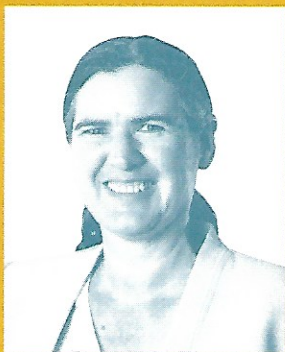


TRY, TRY AGAIN

Q&A WITH BECKY McCRAY

Becky McCray, a business owner and speaker who specializes in rural and small-town business development, explains how entrepreneurial thinking can resuscitate even the most moribund local economy.



You're no stranger to small cities.

I'm from Hopeton, Oklahoma, a little unincorporated community of about 30 people. Eight miles away, there's the big town of Alva, with 5,000 people, where my husband and I have a retail liquor store; in the other direction we have a family cattle ranch, and that doesn't mean the Ponderosa, either.

You once worked as the administrator of Waynoka, Oklahoma, a city of about 1,000.

I loved doing that. I got to learn about every aspect of city government. I learned to appreciate the different pressures on city government, how many city services need to be maintained, and the balance between all the competing demands on those limited resources. It's hard for people stuck in that day-to-day balancing act to think long-term, to be able to look toward the future.

After you left city government and opened your own business, you started a blog.

I wanted to find ways to be involved in larger projects than just my own business, so I started writing online about small-town issues and small-business issues. That led to *saveyourtown*, which I do with my colleague Deb Brown. We share practical steps people can take right away to look toward the future and move things forward.

Such as?

Take an empty lot, cover it with card tables and coffee trucks, and be an anchor opportunity, building a pipeline of future business owners.

What's the most common roadblock preventing small cities from thriving?

The limiting factor tends to be worrying about whether an idea will work before you ever try it. We're still operating on the model that we need to have a committee; we need to gather evidence and have proof before we do anything. That holds us back from trying new things.

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How should city leaders act instead?

We know the world is changing all around us. Even if we don't change, we're going to get change because things are happening all the time. We have to compare the risk of making a change versus the even riskier change that will happen if we don't do anything.

You call that being Idea Friendly. What do you mean by that?

We can't guess what direction things will take over the next 5, 10, or 50 years, so we're going to be open to ideas—as opposed to slowing things down, which makes us closed to new ideas. We don't have to spend five years planning it out if we can run a temporary test next weekend. There's less risk of big long-term failure when you have the ability to try things out quickly and learn a lot more in the short term.

Any advice for struggling rural cities founded on an industry, or an economic asset, that no longer exists?

If you think about it, almost every town and city has lost its original reason for economic well-being, whether it started as a center of trade, a railroad town, or some other reason. All those factors have changed over the past 100 years. Every city, every town has had to reinvent itself.

What's one example of a small city that has reinvented itself?

Webster City, Iowa, a city of 8,000 that lost an

Electrolux factory, putting 850 people out of work. The factory moved to Mexico, and businesses started closing down like dominoes. Two years after the final closure, they hired a new chamber of commerce director who drove into town and started counting the number of vacant buildings downtown. When she got to 12, she thought, "Do I even want to take this job?" When she was asked what she was going to do about all the empty buildings, she said, "We're going to give a tour and show them off."

So she took what many locals saw as a liability and pitched it as an asset.

It was a declaration. She said, "We have opportunities here; they're not necessarily tied to what opportunities once looked like." She took people around, spread the word, asked the grouchy old guys in the coffee shop, "Don't you want to be involved, too?" When they said no, she said, "Didn't your granddaughter just graduate from college? Don't you want her to move back to town?" That got people involved.

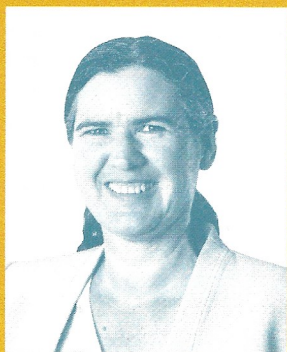
The moral of that story?

They started exploring opportunities instead of focusing on how things had been before. They built connections, found businesses in nearby towns that wanted to open a branch there. It doesn't matter what is thrown in front of you: when you work at being more Idea Friendly, then your town will prosper.

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