

BRIDGING THE GAP BETWEEN ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT AND SITE SELECTION

FDI ALLIANCE

WINTER INTERACTIVE ISSUE 2020

INTERNATIONAL

★
ECONOMIC
CULTURAL
SOCIAL
EQUITY

MAYOR
JASON LARY

CITY OF
STONECREST
GEORGIA



DIVERSITY & INCLUSION



TOMBALL
ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT CORPORATION

edc
WHITLEY COUNTY, INDIANA

UNIQUE MCKINNEY

INVEST IN GEORGIA



HIDDEN GEMS IN RURAL AMERICA FINDING OPPORTUNITY IN UNKNOWN PLACES

Ingenuity, innovation and resourcefulness. Experts on rural America say these qualities are what the country's smallest communities must amplify more than ever to take advantage of what could be unprecedented growth, given the rise in remote work and recent signs that people are more rapidly seeking smaller population centers. Keen businesses should be eyeing these communities with the same interest.

"In the past 20 years, the opportunities available in small micropolitans have been completely revolutionized through the nature of work, internet connectivity, and generational turnover in leadership that has brought new attitudes and ideas," said Becky McCray, international speaker and author on rural and small-town development. "Studies from Gallup and Trulia in the past five years show that when asked where they want to live, more people would prefer to live in rural areas and small towns, and the main thing that has been keeping them in more populated areas is work. And now, for companies who want the ability to bring people back together for on-site work, it makes even more financial sense to consider doing that in smaller towns."

Data has already shown a slow population shift toward small cities and rural communities for the past several years, according to nationally

renowned speaker Lorie Vincent, CECd, of Acceleration by design, LLC.

"A lot of our young people couldn't wait to leave the small towns, but as they're starting to raise families, their priorities have been changing about the quality of life a smaller community can offer. Also, many people were already figuring out they could work remotely and live wherever they wanted," Vincent said. "With all that has happened this year, these and other reasons are magnified. Now, all of America is taking a second look at the opportunities small towns have to offer in terms of lifestyles, quality of life, affordability and work ethic, and that's not just individuals, but companies, too. My question to small towns I work with had already been: 'Are you ready? Because if you aren't, you're going to miss opportunities.' That question is only more important, now."

THE REFRESHING ANSWER: IF THEY AREN'T READY, THEY WANT TO BE.

At least that's the indication from the attendance of the first Stand Up Rural America Economic Development Summit, which Vincent founded. The 2019 summit was held in Tulsa, Oklahoma and drew over 200 participants representing small towns across 20 states. The second summit planned for this year is rescheduled to April 2021

in Charleston, West Virginia. Themed, "Forging a New Path," it has twice as many participants signed on as early registrants.

INNOVATION, INGENUITY & RESOURCEFULNESS

Beyond the broader quality-of-life assets associated with attracting individuals to small-town life, such as shorter commutes, affordability, lower population density and access to nature, there are also specific advantages that come into play specifically for businesses considering rural American communities.

"Businesses choosing small towns automatically will make a bigger impact locally in terms of jobs, and they have more opportunities to become a part of the community and benefit from that relationship," McCray said. "Additionally, rural states and the rural communities within them tend to have more flexibility in regulation. If you need local governments to work with you, you are more likely to get that."

Vincent added that the size of small communities is an advantage in being responsive and resilient in the face of challenges.

"If you're confronted with an issue as a community and need to solve it, you're less bogged down

by bureaucracy and red tape, and there's more opportunity for collaboration. There's a shared common interest in the community and attitude of 'let's fix it,' she said.

Vincent gave an example of how businesses in a small, coastal town in North Carolina pulled together to save its tourism-reliant downtown economy this year during the early months of the COVID-19 pandemic. Local chamber of commerce leaders approached the town's 15 largest employers for \$1,000 grants, which were then given to local students as payment for establishing and maintaining a digital presence for 15 downtown businesses to help them offset the devastating loss of tourism foot traffic.

"Everyone won in that scenario," Vincent said. "That kind of ingenuity is key -- and it's what you'll see more of in rural communities. More of that has to happen."

OVERCOMING BARRIERS

What business wouldn't want the kind of supportive environment? But how do businesses looking to be part of that kind of community actually find it?

Zeroing in on the magic formula that makes a specific small town a perfect match for a business and its employees is an art that begs perfecting, as there are several barriers to finding information on such a micro level.

"Rural, by its nature, is decentralized," McCray said. "There's not been a resource that tells you if the communities you're looking at have everything you need. There is a lot of data out there, but when you are considering communities this small, you have to look even beyond that data and actually find someone to ask. For example, even with internet connectivity, a Census tract may show the entire tract is served when only one home on that tract is served. You could select a site across the street that does not have it. It just requires additional research and even examining your own assumptions."

Along that line, McCray told of a little-known rail park adjacent to the tiny town of Avard, pop. 26, located in Woods County, Oklahoma.

"After considering that two major rail lines are within a mile of one another there, the county's economic development director, Neal Williams, came up with the idea of developing a rail park between them with an access line connecting them. It was a countywide effort, and he built the interest and generated the support. Now 10 years later, there are four companies there," McCray said. "You will find unexpected, innovative thinking everywhere. But there's no way if you're a small company searching on your own that you would just quickly find that. It's the sort of asset you'd only hear about with local knowledge."



Vincent and McCray's examples are among thousands to be told about rural communities across America. And they're the types of stories that could lure a company that seeks a perfect match beyond data sets. The challenge for small communities and small companies alike has been having the resources for doing such detailed research.

LEVERAGING KNOWLEDGE & NETWORKS TO MAKE CONNECTIONS

Connecting those dots leveraging networks and resources is the drive behind a new initiative called Texas Economic Development Connection, which was launched by Day One Experts, a collection of some of the country's best-known economic development professionals and their top supporting service vendors. The initiative will be a portal for economic development matchmaking between communities and small businesses looking to relocate or expand into the State of Texas.

Texas was chosen as the pilot for the initiative given its vast number of rural communities, significant differences in regional economic and quality-of-life assets and the existing interest in the state due to its successful branding and marketing efforts. Several rural communities already have committed to the initiative, which will leverage the relatively small investments of each to promote the assets of all. The idea is to align them with interested businesses who are seeking "where the locals go" type intel, as experienced travelers do when trip planning.

"We have found a lot of small companies over the years trying to find out about the rural communities in our state, and that info just hasn't been available," Vincent said. "This will create

a funnel where they can get the resources they need, their questions answered and the detailed information they need. We're also excited to tell these communities' stories. It is time to get out of the reactive mode and into a proactive mode. This year we've learned we don't have time to just talk about things any longer. We have to identify the problems, find the solutions and take action."

One thing is for sure. There are opportunities in rural communities across the country if you know where to look. Choosing to partner with experts can help shorten your search time and get you up and operating in your new location much sooner.



"SUPER" DAVE QUINN, CECD
MANAGING PARTNER,
DAY ONE EXPERTS

(214) 775-0617

www.D1Experts.com

dave@d1experts.com