H recently received the Cathy

Ashmore Leadership and Advocacy Award for ESI presented at the 27th Annual Entrepreneurship Education Forum.

Today, HTC is in various phases of implementation in 17 communities across the state. One of the most exciting sites is the county-wide effort in Holt County. In 2005 HTC fueled the imagination of young leaders in Stuart and Atkinson with a leadership program that brought people from both of these communities, including adults and teens, together for the first time. Soon, O'Neill, the county's largest city, joined in.

From there we organized four task forces to work on entrepreneurship, leadership development, youth engagement and philanthropy. Each community had affiliated funds through the Nebraska Community Foundation. They launched "founders clubs" through which charitable gifts, large and small, could be endowed and directed to support their work.

Together with an expanded corps of young leaders and elected officials, in 2007 Holt County and its nine municipalities agreed to support a new economic development office and hire its first full-time director. We helped to secure a Building Entrepreneurial Communities grant and a Federal Home Loan Bank JOBS grant. In less than two years, Holt County created 11 start-up businesses and 9 business expansions. It created or retained 110 jobs. It helped bring back 11 families and even more alumni have returned on their own.

The HomeTown Competitiveness youth task force spearheads a countywide youth advisory council. As a token of its commitment to young people, the county gives each high school graduate a full-sized, personalized mailbox with a reminder that they are always welcome home and an invitation to come back.

In 2010, the Rudolph H. Elis donor-advised fund, an endowed fund through the Nebraska Community Foundation valued at more than \$2 million, made its first grant to Holt County Economic Development to support entrepreneurial development and people attraction. The three-year commitment of \$87,500 will be matched two-to-one by local sources and support the hiring of a business coach. This grant is a manifestation of how HTC enables grassroots philanthropy to begin and complete a full circle of community reinvestment. With additional support from other donor-advised funds, the county now has more than \$3 million endowed to provide a significant annual infusion of funding far into the future. Ultimately, HTC has inspired local leaders and donors with renewed hope for the future prosperity of their hometowns.

This success is being replicated in sites across Nebraska. Significant progress is being made in other communities: Challenge grants issued by the Hunt Family, owners of Great Plains Communications, have helped to build endowments for HTC efforts in Imperial, Stratton, Creighton, Wausa, and Perkins County. Consolidated Companies is doing the same in Arthur, Eustis, Hyannis, Mullen, Thedford and Wallace.

HTC requires an ongoing, intentional commitment in both time and financial resources. Working collaboratively produces outcomes that far exceed what could be accomplished by any single agency or organization. For more information, visit www.htccommunity.org.

