

RESPONDING TO RURAL CHALLENGES

WHAT SMALL TOWN PEOPLE CAN DO ABOUT THEIR BIGGEST CHALLENGES

AND HOW PEOPLE AND ORGANIZATIONS SERVING SMALL TOWNS CAN HELP



SMALLBIZSURVIVAL.COM/RURALCHALLENGE

In the [SmallBizSurvival.com Survey of Rural Challenges](#), the issues small town people identified for themselves differ from what is commonly mentioned as “what rural needs.” Based on the results, here are action steps small town people can take to improve their communities. Organizations and people who serve small towns can also help locals put these into practice.

BIG THEMES

When looking through the survey results for actions to take, three common themes emerge:

1. Bring more activity and life to town, especially downtown.
2. Help local businesses improve.
3. Build cooperation.

These three actions will build on each other. Bringing more activity and life downtown helps local businesses with more traffic. Helping local businesses improve makes them more attractive to shoppers and keeps more people (and activity) in town. More cooperation will make new business and new activity possible.

BRING MORE ACTIVITY DOWNTOWN

Make downtown the center of life and activity in your small town. Community happens when people talk to each other.

- Provide tables and chairs. People can't linger if there is no place to sit.
- Hold your board meetings, chamber breakfasts or other regular events outside in a pocket park or other greenspace.
- Use light to encourage people to linger. String holiday lights, put up paper lanterns, or drape building fronts with lights.

- Invite everyone who works downtown to bring their lunch or buy from a downtown eatery and have lunch together outside at picnic tables.
- Expand wifi coverage to encourage lingering. Find out which businesses offer free wifi and put up consistent and visible signs to promote it. For businesses that have password-protected wifi, ask if they'll consider adding an open guest network or posting a password for guest use.
- Invite local people who work from home or from coffee shops to work downtown for a day. Hold it outside at picnic tables, or inside a local business that is willing to host.
- Bring in temporary businesses with pop-up shops. Hold them inside existing businesses, on the sidewalks or in empty buildings.
- Fill empty stairwells and unused small spaces downtown with temporary art by local artists.
- Encourage performances on your band shell, stage or other open space downtown. Start recruiting anyone who gives lessons (music, dance, drama, writing) to hold student performances there.
- Hold a picnic dinner for the whole town.

HELP LOCAL BUSINESSES IMPROVE

Rural businesses tend to suffer from some common weaknesses. Helping them improve will improve their sales and in turn increase local prosperity.

- Use evening and weekend events like art walks, strolls or special shopping open houses to encourage businesses to be open later hours and weekends when more potential customers are out.
- Promote customer service training for local businesses. Check for low-cost or no-cost options from Extension, regional colleges, technical institutions, state chambers of commerce or tourism groups.
- Support pop-ups and other temporary shops to increase selection and test what lines of merchandise might be in demand locally. Invite students to select and display merchandise they think will sell well.
- Help stores be more cost-competitive by checking industry benchmarks. [Read more about how to set retail prices.](#)

- Hold clean up days to update the appearance of stores and buildings with fresh paint, trash removal and window washing. Consider a contest or partial reimbursement program to encourage more significant façade improvement by business owners.
- Help business owners keep up with marketing trends by connecting them with local or regional educational offerings. Check with community colleges, technical centers and professional trainers for marketing training tailored for small business owners.
- Use events like [Tweetfolk Tours](#) to bring together local businesses and residents to build social promotion and buzz. This improves marketing skills and also increases activity and encourages tourism.

BUILD COOPERATION

Building cooperation among local leaders, among local businesses and among local people may be the most important thing you can do.

- Invite leaders from local organizations to get together to have coffee and compare calendars and plans for the next few months. Repeat quarterly.
- Maintain a community calendar for all the participating organizations. Share it widely online and offline to promote events and also to recruit additional organizations for the coffee.
- Follow the classic advice from the “How to Build Community” poster: “Turn off your TV. Leave your house. Play together. Pick up litter. Dance in the street. Bake extra and share.” [See the poster and order copies from the Syracuse Cultural Workers.](#)
- Integrate three ideas from the poster into your next three local events or festivals to enhance community-building.
- Create a list of local people and businesses on Facebook. Check it daily. Re-share what local people are talking about to promote discussion and connection.
- Profile one newcomer to town (new in the last two years) every week in your newsletter, newspaper, email or on social networks.
- Create social-media lists of local businesses using online tools like [List.ly](#) or [Pinterest](#). Share the project widely on social media to get others involved in the list-making.
- Create a local hashtag to make it easier for others to discover online conversation in your community.



WHAT ISN'T RECOMMENDED

Don't go looking for outside businesses to recruit to bring jobs.

- Survey results showed no support for this. Your local businesses provide greater benefits to your town.
- **DO focus on growing your own businesses.**

Don't take this advice or any other advice without customizing it for your town.

- Small towns don't all face the same challenges and don't have the same assets.
- **DO listen to people different from you in your town before you take action.**

ABOUT THE SURVEY OF RURAL CHALLENGES

These recommendations are based on the Survey of Rural Challenges. More information about this survey is at SmallBizSurvival.com/ruralchallenge

ABOUT BECKY MCCRAY

As a speaker, [Becky McCray](#) delivers presentations and programs that give rural people practical steps they can implement right now to shape the future of their community. Her down-to-earth perspective as a rural business owner connects immediately to small town people across the US, Canada and other international audiences.

McCray founded SmallBizSurvival.com in 2006 to focus on rural small business. It has been ranked in the top 30 small business blogs worldwide by Invesp BlogRank and BizHumm. McCray has been named one of the Power Players in Technology Business Media in 2013 and a Small Business Influencer Journalist in 2011, 2012, 2013, and 2014.