Investing in Our Rural Heritage
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Small photos, left to right:
Livestock at Glenwood Center’s working farm in the Hudson Valley. Photo by Gary Valen.
Farmers’ market. Photo by James Lindberg.
Ebey’s Landing National Historical Reserve. Photo by Mark Sherban.
Introduction: Investing in Our Rural Heritage

Richard Moe

It has been nearly a century since the majority of Americans lived and worked in rural places. Today most of us spend our lives in cities and suburbs—but the ideal of country life continues to hold a prominent place in the heart of the nation. We treasure images of bucolic landscapes, tidy family farms, and close-knit small towns, and surveys indicate that most Americans would choose to live in a rural community, if only they could.

This attractive veneer of sentiment hides a grim reality: The foundations of rural America are being undermined by forces such as sprawl, farm consolidation, and industry layoffs. Without a reliable economic base, many traditional rural communities are endangered. Some are nearing collapse.

The risk to our rural heritage is clear. As author and philosopher Wendell Berry put it in his speech at the 2004 National Preservation Conference in Louisville, Ky., “We can’t preserve historic buildings to any purpose or for very long outside the contexts of community life and local economy.”

This issue of Forum Journal explores the connections between historic preservation and the rural economy. As the first article indicates, sweeping economic and demographic currents are rearranging the rural landscape. Many rural communities are searching for more sustainable economic-development strategies.

It has been 26 years since the Main Street Program first began demonstrating that preserving historic buildings makes economic sense for small towns. Since then, the program has proven its worth in even the smallest communities, as we learn from Debra Flanders’ article on Iowa’s Rural Main Street Program. Additional articles suggest other creative ways that historic preservation can help support the rural economy. Marc Penner explains how a rural “explorers club” in Kansas is bringing attention to places that lie off the beaten path. An article provocatively titled “Slaughterhouses and Sprawl” explains how local food networks are helping to keep small and medium-size farmers on the land in New York’s Hudson Valley. A review of rural preservation practices on Whidbey Island, Wash., illustrates the complexity—and promise—of protecting viable working farms while also preserving historic resources and conserving the natural environment.

I am pleased to report that the National Trust is investing its resources in rural places. With the generous support of the Claneil Foundation and the MARPAT Foundation, we have established a new Rural Heritage Collaborative that aims to coordinate services and pool expertise from departments across the organization—including Main Street, BARN AGAIN!, heritage tourism, public policy, and more—to address rural preservation issues more comprehensively.

As you will learn in the final article, we’re already putting this concept into practice in selected rural regions. Last fall, with funding from the W.K. Kellogg Foundation, we began multiyear rural heritage projects in Arkansas and Kentucky. We have also received support from the Harvest Foundation and the Public Welfare Foundation to demonstrate the value of heritage-based rural development in Martinsville, Va., and surrounding Henry County, an area hit hard by layoffs in the textile industry. In each of these projects, we are working closely with our state and local preservation partners.

We are also working with Congress and organizations such as the American Farmland Trust to facilitate needed changes in federal rural policies. We believe that next year’s re-authorization of the Farm Bill offers an excellent opportunity to increase federal investment in heritage-based rural development and conservation programs.

In the long run, the best way to protect our rural heritage is to support the enterprise, creativity, and culture of people in rural communities. Governments, organizations, individuals—all of us can help, even if we don’t all live in rural places anymore.

Richard Moe is president of the National Trust for Historic Preservation.
Rural Development Trends and Opportunities for Historic Preservation

James Lindberg

According to the U.S. Census Bureau, more than 80 percent of the nation’s land area is rural. Some 56 million people live in rural places—about 20 percent of the total U.S. population. Historically, America’s rural areas have been idealized as refuges of stability and tradition or mocked as isolated backwaters, far removed from the currents of modern society. Neither stereotype is accurate. Today rural communities are undergoing profound changes resulting from major economic, cultural, and demographic shifts.

These changes threaten our rural heritage, but in ways that often go unnoticed. Over the years, the transformation of the rural landscape has been slower, more isolated, and less dramatic than changes to urban neighborhoods and downtowns. Yet the impacts are equally significant. For example:

• Although they make up less than 1 percent of the population, America’s farmers and ranchers are stewards of some 46 percent of the nation’s land and the vast majority of our settled “cultural landscape.” Not unlike independent merchants on Main Street, family farmers and ranchers are struggling to compete in a market dominated by corporate giants. Many are giving up or selling to developers. Farmland is disappearing at the rate of two million acres annually and many historic agricultural buildings sit empty.1

• Nearly 90 percent of the nation’s 19,289 incorporated places are towns with fewer than 10,000 residents.1 Many of these towns are fighting for economic survival, placing thousands of small Main Street commercial districts and many surrounding older neighborhoods at risk.

• Thousands of historic rural schools, churches, post offices, town halls, and other institutions have closed in recent years due to consolidations and population shifts. If uses are not found soon, many of these landmarks will disappear.

Despite this gloomy picture, there is reason for optimism. The economic forces behind these threats are causing many rural leaders and policymakers to re-examine their plans for the future. Business as usual isn’t working very well. More and more rural communities are looking for new ways to create sustainable economies, based on local and regional assets. Historic preservation has much to offer to these efforts and much to gain in return.

As we consider how historic preservation can play an even larger role in helping to revitalize rural communities and preserve historic landscapes, it may be useful to review the demographic and economic forces that are affecting rural areas.

What Is Rural?

Useful definitions of the term rural are elusive. Dozens of articles and papers have been written on subject, with little agreement to be found. Often rural is defined by explaining what it is not. The Census Bureau, for example, defines rural as those places not part of a town or city of 2,500 residents or more. The Office of Management and Budget defines rural as counties that qualify to move from rural to the new micropolitan classification.

When both the micropolitan and metropolitan counties are added together, what are left over are those places that some call “deep rural” counties. This rural core includes about 17 million peo-
Rural Demographics

Contrasting “have” and “have not” scenarios are playing out across rural America. About one-third of the nation’s rural counties are in decline, characterized by high rates of depopulation and abandonment along with rising levels of unemployment, poverty, and crime. Other rural landscapes, including those on the exurban fringe and in “high amenity” recreation areas, are experiencing population growth and sprawling development that threaten to eliminate the rural qualities that made them attractive to new residents in the first place.

The divide between rural winners and losers is becoming increasingly stark. “We are headed back to a rural America of the rich and the poor—of resorts and pockets of persistent poverty,” suggests Karl Stauberg, president of the Northwest Area Foundation and a former Department of Agriculture official. Here are some other statistics about rural America:

- There are only four states where a majority of the population lives in rural places: Maine, Mississippi, Vermont, and West Virginia.1
- Texas has the largest number of rural residents, followed by Pennsylvania and North Carolina.2
- The average rural resident is three years older than the average metropolitan dweller.3
- The Hispanic population is growing 10 percent faster in rural areas than in urban areas and is responsible for 25 percent of all rural population growth.4
- Rural household income is about 25 percent less than in metropolitan households.5
- 244 of the nation’s 250 poorest counties are rural.6
- While the number of drug-related homicides dropped by 50 percent in urban areas between 1990 and 2000, it tripled in rural areas during the same period.7

As these figures indicate, a significant portion of the nation’s rural areas are struggling to overcome social problems similar to those found in many inner-city neighborhoods, including persistent poverty and rising levels of drug use and crime. These conditions present major challenges to rural development efforts.

Areas of Growth: Rural Sprawl

The phrases “urban sprawl” and “suburban sprawl” are commonly used to describe how large metropolitan areas are expanding into previously rural countryside. A slightly different development pattern is what some label “rural sprawl.” A recent Brookings Institution study of growth trends in Missouri found that unincorporated “open country” areas in the state grew 50 percent faster than cities and towns. Seventy-one percent of all growth in the state’s rural counties occurred outside the borders of established towns.8

Rural sprawl is generally more dispersed and often less noticeable than the construction of one-thousand-home subdivisions or new shopping malls. Yet the impacts on rural landscapes are equally significant. As land is divided into thirty-five, ten-, and five-acre farms and ranchettes, land prices and property taxes begin to rise and conflicts between residential and agricultural uses increase. Eventually, productive agriculture is no longer viable and the only possible future is more sprawl.

Areas of Decline: Rural Abandonment

Nearly 700 rural counties lost population during the 1990s, including portions of northern Maine, central Appalachia, and a large swath of counties in the Great Plains stretching from the Canadian border all the way south into Texas. For many of these counties, the population loss of the 1990s was not a new trend. Most Great Plains counties have been watching their census numbers fall since the Dust Bowl days of the Depression. The slow slide has left 261 Great Plains counties—an area larger than Germany and France combined—with fewer than six residents per square mile, which meets the old definition of a “frontier” county.9

Economic Shifts

Behind these demographic statistics are several major economic changes. The “old economy” employers in many rural areas—agriculture, textiles, logging, and mining—are all in decline. More than 800,000 textile and apparel jobs were lost in the last decade, with most of the layoffs targeting small cities and towns in the southeast.10 Federal farm subsidies that reward large, specialized commodity producers have pushed thousands of farm families off the landscape. With agricultural and resource dependent employment in decline, many rural community leaders are realizing that they must re-invent themselves economically. “Put simply, many parts of rural America face a make or break period in the coming years,” notes a rural expert from the Federal Reserve Bank of Kansas City.11
Rural Development Strategies

In 2000 the Federal Reserve convened a meeting of more than 250 rural leaders and experts from across the country to discuss the future of rural America. A variety of strategies were presented, but “there was general agreement that a new path is essential if rural America is to seize its full economic potential.”

Traditional rural development paths, such as industrial recruitment, no longer work very well. In the 1970s and ’80s, communities in the South and West succeeded in drawing manufacturers away from the Midwest and Northeast with promises of cheap land and low-wage labor. Now those same incentives are causing many manufacturers to move overseas. As a result, the competition for the limited number of new plants is even greater. “Each year some 25,000 economic development committees from large and small cities bid for about 500 major plant sitings—a 50 to 1 ratio,” according to the Rocky Mountain Institute. Even with massive financial incentives, recruited firms may leave after a few years.

In desperation, some rural communities have turned to more controversial development alternatives, such as slaughterhouses, prisons, casinos, and even toxic waste dumps. Although new jobs may be created in these industries, they are purchased at considerable social, community, and environmental expense.

Among rural development professionals, there is a growing consensus that future economic vitality will result from developing local entrepreneurs, not chasing smokestacks and feedlots. “Creating a culture of entrepreneurialism may be the last best chance to rescue rural America from its long, slow slide to economic and political obsolescence,” observes Karl Stauber of the Northwest Area Foundation. The knowledge-based “creative economy” that many urban areas are trying to foster will just be as important to rural areas in the future. “Increasingly, wherever intelligence clusters, in small town or big city, in any geographic location, that is where wealth will accumulate,” writes journalist Joel Kotkin.

Place-Based Economic Development

A key question is: How do rural areas develop, attract, and retain creative entrepreneurs? One response is to make rural communities attractive places to live. “Rural places must continue to capitalize on quality of life attributes to capture high-skilled activities,” notes the Federal Reserve Bank’s Main Street Economist.

The Brookings Institution economic study for Pennsylvania advises, “tailoring of state economic development initiatives to local and regional needs should allow rural areas to prosper in more distinctive niches—whether in heritage tourism or higher value agriculture—instead of pursuing the one-size-fits-all solution of strip-mall sprawl.”

One of the concepts often mentioned regarding the new rural economy is “place-based development.” The idea is that rather than focusing on specific economic sectors, such as agriculture or manufacturing, development strategies should build on the existing assets of rural communities: human, cultural, historic, and environmental. This is a familiar notion to historic preservationists, who have long advocated for greater appreciation of each community’s unique character. Perhaps more than ever before, historic preservation is well positioned to contribute significantly to rural economic development efforts. We can begin by pointing to a strong track record, such as the proven success of the Main Street Program. Recent trends, including the emergence of the sustainable agriculture movement and the growing interest in protecting working landscapes, offer opportunities for new partnerships and increased impact in rural areas. Below are a few areas where historic preservation can help foster sustainable, place-based rural economic development.

Supporting Sustainable Agriculture

A new era of agricultural entrepreneurship is underway on the nation’s farms and ranches. Tired of competing with subsidized agri-business, a growing number of farmers and ranchers are turning to agricultural practices that are environmentally, socially, and economically sustainable. Sustainable agriculture includes production for organic, specialty, niche, and direct local markets. These markets are growing. Consumer demand for certified organic food is increasing 25 percent annually and now represents nearly 2 percent of the total food market.

Perhaps even more important is the new emphasis on purchasing food that is grown locally, which helps to preserve distinctive cultural landscapes and traditions. “Buy Local” networks are forming in many states, linking producers directly to families, restaurants, and groceries. The Boston Globe recently described how purchases from regional producer co-ops in western Massachusetts and Connecticut are helping “family farms stay in business, rather than selling to developers. Who would have known that by buying the southern Connecticut peaches, you were doing your bit to curb sprawl.” As urban markets for local agriculture products expand, so does awareness of the surrounding rural landscape, economy, and heritage. Sustainable agriculture is generally small scale and well-suited to older farms and...
Finding common ground in their desire to preserve “working landscapes.” Supporting economically viable farms, ranches, and forests not only protects scenic and cultural assets, it also helps to maintain a viable rural economy. “A growing number of New England communities are realizing that one way to preserve rural character and heritage is to take a stronger role in stabilizing and fostering active, productive family farms,” notes the New Hampshire Office of State Planning. The acquisition of conservation easements that allow continued use of the land and historic structures for agriculture is one way to accomplish this goal.

In Rhode Island, Historic New England manages the 18th-century Casey Farm as a community supported agriculture (CSA) operation. About 200 area families purchase “shares” of the farm’s vegetables, fruits, herbs, and flowers each year, which guarantees enough income to pay for planting, harvesting, and maintenance of the historic farm landscape. Since the concept was developed in the 1980s, the national CSA network has grown to more than 1,000 farms, each providing a way for consumers to directly support local producers.

Preserving Working Landscapes

Rural development leaders, conservation groups, and preservation organizations are finding common ground in their desire to preserve “working landscapes.” Supporting economically viable farms, ranches, and forests not only protects scenic and cultural assets, it also helps to maintain a viable rural economy. “A growing number of New England communities are realizing that one way to preserve rural character and heritage is to take a stronger role in stabilizing and fostering active, productive family farms,” notes the New Hampshire Office of State Planning. The acquisition of conservation easements that allow continued use of the land and historic structures for agriculture is one way to accomplish this goal.

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Growing Main Street Entrepreneurs

“For much of the past half century, rural development has been driven by twin incentives aimed at business recruitment and retention. This strategy is no longer working so well, however, for one simple reason—globalization,” notes the Federal Reserve Bank of Kansas City. “Now, more and more rural regions are turning their attention to the third leg of the development stool—growing more businesses on Main Street.”

Of course the Main Street Program has been doing just that since 1980, creating some 67,000 jobs nationwide. By identifying market niches and matching business needs to affordable spaces in historic structures, even very small towns have found ways to create new businesses. Community-owned enterprises are another option for small towns. Rather than relying on outsiders to do it for them, local citizens band together to start and run stores that otherwise would not be available. The Powell Mercantile in downtown Powell, Wyo., is owned and operated by community investors who wanted an alternative to Wal-Mart. In North Dakota, a study found 25 active theaters in tiny rural towns across the state; 60 percent were community-owned and operated.

Regional strategies are working as well. North Carolina-based Handmade in America has established the Institute for Creative Economies to help rural communities grow new businesses around local heritage, arts, crafts, and traditions.

Encouraging Cultural Heritage Tourism

Especially in areas without natural amenities such as mountains, lakes, or seashores, tourism is cultural heritage tourism. According to the Travel Industry Association of America, some 87 million people—nearly two-thirds of all American adults—took a trip to a rural destination within the last three years.

By combining what are often the two largest sectors in the rural economy, agritourism has great potential for rural communities. Growing numbers of producers are finding that tourism is an effective way to supplement farm and ranch incomes. A USDA study in Vermont found that one-third of the state’s 6,600 farms were involved in agritourism. Each farm received an average of nearly $8,900 from tourism activities in 2002—an 86 percent increase from just two years earlier. More than two-thirds of England’s farmers rely on tourist income of some kind to maintain their way of life. Ten percent take in overnight guests. Properly managed, agritourism can help alternative and sustainable producers reach a larger market and strengthen connections between urban and rural areas.

Regional heritage areas and recreational trail corridors also offer great potential for place-based rural development. In Pennsylvania, the Lancaster-York State Heritage Region was established in part to promote and support local food producers, including many that operate historic farmsteads. The newly established Blue Ridge National Heritage Area in North Carolina will highlight local culture, craft, music, and agriculture. The Great Allegheny Passage, a rails-to-trails project connecting Cumberland, Md., to Pittsburgh, Pa., is bringing travelers to small “Trail Towns” along a 150-mile corridor.

Conclusion

Added together, these and other place-based approaches to rural development are shaping a more hopeful outlook for...
A New Approach to Rural Preservation: Observations 27 Years Later

It’s been 27 years since local residents rallied to save Ebey’s Prairie from development. Once the dust cleared, the activists quieted, great minds conspired, and Congress got involved, Whidbey Island, Wash., found itself home to a grand experiment in National Park administration and a new model of rural preservation—Ebeys Landing National Historical Reserve.

The Reserve is located in central Whidbey Island, 50 miles south of the Canadian border and 27 miles, as the crow flies, north of Seattle. It encompasses 17,572 acres (13,617 acres of land and 3,955 surface acres of water—Penn Cove). The centerpiece of the Reserve is the pristine Ebey’s Prairie, its largest open space and an area containing some of the most productive farmland in the state of Washington. Locals rightly brag that the view of Ebey’s Prairie today is practically identical to the view in 100-year-old photos of the very same landscape. Standing on the bluff above the unspoiled prairie, one looks west across the Strait of Juan de Fuca to the snow-capped Olympic Mountains, north to Penn Cove, or east across Saratoga Passage to the Cascade Range. On a clear day, Seattle’s skyline is visible from the bluff, a reminder that one is no longer in 19th-century Whidbey Island. Few other reminders are present.

And, that’s just what was intended 27 years ago when the Reserve was established. Wooded uplands and bluffs, beaches, lagoons, lakes, and grasslands are all prominent features in the Reserve. Its beauty is profound; its resources are fragile.

As diverse as its landscape is, so is its ownership. Almost 90 percent of the land in the Reserve is privately owned. The rest is a combination of local, state, and federal ownership. The Reserve includes two state parks—perhaps most notably, Fort Casey with its beautiful lighthouse and coastal defense installation built in the 1890s. Seattle Pacific University owns and operates 100 acres at adjacent Camp Casey, a wonderful adaptive use of the

Notes
2. American Farmland Trust figures.
3. 2000 U.S. Census figures.
5. 2000 U.S. Census figures.
7. Economic Research Service, USDA.
13. Economic Research Service, USDA.
16. Economic Research Service, USDA.

James Lindberg is the director of preservation initiatives and rural heritage coordinator at the National Trust&Middot;S Mountains/Plains Office.
fort’s officer quarters, company quarters, quartermasters house, and other 19th-century historic buildings. All are now used as a conference and soccer camp center. Nearby is the 700-plus acre Crockett Lake wetland, a complex of salt and freshwater marshes that hosts more than 17 species of migrating shorebirds and at least nine species of raptors. At the east end of the Reserve is another large open space, Smith Prairie, occupied by the private Au Sable Institute and the U.S. Navy’s practice landing strip called the outlying field which is currently proposed for inclusion in the Reserve when boundaries are next revised.

In the Reserve’s heart is the town of Coupeville, population 1,700, county seat, center for the surrounding farming community and historically a mid-19th-century shipping port. One of the oldest communities in the Puget Sound region, Coupeville has more pre-1870 buildings than any other town in the state. Before Captain Thomas Coupe and others established this little seaport in the early 1850s, about 40 Indian villages around Penn Cove—beginning as early as 1300—housed a Native American population thought to have numbered close to the current population.

A New Model Emerges

How does one protect such a large and complex rural resource—scenic viewsheds, endangered native plants, fragile wetlands, an entire town… cows? Residents here took a different approach—an approach that even today is very much evolving, working, not working, saving buildings, protecting critical lands, making us grapple with how to conserve in a changing world, making history, and racing against time.

The first of its kind in the National Park system, Ebey’s Landing National Historical Reserve was established by Congress in 1978 “to preserve and protect a rural community which provides an unbroken historic record from 19th century exploration and settlement in Puget Sound to the present time.” It didn’t happen easily or come quickly. Eight years of citizen initiatives, lawsuits, activism, and exploration of potential new strategies to conserve open space led to its formation. According to the Reserve’s administrative history: “This story began simply enough, with one family’s decision in 1970 to rezone a portion of their farm…. Once the dust settled, the farm remained intact and the local residents had achieved a unique partnership with the National Park Service (NPS) and local governments.”

This new model was viewed as an alternative to traditional federal land protection—a way to preserve open space and provide federal support while maintaining local leadership and some degree of local autonomy. While National Park units are traditionally created by purchasing private properties or encompassing land in the public domain, the Congressional Act establishing Ebey’s Reserve encouraged—rather than excluded—private land ownership. It was thought that the protection of “core zones” through the purchase of development rights could preserve its most important resources without fee-simple purchase. An unusual element of the Act stipulated that lands and/or interest in lands could be acquired by the NPS but only with the consent of the owners. Reflecting the intent for strong local collaboration, by law no condemnation could occur.

Further reinforcing its grassroots origin, the Act stipulated that the Secretary of the Interior transfer day-to-day management and administrative responsibility to state or local government—which it did in 1988 when the “Inter-local Agreement for the Management of Ebey’s Landing National Historical Reserve” established a joint administrative entity called the Trust Board. The Trust Board is made up of three appointees from Island County (two must live within the Reserve; a third in Island County at large), three appointees from the Town of Coupeville, one representative of the NPS, and one from Washington State Parks.

Further, the Act stipulated that the NPS would provide technical assistance in grants...
of up to 50 percent of the Reserve's annual cost of operations and maintenance, while Island County and the Town of Coupeville were to provide annual direct and in-kind financial support. As a unit of the National Park Service, the tiny Reserve competes for federal funds like any other park unit—such as Yosemite or the Grand Canyon—big or small. When the Interior budget is cut 5 percent across the board, the tiny Ebey's grant is also cut.

And so began a rather remarkable experiment in collaboration and partnership between all levels of government, private landowners, and nonprofit organizations. In the late 1980s and early '90s when the historic preservation movement began focusing more seriously on rural preservation, Ebey's patchwork of protection strategies was touted as a new model in rural preservation. After all, a model designed to take advantage of the entire range of available tools—land conservation tools such as easements, farmland protection incentives, local design review, federal technical and financial support, tax incentives—while working with every level of government and also maintaining local control seemed ideal!

It is impossible to fully analyze almost three decades at the Reserve in a Forum Journal article. As with any living entity, its resources, challenges, politics, leadership, outside threats, and basic culture have all changed substantially over time. But it has tested many of the tools of rural preservation, and lessons learned may be instructive to other rural communities.

How Best to Preserve?

The preservation challenge within the Reserve lies in guiding and managing change in a way that respects the cultural values and historic landscape within a living, working environment. This is not unlike the challenge in any other community—except that the Reserve encompasses such a vast array of historical, cultural, and natural resources owned by everyone from an 80-year-old farmer to the Pentagon.

As with many burgeoning preservation efforts, traditional inventory and designation came first. Ebey's Reserve contains one of the largest National Register historic districts in the country, the 22-square-mile Central Whidbey Island Historic District established in 1973. National Register designation served well in the early days to reinforce to the local citizenry how significant the resources are within their care. Today many residents think that National Register listing and Reserve designation accelerated the development of a fairly strong and ingrained local preservation ethic.

The Town of Coupeville's Design Review Board is a traditional local preservation board with power to review proposed changes to all non-single-family residential construction and all new construction within 100 feet of any designated historic resource within its district's bounds. A proposal is on the table today to expand review to new single-family construction. The Board's decisions are final and can only be appealed to the Town Council. Throughout the Reserve's history, design-related issues have come up, especially within the Town of Coupeville, that have perhaps unexpectedly pitted NPS purism against community pragmatism. NPS representatives working with the Reserve have often adopted a much more restrictive stance on historic building changes, infill construction, or streetscape design than the town's Design Review Board and administration. Frankly, this is fully appropriate given their different mandates and standards. But it has sometimes caused ill will or ambiguity about the best preservation practices within a small town where taking a hard line on the 1 percent of controversial projects could potentially jeopardize public support for 99 percent of activities that everyone supports. All care about historic resources in their care and truly want to do the right thing. The "right thing" in some cases is not so clearly one thing or another, however.

Complicating matters, the Island County Historic Review Committee carries out a very different design review process. Reflecting a much more conservative political environment, the county's committee is merely advisory. Sometimes its advice is followed and other times not. Many would like to see a county historic overlay district. Indeed it is called for in the Reserve's "Draft General Management Plan" now under review. But so far, there is neither the political will nor grassroots momentum to push for a higher level of design review or more restrictive zoning on county land within the Reserve. So, interestingly, in spite of National Historical Reserve status, protection of historic resources within its bounds still depends largely on individual stewardship rather than a strong, coordinated framework of regulations and incentives.

However, NPS involvement has brought a high level of technical and financial support for preservation that far exceeds the kinds of resources the community might have otherwise tapped. The NPS funded Phase I and II of a comprehensive historic preservation plan for the Town of Coupeville as well as other interpretive and resource plans. Thanks to the NPS, much of the citizenry within Ebey's has
So Many Owners; So Much Land

About 2,023 acres of land in the Reserve are protected with NPS-held conservation easements on farms and important open spaces, and 684 acres (3.8 percent) are NPS-owned in fee. This certainly reflects the Reserve’s design as a place driven by community initiative. Even more than preservation of historic buildings, land protection remains voluntary on the part of private landowners. And, there are a lot of landowners. There are more than 6,500 pieces of private property within the Reserve.

As was hoped when the Reserve was established, respected entities other than the NPS own or protect large parcels within its bounds as well. Notably, The Nature Conservancy owns 554 acres in the core of the Reserve. The Conservancy continues to lobby for federal Land and Water Conservation funding for further acquisition of land and easements, planning to establish a historic preservation endowment in coming years.

The local nonprofit Whidbey Camano Land Trust currently protects 123 acres through easements and ownership, protecting high bluff and endangered plant species in the Reserve. And the Land Trust recently brought $850,000 in federal funding to Crockett Lake to acquire most of the remaining wetland system in order to add it to Fort Casey State Park, permanently protecting critical habitat. A few years ago, using a federal Land and Water Conservation Fund appropriation, the Trust for Public Land stepped in to buy 304 acres and purchase a conservation easement on a historic farm lost to bankruptcy. As designed, nonprofit conservation groups have played an important role in the Reserve.

All this is exemplary. It represents the best that multiple partners have to offer a critical resource area. Yet in spite of work by top agencies and organizations at every level, today only about one-third of the Reserve’s land is permanently protected. Some of the most scenic and important parcels of land are owned by farmers in their 80s and 90s who will soon be making critical decisions about their land and their legacy—or passing away before those decisions are made, leaving high estate taxes that may force heirs to subdivide and sell. The county maintains five-acre zoning in much of the Reserve, indirectly encouraging residential construction rather than a continuation of agriculture. Since protecting the Reserve’s cultural landscape still depends on willing sellers and preservation-minded landowners, key open space within the Reserve remains vulnerable to development and subdivision.

Many highly significant tracts within the core of the Reserve are, surprisingly, completely unprotected.

Keeping Real Cows and Raising Crops

In the 27 years since the Reserve was established, many farmers in their 80s and 90s have seen their dreams of maintaining the farm and historic site for their communities in the face of the core of the Reserve are, surprisingly, completely unprotected. As pressure mounts to sell agricultural land or open space and subdivide, it seems more and more clear that federal ownership of land and easements is not the magic answer to land protection in the Reserve. A couple of years ago, the Park Service found itself rather unwittingly owner of two very significant historic working farms as a result of bankruptcy. Suddenly, management flexibility completely outside the culture of a federal agency was required to deal with a diverse array of issues associated with living, working farms and changing agricultural markets. A large federal park agency is, rightly, ill-prepared to suddenly manage a small, century-old historic farming landscape complete with livestock, manure ponds, and aging equipment. Frustrated by the dilemma of how to fulfill the goals of the historical reserve while responding to unexpected realities on the ground, on an island, on the other side of the country, a Department of Interior solicitor purportedly summed it up when he told Reserve management, “the federal government does not want to own pigs!”

Fair enough. Now the NPS is in the middle of what promises to be at least a three-year process of transferring the
two farms to new owners, but doing so by jumping through all the hoops and dealing with all the regulations and requirements that come with owning and selling federal property. Had the Park Service not entered the picture, it seems certain that these very significant farms would likely have been lost to development. Ironically, now if the Park Service doesn’t get out of the picture, they’ll be lost to farm use due to federal red tape.

Thank goodness for federal involvement, but after 27 years the Reserve may have become a little too dependent on the Park Service’s financial support. Despite this, the Reserve has been the stewards ofEbey’s Prairie. They are highly specific, sometimes denoting the few crops that can be planted on a farm—in perpetuity. Some question whether they are too restrictive to allow for inevitable changes in agriculture over time. Changes that might call for adaptive use of working dairy farm structures for local yogurt or specialty cheese production, for instance. Or, changing scales in order to develop specialty markets for organic, Whidbey Island brand-based food products.

Changes like these would likely help insure the preservation of farmsteads in the Reserve. They would contribute to continued agricultural use. But would they preserve traditional farming here? Some in the farming community question whether those changes are needed. Farmers have been the stewards ofprime land within the Reserve for more than a century. No one knows the land better or cares more about its conservation than the ones who depend on it for their livelihood. Does it matter that new forms of agriculture might replace traditional farms, or does it matter that some sort of sustainable agricultural-based economy is present in the Reserve? It’s a question partners are grappling with, and there’s no easy answer.

What does seem apparent is that local groups may need to take a greater role within the Reserve. For instance, the Whidbey Camano Land Trust is probably best positioned to permanently protect land within the Reserve today. Like the more than 1,500 local land trusts across the country, it is local, nimble, and entrepreneurial with the relationships and the expertise to move fast and aggressively to preserve land in the Reserve. One thing the Reserve teaches is that it behooves historic preservationists across the country to get to know their local land trusts. Together, preservationists and land trusts can save rural land by doing what they each do best—and by doing it quickly.

Collaborative Leadership—A Whopping Task

Finally, there’s the Trust Board—the entity tasked with joint administration of a complex and changing environment. As with any preservation goal—whether it is rallying to save a single threatened building or organizing to transform an entire neighborhood or downtown—leadership is key to its success. When I worked in historic preservation, I used to say that I could tell within 20 minutes on the phone with someone whether a historic resource was going to be saved. It didn’t depend on economics—though everyone always thinks it does—or politics, or timing, or even the condition of the building. It almost always depended on the quality, tenacity, creativity, and base of support of its leadership.

Neither a traditional nonprofit nor a government agency, the volunteer Trust Board responds to a mandate for local control while taking on management duties traditionally assumed by a NPS park superintendent and federal staff. It has evolved over time and has been staffed with one or more professionals try-
At times during its history, the Trust Board has clearly been too dependent on the Friends and neighbors, and the task is pretty tough. This odd model provides for maximum partnership opportunities. Yet in doing so, it calls for the NPS to operate outside its established culture—a culture that does not always provide for the level of flexibility, creativity, risk-taking, innovation, or entrepreneurship that is necessary in this complex, living environment. When NPS “partnership area” representatives gathered in 2003 in Santa Fe and produced a report called Collaboration and Conservation: Lessons Learned from National Park Service Partnership Areas in the Western United States, it was noted that “collaborative leadership involves a mindset and a set of skills and guiding values that can differ from the leadership employed with more unilateral land management….The NPS is used to managing parks according to familiar Service-wide policies and standards. And yet, the NPS planning process and regulatory requirements seem complicated and difficult to NPS partners. They are not easily transferable to areas managed through partnerships.” It went on to observe that “the administrative machinery is still unable to keep up with the creativity of partnerships.”

In Ebey’s Reserve, we have almost asked the impossible—for federal agency representatives to operate within the legal and cultural mandates of their agency while acting in an entrepreneurial, “non-governmental” way to bring together private and public resources at the local, state, and federal level to protect land in the “partnership park.” Likewise, we’ve asked volunteers and their small staff to do what National Park staff have been doing practically since the Park Service was formed with a fraction of their funding and back-up. An admirable model….an unrealistic quest? Given this non-traditional approach, the Reserve presents remarkably unique opportunities and challenges to planning, management, public use, and preservation of resources.

Last fall the Park Service began holding public meetings seeking input that will lead to the adoption of a General Management Plan for the Reserve. The plan will establish a new 15-20 year vision and blueprint for its operation and protection. It will help the myriad partners respond to changing conditions within the Reserve and will provide a new framework for the future management, protection, and public use of the Reserve. It’s a good time for input and reflection.

An August 1997 Samset magazine article noted: “Where the land and the sky and the sea come together, you can slip through a crack and see the past and the future,” according to the Native Americans who first lived on Ebey’s Prairie.” And so the great experiment continues. Can this unusual federal model conserve a still largely privately owned cultural landscape? Will the NPS and other partners always be there working to achieve a common stewardship in a living cultural landscape? Or will the tradition of individual stewardship prevail and ultimately save the day in this little piece of paradise on an island in the Northwest corner of our country?

Lisbeth Cort is a former member of the Ebey’s Landing National Historical Reserve Trust Board. Before becoming director of outreach and development at the Whidbey Camano Land Trust a year ago, Cort spent 23 years in the historic preservation field, 10 as executive director of the Utah Heritage Foundation and the Washington Trust for Historic Preservation.

For additional information contact Ebey’s Landing National Historical Reserve, P.O. Box 774, Coupeville, WA 98239, (360) 678-6084, www.nps.gov/ebla. Especially see these management documents that are posted on the website:

An Unbroken Historical Record: Ebey’s Landing National Historical Reserve Administrative History, Laura McKinley, 1993.


New Life for Iowa’s Small Towns Thanks to a Main Street Approach

No one would set foot in Bonaparte, Iowa, and dare suggest to its citizens that they are not big enough, strong enough, or savvy enough to thrive in the 21st century. This quaint little town of 458 citizens, nestled along the banks of the Des Moines River, has proven that through sheer determination it can beat the odds.

In the 1970s and ‘80s dramatic shifts took place in the Iowa agricultural–based, rural economy that had a direct effect on the commercial districts in its small towns. Iowa was facing a declining population and experiencing a significant economic downturn. Generational owned family farms were sold, industries closed, and there was double-digit unemployment. Additionally, increasing commercial business competition added to the severity of the financial struggles the already vulnerable small town merchants were experiencing. In 1986 Bonaparte citizens witnessed the closing of a 17,000-square-foot anchor business where for decades residents bought their groceries, nails, work boots, and even their dining room tables. Downtown stood boarded up, peeling, and decaying.

But this town with a big heart has a history of rebounding when other much larger towns would have given up. Residents reacted to the situation, rallied support, and within two days 50 individuals invested $2,000 each and formed the Township Stores. The property was purchased and renovated into investor-owned grocery and hardware stores. Bonaparte’s citizens became committed to improving the viability of their commercial district and preserving their historic architecture; they embraced the concepts of the National Trust for Historic Preservation’s Main Street Four Point Approach and structured their revitalization efforts accordingly. A year later they succeeded in getting their downtown listed in the National Register of Historic Places as a historic riverfront district.

Rural Downtowns in Decline

Since the farm crisis of the 1980s Iowa’s downtowns have continued to undergo transformations that dramatically affect the community’s character, viability, competitiveness, and emotional security. Already struggling small town merchants have faced increased competition from big box stores, shopping malls, outlet malls, e-tailing, catalog sales, and other retail alternatives. New highway bypasses and sprawl have changed travel routes and settlement trends. As rural consumers become more mobile and technologically connected, they become less reliant upon local businesses. As a result, many downtown stores closed or relocated to the outskirts of town.

Many merchants who did remain downtown were reluctant to invest in internal operations and building improvements. Regrettably in too many cases when investments were made, improper techniques and materials were applied. The owners did not realize that when the character-defining elements were destroyed, removed, or concealed, the structure’s historic integrity was compromised and the overall visual appeal of the commercial district drastically transformed. Underutilization of multiple-story buildings further reduced income generation, resulting in deferred investment and maintenance, and contributed to gradual deterioration.

Covered, boarded up, or scaled down display windows created barriers between the businesses and the customers. Uninteresting window displays, or lack of them altogether, affected the pedestrian traffic flow. Business signage, its quality and attractiveness, was inconsistent. City and county governments were also cautious about making infrastructure investments in sidewalks, curbs and gutters.
lights, and streets or making improvements to government-owned properties, further contributing to disinvestments in Iowa’s downtowns.

A Main Street Approach for Rural Communities

Iowa became involved in the National Trust’s downtown revitalization initiative in 1985 with the creation of the Main Street Iowa program, serving communities with populations of 5,000 to 50,000. Small rural towns, however, did not fit Main Street Iowa’s population parameters; about 92 percent (872 out of 949) of the incorporated cities in Iowa are under 5,000 in population.

In response to requests from communities such as Bonaparte and Corning, Iowa legislators approved expansion of the state program to include smaller cities and appropriated funding for the Rural Main Street Iowa program.

Today the grassroots, comprehensive Main Street revitalization process is working in small Iowa towns. Since the five pilot rural communities were chosen in 1990, there have been a total of 22 rural programs. Today 19 rural programs remain active in communities with populations ranging from 458 to 4,659. One of the programs is a countywide initiative involving three communities.

While small town Main Street programs are similar in many ways to their larger counterparts, there are a number of differences:

• There is little room for failure from economic and human resource perspectives, as there is a scarcer pool.
• A greater impact, both economically and emotionally, is felt by positive and negative changes.
• As a unit, the downtown commercial district is generally the largest employer in the community.
• Downtown’s health has a more immediate and direct influence upon the entire community’s well-being.
• There is a greater degree of volunteerism. Pride and passion translates into more ownership, and personal connectedness factors into residents’ willingness to be involved.
• They are less staff driven and rely on volunteer involvement.
• Hiring a local person for the director position seems to work best because he or she is more readily accepted.
• Often the program is the only economic development entity in the community.
• When there are multiple economic development organizations, they frequently share office space, merge organizations, and the director serves dual roles.
• They rely more heavily on financial support from individual residents.
• Special fundraising activities account for a larger percentage of the operational budget.

Each community is unique, with its own personality, style, physical characteristics, history, and advantages. The program has allowed for flexibility to personalize the approach, to capitalize on an individual community’s attributes and resources. Long-term effectiveness has depended on establishing a sound organizational foundation. Educating stakeholders and changing attitudes takes time and concerted effort, but is a critical component to engaging the public. Individuals involved in the rural programs have high expectations and they are extremely imaginative and resourceful. Support and commitment from all sectors and the formation of public and private partnerships have been essential.

Progressive programs periodically acquire baseline demographic, trade analysis, and market analysis information and use the data internally in strategic planning and share it externally with the business community. Business retention and expansion are priorities and the rural programs are prepared with information, assistance, and incentives for existing and new business startups.

The rural programs’ economic successes are reflected through their cumulative totals of a net gain of 635 businesses starts, expansions, and relocations, and a net gain of 1,006 new jobs in their downtowns since 1990. The commitment and involvement of citizens can be seen in the rural programs’ cumulative total of 707,947 documented volunteer hours.

Some Strategies for Success:

Develop a Niche

Competition for the consumer dollar is at an all time high. The vast majority of small towns in Iowa are located within 30 miles of at least one big box store, downtown’s major competitor. These discounts, demographic shifts, increasing numbers of women in the workforce, and changing shopping preferences (different generational and gender spending habits and expectations) are forcing merchants to think and operate differently.

Successful rural downtowns have identified their collective niche(s). Merchants know who their customers are and they are cooperatively marketing to targeted audiences. They are striving to meet and exceed customers’ expectations through specialized products and services, providing unique shopping experiences, establishing more convenient store hours, and offering exemplary personalized customer service. Small town merchants actually have a competitive advantage in this area because they know...
Success Stories: Corning

The National Farmers Organization (NFO) headquarters moved to Corning in 1990. The loss of 119 white collar jobs and the five vacated commercial buildings created both economic and emotional voids. Today the town has a viable mix of specialty shops. Television advertising campaigns targeted to the Omaha, Neb., market have been conducted. Business owners have expanded their trade area with online purchasing opportunities through their “Shop Corning” website. The town’s newest venture, the Corning Center for the Fine Arts—an artist-in-residence and gallery combination—enhances its “artistic and specialty shop” niche. When restoration is completed, Corning’s Opera House will contribute to this niche and downtown’s vibrancy. In the 16 years since NFO relocated, Corning can now boast a net gain of 60 businesses and the NFO buildings are occupied.

In addition to standard approaches to assist local merchants in assessing and improving performance, Corning’s SOLD (Salesmanship Opportunities Learned Directly) program has worked with young entrepreneurs to improve customer service skills. Merchants realized the majority of their front-line employees were high school students with minimal customer service

The successful reconstruction of the Family Pharmacy building in Jewell, Hamilton County, is just one example of the town’s community initiated development projects. Photo courtesy of Main Street Iowa.
Elkader

Elkader, an agriculturally-oriented community with a population of 1,465, was hit hard during the agriculture crisis. It lost a number of businesses, including the hotel. When the highway bypass was completed, 4,200 vehicles that passed through downtown daily were routed around the town. This was followed by two consecutive years of flooding, causing severe damage to downtown and residential properties. Citizens pulled together and held a “Rally for the Positive,” with residents marching down Main Street in a New Orleans-style funeral parade for the “Despair Brothers, Gloom and Doom.” The mayor challenged participants to find a solution for their commercial district’s challenges.

Residents determined that the town’s strengths were its historic assets, the Turkey River, and its scenic terrain—and went to work. The 1889 Keystone Arch Bridge, the gateway to downtown, was restored. The construction of the half-mile Riverwalk trail, connecting downtown and the bridge to the park, pool, and camping grounds, was privately financed through fundraisers. Increased downtown pedestrian traffic was noticeable. The restored hotel, an antique business with 30 upper-story rooms utilized for vendor displays, and the Opera House restoration and rehabished vintage streetlights (both public-private partnership efforts) complement the business mix.

Entrepreneurs have moved in with their families, invested in properties, and opened new businesses. Treats, a coffee and sandwich shop that provides wireless internet access, and Fire Farm Lighting, a designer and manufacturer of unique light fixtures, are two such ventures. The Elkader Cinema renovation was a CID project, resulting in the recruitment of a couple willing to relocate to Elkader and operate the theater.

A very important part of Elkader’s revitalization plan includes increasing the appreciation of heritage through education and promotional events. The grand opening of the Opera House featured a re-creation of the first 1903 performance. Initially Elkader’s “Old Fashioned Saturday Night” promenade was intended to celebrate the completion of the Riverwalk. The event continues now with various heritage themes and elements. “Stories from the Past” brings the town’s heritage to life through colorful portrayals of past residents. Visitors also enjoy these events and are increasingly expressing an interest in connecting with Elkader’s heritage through meaningful educational experiences.

And Elsewhere

In six years Story City, State Center, and Central City have undergone impressive downtown metamorphoses with sensitive infill, quality restoration, and rehabilitation projects. Their combined building investments equal 12.7 percent of the rural programs’ total private building investment of $66,631,327. Sigourney has experienced success with building transformations with notable achievements in regard to high quality, upper-floor housing development, increasing downtown’s population and 24-hour users multiple times.

Remember Bonaparte? It is the recipient of a National Preservation Honor Award, Great American Main Street Award, and is one of the National Trust’s Distinctive Destinations. After the 1993 flood left the downtown standing in water and mud for almost a month, residents reinvested, and today there are no outward signs of the flood’s devastation. The town participates in countywide tourism efforts, and its natural physical attributes, restaurant in the converted mill, wonderful assortment of specialty shops, and the historic riverfront district attract a multitude of tourists. Visitors have been known to fall in love with the town, purchase buildings, and open new businesses. The massive white elephant 16,200-square-foot Meek Pants Factory is being restored into a reception hall and lodging. Since 1990 the town’s net gain of 17 business starts, relocations, and expansions; net gain of 31 jobs; $2 million private building investments; and 47,349 volunteer hours rival any one of its rural counterparts when comparing per capita investments.

Presently undergoing the third phase of its restoration, Bonaparte’s 1892 Meek Pants Factory is being converted into overnight lodging and a banquet hall facility. Photo courtesy of Main Street Iowa.
Participants in the Rural Main Street Program understand that change did not occur overnight nor will longstanding problems be solved overnight. They share many commonalities, but their treasures, assets, and approaches are as varied as their towns’ personalities. Although setbacks have occurred, great strides and monumental achievements have been accomplished and valuable lessons learned through this multifaceted rediscovery process. Long-term effectiveness of revitalization efforts is contingent upon increasing understanding, awareness, appreciation, and support and changing attitudes, improving the climate for risk taking, and empowering volunteers. But it is already clear that small towns are rediscovering and redefining their main streets.

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Thom Guzman, director of the Iowa Downtown Resource Center, also contributed to this article.

Slaughterhouses and Sprawl: Supporting Local Agriculture as a Key to Preserving Local Heritage

Judith M. LaBelle

Had you told me five years ago that developing a network of high-quality slaughterhouses was essential to protecting the Hudson River Valley, my home region, from sprawl, I would have thought you were nuts. Now I would think you insightful.

For in the Hudson Valley—and other regions that are strongly influenced by development pressures from nearby urban areas—the only way that we will preserve the agricultural landscapes that are a defining element of the region’s character is to help farming become economically viable.

We grow good grass in the Hudson Valley; it is a great place to pasture livestock. But livestock production ultimately requires slaughtering facilities, and here, as in many places across the country, the small slaughterhouses that used to dot the region have become scarce. As corporate consolidation has spread through the agri-food sector, larger slaughterhouses that can process animals more cheaply have replaced many smaller ones.

These big slaughterhouses serve the needs of the larger cattle producers very effectively. But for smaller farmers, trucking animals several hours is time-consuming and stressful to the animals, which reduces the quality and value of the meat. As fuel prices have skyrocketed, transportation costs have further reduced farmers’ already thin margins.

Yet it is the farmers who raise livestock, with their open pastures and cropland, who are responsible for maintaining much of the agricultural landscape that we treasure. Even small dairy farmers routinely work a few hundred acres and small (in the larger scheme of things) beef producers may maintain a few thousand.

But in today’s market, a farmer producing niche vegetables on a few acres may have a higher net income than a beef or dairy producer on a few hundred. A skillful farmer can produce a bounty of vegetables on five or ten acres; one young farmer we met recently supports a 75-member,
Glynwood Center’s headquarters is located on a working farm in the Hudson Valley. Its livestock include heritage breeds such as these Ancient White Park Cattle. By encouraging their continued production, the Center helps protect the genetic diversity that is part of our agricultural heritage. Photo by Gary Valen.

As beef and dairy farms go out of business and are replaced with one or two houses per acre, their loss ripples across the landscape. The irony that residential developments are often named for the farms they have replaced becomes ever more poignant.

Slaughterhouses are but one part of the agricultural infrastructure that has been fraying and disappearing since World War II, as national and global interests have come to dominate the agri-food business, and infrastructure has shifted in response. Loss of infrastructure has made small and mid-size farmers less efficient and increased their costs. As the market value of their land rises in response to development pressure, selling becomes an ever more attractive option.

Some farmers are eager to sell; they have long considered the land their only retirement fund. Many others, however, would prefer to stay on the land, but they must be able to make a living and support their families. A third-generation dairy farmer, whose operation uses more than 300 acres of land for pasturing cows and producing feed, told us that “Every day, people come up my driveway and offer me more money than I have ever dreamed of—even though my farm is not for sale. I don’t want to go out of dairy but I can’t afford braces for my kids. What am I supposed to do?”

If we want to contain sprawl and protect key cultural landscapes, we have to find ways to help this farmer and others remain economically viable. The task is doubly hard because current agricultural policy—and global trade policy—is often oriented toward encouraging and supporting large commodity growers rather than the small and mid-size farmers that predominate in regions like the Hudson Valley.

But much can be done at the regional and community level—and by individual consumers—to make a critical difference in encouraging farmers to stay on their land. The experience of Glynwood Center, in New York’s Hudson River Valley, provides insights and approaches that may be translated for use in other regions.

Glynwood Center, a non-profit organization, helps communities conserve their cultural and natural resources while achieving economic well-being. In recent years a major focus of our work has been our Agricultural Initiative through which we encourage farmers to stay on their land and share what we learn with people facing similar challenges in other regions. Our agricultural work grew out of our decade of experience with community-based efforts, including the Countryside Exchange program through which we helped more than 100 communities in the United States and abroad gain new perspective and catalyze a new course of action. Nearly 1,000 professionals, including many historic preservationists, from a dozen countries contributed their services as team members.

Glynwood Center also operates its own farm. We are establishing a multi-species rotational grazing system using the Black Angus that have traditionally been on the land along with heritage breeds. By encouraging the continued production of heritage breeds, we can help protect the genetic diversity that is part of our agricultural heritage.

Helping Communities Understand How Their Actions Affect Farmers

The officials who control land-use and other regulatory and tax policy at the local level frequently aren’t aware of the effect their actions have on farmers. They often assume that farm viability is determined by national policy or economic forces that are beyond their influence.

But local policy affects farm viability in many ways. In New York and many other states, critical land-use decisions are made at the municipal level. Other states delegate authority to the county government. In either case, local policy reflects the local leaders’ role in determining what happens on the land, including farmland. Many local policies and regulations undermine a farmer’s ability to succeed, such as those that make it difficult to diversify or to engage in direct marketing or that make it prohibitively expensive to obtain permits for constructing or changing buildings.

Let us consider one common example of the problem: Zoning too often both reflects and creates a mindset that farming is a “transitional use.” In most communities, agriculture is not a separate zoning category, it is an “as of right” use in a residential zone, which often means that you can build one house on every acre of land. This land-use policy both reflects and creates a mental framework in which agriculture is seen as part of a transitional landscape. There is an assumption that all farmland will one day be developed for residential or commercial purposes, which are assumed to be its “highest and best use.” Even farmers may come to value their land for the number of “buildable lots” allowed by the zoning rather than its productive capacity.

Too often, value for future development, rather than value for current agricultural use, also determines real property taxes. One assessor in our region recently placed a higher assessed value on the portion of a cornfield with a higher elevation, despite the farmer’s protest that the corn didn’t care about the better view. The higher taxes will make it even more difficult for
the farmer to remain on the land.

At the same time, there are many local regulatory approaches and real property tax programs that can affirmatively encourage farmers to remain on their land. While farmers are quick to note the discouraging impact of high real property and school taxes, many also cite lack of understanding and “harassment” by their neighbors as the element that is most likely to make them decide to stop farming.

Although many developers like to locate their residential developments next to “scenic” small and mid-size farms, the new residents often have no knowledge of farming. They are frustrated when their drive to town is delayed by a slow-moving farm vehicle, or the smell of their barbecue is spiced with that of the manure being spread on a nearby field. Some communities in the Hudson Valley, such as Goshen, now require that a subdivision be created near an active farm, each deed must contain a notice that the nearby farming operation will generate normal noise and smells. This helps create a more realistic expectation on the part of the buyer, and if local officials do receive a call from a new homeowner demanding that action be taken against the farmer, they can point to this notice and refuse. While this may sound like a small action to take, farmers often cite a municipality’s commitment to support farming as being critical to their own determination to stay on their land.

Helping Communities Understand Agriculture’s Relationship to the Economy

Local officials are often unaware of the importance of agriculture to the local economy. They assume that it is a vestige of the past—that farmland is “vacant” land just biding time until it is developed—rather than a key component of a diversified economic future.

When Glynwood Center made sustainable agriculture a major focus of its work, local officials told us that they did not have data that would support devoting economic development resources to agriculture. Therefore, we undertook the first analysis of the USDA’s Census of Agriculture data that focuses on the 10 counties that make up the Hudson River Valley Heritage Area. By comparing the 1997 with the 2002 data (released in 2004) we were able to provide a snapshot of agriculture in our region and reveal some major trends.

Most people were surprised to learn that in spite of the development that has taken place, the Valley still has 1,000 square miles of farmland—about 670,000 acres. About 17 percent of the land mass of the Valley is farmland and about 8 percent of all farmland in New York State is in the Valley. This is remarkable given the Valley’s proximity to New York City. In 2002, Valley farmers sold products valued at $260 million, almost 10 percent of the total for New York State. The Valley produced almost 20 percent of the state’s vegetables and between 20 and 40 percent of the apples, peaches, tomatoes, and other fruits.

This farmland comprises 4,000 farms, virtually all of which are owned by the families that operate them. We are blessed to have farmers who are experienced and thoughtful stewards of their land. Many of the farms are relatively small; the average farm size is 156 acres and the median is 87 acres. At the same time, 80 of the largest farmers collectively own more than 100,000 acres. The range in farm size is reflected in the range of value of the products sold. Twenty percent of the farms had sales in excess of $50,000. Fifty percent had sales of $5,000 or less, reflecting the fact that many farm families rely on income generated off the farm.

One of the troubling trends we identified was termed by one farmer as being the transition “from dairy to hay, to horses or houses.” Nonetheless, the opportunity to strengthen the regional food system and encourage these farmers to stay on their land—and even increase production—is tantalizingly evident. Between 1997 and 2002, the value of agricultural products sold through direct marketing (at farmers’ markets, through community supported agriculture, etc.) almost doubled, and a recent study undertaken on behalf of the New York State Department of Agriculture and Markets projected that the market for regional food products in New York City alone exceeds $850 million. At the same time, this study projected that there is slightly less than $150 million in supply (excluding the value of meat products). Clearly there is a great opportunity for regional farmers if we can encourage them to stay on their land and connect them to this regional market efficiently.

But well-informed local officials cannot take effective action without an informed and supportive constituency. One response to this challenge is Glynwood Center’s Keep Farming program, a unique community-building process that helps communities understand the many benefits that agriculture provides and then helps them develop and implement strategies to sustain it.

Responsibility for coordinating the program at the community level is vested in a Community Agricultural Partnership, which is composed of farmers, local officials, and other interested local residents. During the first phase of the Keep Farming program—Analyzing for Understanding—
teams of community volunteers use a set of specially designed assessment tools to develop an understanding of what agriculture exists and how it contributes to the community’s economy, environmental quality, community character, and access to fresh food. During the second phase—Creating a Strategy to Keep Farming—the community considers what it has learned and determines the steps it wants to take in the implementation phase.

The results that can be achieved at the community level are impressive and reason for optimism. For example, in Chatham, N.Y., the Keep Farming economic assessment team interviewed every farmer it could identify in the town for whom farming is the primary source of income. They—and others in the community—took a new light when they learned that these farmers spend $1.25 million per year for goods and services within the county. Clearly, farmers are an important part of the county’s economy and losing them would undermine many other small businesses as well.

After careful review of all of the data collected during the assessment phase, Chatham Keep Farming teams developed recommendations that four local farmers presented at the Community Agriculture Forum. They ranged from the simple (erect signs on the main roads entering the town declaring Chatham a “farm friendly” community) to the complex (implement a Purchase of Development Rights Program backed by a bond act to generate funds for farmland preservation).

Within weeks, the Chatham Town Board passed a resolution officially implementing one of the recommendations—creation of the Chatham Agricultural Partnership (CAP), a standing advisory committee for agricultural issues. The CAP includes five farmers, a representative of the Town Board, and the local Keep Farming facilitator. The CAP and the members of the Keep Farming teams have continued to work on the implementation of the recommendations and to encourage their integration into the master planning process which is underway in the town.

As the Keep Farming program moves forward in other communities, our goal is to build a network of communities throughout the Valley whose leaders and residents are better informed, organized, and taking effective action to support regional agriculture.

Our analysis of the State of Agriculture in the Hudson Valley and the research done through the Keep Farming program have begun to articulate the importance of agriculture to the broader economy of the Hudson Valley. Farmers and local officials are using this information to make the case for more economic development dollars being devoted to re-creating the infrastructure that farmers need to get their products processed and brought to market efficiently. High quality regional slaughterhouses are a critical part of this infrastructure. Given the strong demand for regional products, this investment could generate an upward spiral by helping farmers stay on their land, diversify, and expand, while creating other opportunities for related businesses, such as machinery suppliers and veterinary practices.

One opportunity that is drawing increased attention in the Valley is “culinary tourism,” an offshoot of the agri-tourism that has grown in recent years. As more city dwellers yearn for a connection with the land (at least for a few hours on a weekend), many farmers have found that inviting visitors to the farm to see what is going on, participate in a farm-related activity, and buy farm products is a lucrative form of diversification. Culinary tourism has been termed “the hottest niche to emerge within the travel industry in years.” It is a natural outgrowth of the trend toward the “experience economy,” an economy in which consumers are more focused on having a memorable experience than merely purchasing a product or service. Culinary tourism can encompass any activity that relates to food and beverage in a region, but will be successful only if it provides a unique and memorable experience.

Focusing on the distinctive food products in a region is a key to culinary tourism.
There is great potential for mutually supportive relationships between a region’s farmers and its restaurants, centers for culinary education, and specialty shops.

What Can Individuals Do to Support Regional Agriculture?

While each person has a critical role to play as a citizen in supporting efforts to sustain farmers, each person also has a powerful role to play as a consumer. Regardless of where you live, you can help keep farmers on their land by using your food dollar thoughtfully:

• Buy direct from the farmer whenever possible, so that the farmer receives your entire food dollar.

• Respect seasonality. Part of the distinctiveness of your region’s culture is derived from its seasons. Strive to purchase agricultural products that are in season in your region.

• Set a realistic goal and stick to it. Few of us can source all of our food regionally, but if each of us spent even 10 percent of our annual food budget on food from farmers in our own region, the increase in demand would strengthen the region’s farm economy and help keep sprawl at bay.

• Don’t confuse price with value. A head of lettuce from the supermarket may look like one from the farmers’ market, but it was likely picked many days before and won’t last as long. Taste, nutritional quality, freshness, and shelf life all relate to the value of what you are getting for your food dollar.

Conclusion

There are many things that communities and consumers can do to help sustain regional agriculture, and in so doing stave off sprawl and help preserve the cultural landscapes that are a fragile part of our heritage.

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Notes

1 In a community supported agriculture (CSA) program, farmers sell “shares” of their year’s production. The members of the CSA share risk with the farmer. In a bountiful year they receive more; when the weather reduces production they receive less.

2 For more examples of the ways in which community policies influence retention of farmers, see “Market and Policy Tools for Improving Farm Viability,” prepared for the Kellogg Foundation Food and Society Net-

Looking at Kansas with New Eyes through “Explorer Tourism”

Newsflash! Kansas is one of the top tourism states in the nation! For explorer tourism, that is. Kansas may not be one of the top traditional tourism destination states in the country, but, without changing one thing, the Sunflower State is one of the top states to explore. Once a person understands what it means to explore, then every town of every size becomes a potential destination for explorer-types. Exploring is about enjoying the journey, about becoming engaged in the search, and about not judging a town on its first appearance but appreciating the culture and ongoing drama of daily life. You’ll not see mountains, oceans, or many commercialized attractions—just the real thing. Rural Kansas exemplifies a simpler and slower life—the kind of life many people crave.

First, Some Background

In 1990, I traveled through Kansas with my father, Mil Penner, and co-authored a book called Kansas Weekend Guide. What we saw and heard on our travels inspired us to form the Kansas Sampler Foundation. It seemed that Kansans didn’t know their own state very well and that, furthermore, there wasn’t a way to share grassroots successes or common needs from one small town to the next. Thus, the formation of the Kansas Sampler Foundation (www.kansassampler.org). The mission of the Foundation is to preserve and sustain rural culture.

We Kan!

The Foundation established the We Kan! network to bring rural communities together to share common issues, common solutions, and excellent resources that work for grassroots-level efforts. This network is geared toward the majority of towns in Kansas that are volunteer-led, mostly towns with populations of 1,500 or less. Information is exchanged through the We Kan! newsletter and a variety of gatherings. The rural culture elements (see below) are used as a tourism assessment tool.
The Concept of Exploring

To make “tourism” an applicable tool for rural development, it makes sense to look further into this notion of exploring. Some people want nothing more than to get off the beaten track for an afternoon, a day, or even a week and enjoy dare-to-do-dirt drives, small town main streets, and the search for some oddity or gem. These people prefer something real (authentic) in a small town as opposed to something specifically built to attract tourists.

Rural Cultural Elements

To help towns see themselves with new eyes, the Foundation came up with the eight elements of rural culture: architecture, art, commerce, cuisine, customs, geography, history, and people. The Kansas Sampler believes that every town, no matter the size, has a story or evidence about each of the elements and everything in a town fits into one of these categories. When you ask about one of the elements it helps people focus and see their town more clearly.

Once a town has identified its own unique cultural elements, it can promote them in a collective effort with other rural communities. Here are Kansas examples of each rural culture element. These would all be of great interest to explorers.

Architecture: Fromme-Birney Round Barn, Mullinville, pop. 271

The 1912 Fromme-Birney Round Barn (NR) sits like a lonely vestige out in the country on its original location. It was restored in 1995, and the public can enter at any time to read the storyboards and see the photos that explain the function and history of this barn.

Art: Grassroots Art, Lucas, pop. 480

Samuel Dinsmoor’s Garden of Eden is commonly known in Kansas as the most bizarre sight in the state. This small town has capitalized on the grassroots art theme, and you can find everything from a life-size motorcycle made out of pop can tabs to the Kansas version of Mount Rushmore. Renowned artist Eric Abra-

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The Kansas Explorers Club

At the same time that the Foundation was helping communities see themselves with new eyes through the We Kan! network, it also made sense to grow and develop an audience for these towns. At an annual Foundation Retreat for Rural Leaders in the mid-1990s, the group endorsed and helped to create and launch the Kansas Explorers Club (www.explorekansas.org)—a club designed to inspire, educate, and encourage the exploration and appreciation of Kansas…and to have fun doing it! Since that time more than 4,500 people have joined the club. They receive a bimonthly newsletter packed full of things to see and do in lesser-known parts of the state, to help them plan individual and family daytrips or group adventures. It also encourages members to see Kansas with new eyes and employ concepts like 1) dare-to-do-dirt, 2) feel good about spending money in small towns, 3) enjoy the journey, and 4) make a difference. Even the membership fee is designed to be fun: It’s $18.61, the year Kansas became a state.

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ham has put his Flying Pig Ceramic Studio on Main Street in an old auto dealership, and Erika Nelson has brought in her mobile “world’s largest collection of the world’s smallest versions of the world’s largest things” to town, too.

Commerce: Richardson Organs, Downs, pop. 978
Visitors are invited to step inside this former church and watch an Old World craftsman at his trade, building pipe organs.

Cuisine: Buster’s, Sun City, pop. 77
As you enter through the double screen door under the tin awning, it’s easy to imagine all the cowboy boots that have crossed this wood floor and rested on the bar’s brass foot rail. Smoked ribs are the most popular item on the menu but hamburgers are the main staple in this well-known but out-of-the-way stop in the Red Hills country.

Custums: Bean Feed, Erie, pop. 1,178
A large free bean feed has always been held as part of the annual Old Soldiers and Sailors Reunion. Members of the American Legion Post set up on the courthouse lawn and cook more than 1,400 pounds of beans in 50 iron kettles. The pipes where the black iron kettles will hang are found year round at 1st and Butler. At 1st and Main a black kettle is dedicated to all veterans and stands under a shelter.

Geography: Mount Sunflower, near Weskan, unincorporated
You have to cross the cattle guard into Ed Harold’s pasture to get to the highest point in Kansas. A sunflower sculpture made of railroad spikes lets you know you’ve found the highest elevation, 4,039 feet above sea level. Keep your eyes open for jackrabbits, coyotes, antelope, deer, pocket gophers, and foxes. If you time it right, you can look toward Colorado and watch a sunset explode into rich colors against the western sky.

History: Beecher Bible and Rifle Church, Wabaunsee, unincorporated
During the territorial days New Englanders migrated to Kansas to support the free-state cause. At a meeting in New Haven, Conn., Reverend Henry Ward Beecher announced that his congregation would purchase 25 rifles to send to Kansas if the audience would purchase another 25. The agreement was made, and a shipment of Bibles was sent with the rifles, both placed in crates marked “Bibles.” The emigrants became known as the Beecher Bible and Rifle Colony. The name is etched in concrete near the peak of the church roof in this tiny town. Residents have taken good care of this 1862 historic landmark.

People: Wilbur Chapman, White Cloud, pop. 239
A plaque tells a most unusual story about 10-year-old Wilbur Chapman and his pig, Pete. In 1913 Wilbur sold his prized pig to raise money for a leper colony. The news spread throughout the nation and soon schoolchildren everywhere were collecting money for this worthy cause and saving it in a little iron bank shaped like a black pig.

A Journey to Every Incorporated City in Kansas
By the early 1990s I had written three Kansas guidebooks with my father. It was time to update them, so the Kansas Sampler Foundation board of directors and I decided that I would go to every incorporated city in Kansas (all 627) to conduct research for a comprehensive guidebook. It took two years and 40,000 miles to visit every city plus some unincorporated towns and ghost towns. The primary outcome was a 432-page, spiral-bound, glossy guidebook with 400 color photos. The Kansas Guidebook for Explorers features 3,597 entries that tell what there is to see and do in 500 towns, including dining at 672 non-franchise restaurants and cafes.

The journey resulted in more than just a book. It also convinced the Kansas Sampler Foundation that the state is a fabulous environment for an exploring audience and that this is an audience that can be grown and expanded. Through conversations at book signings and from feedback from those using the book, it became clear that there is a great desire among a certain audience to find and experience out-of-the-way places. The upside for small communities is that they feel buoyed by the attention and the economic impact, and it helps them see that all they really have to do to attract visitors is be the best they can be at being themselves.
Being the Best

Every rural community must face up to the fact that it is in a transitional period and it is time to be proactive about how to convert from a total agrarian economy to a more diverse one. Each town has different assets and natural resources, including the chemistry of the people, and this must be taken into account when planning the direction a town should take. But the one rural development tool that can be most readily put in place is the one that caters to explorers. Explorers are curious about all aspects of a town, but junky and unfriendly towns will probably move an explorer down the road quicker than anything else. Towns that have friendly, welcoming, and preferably knowledgeable front-liners, people on the street, or eye-raising town characters can keep an explorer in town longer. Clean or historic buildings make a difference too. Primitive or professional signage that helps describe a building, historic site or event, or a custom is a plus.

Being the best it can be at being itself isn’t always easy but it gives an achievable standard for every town. The best it can be might change from year to year but it is a goal the town can set and strive for. Communities have the chance to progress incrementally, at a pace that is comfortable for them.

It is not the purpose of this article to look at all the difficulties that are present in the struggle to keep rural communities viable. Instead, the point to be made here is that there are some low-budget things that can help a town of any size and budget to become even more attractive to explorers, things that capitalize on rural heritage.

Making Exploring Important—and Satisfying

Several years ago the Kansas Explorers Club decided to urge 1,000 explorers to go to Lizard Lips (a combination convenience store, grill and deli, bait shop) near Toronto (pop. 300) and spend $5 so that Lizard Lips wouldn’t have to take out an annual loan just to pay employees during its slow time. The campaign became famous and ended up on the front page of the Los Angeles Times. Money even came in from Japan, and a multitude of adventures happened in supporting Lizard Lips. The goal was met and people still go to Lizard Lips to spend $5.

The observation made during this time was that people (explorer-types) really felt good about making a difference and being able to share in the collective and successful result. It didn’t tax anyone very much to contribute $5 yet everyone felt very gratified to help keep this store viable. The group dynamic and effect made it a legendary explorer club activity. From that point on, explorers have stepped up their efforts to buy stamps in small post offices, buy groceries in small stores, and just make small contributions in numerous places that could be part of a larger positive result. This is a win-win for the community and the explorer.

Local residents are also planning unique projects and events that have had fun and meaningful results, using their own passions and creativity to find ways to showcase their rural communities. One launched a contest for Garage Sale Art. Since so many communities have garage sales he thought it would be fun to have contestants go around to sales and buy all sorts of pieces and parts and then come back to a common site and create something artistic from the garage sale items. Even the trophies were created from items purchased and put together.

One small town is staging a clever clean-up drive and is calling it a Junk Funeral. A hearse will lead all the trucks full of junk out to the cemetery (landfill) where a service will be held. A barbeque luncheon will follow. Others have developed Mystery Tours and turned some of the most obscure places into fascinating spots to visit.

Producing these kinds of activities can empower local residents, demonstrating how easy it is for individuals to make a difference in their communities.

The Bottom Line

Everything we do in rural communities needs to be part of keeping the community and its heritage viable—even explorer tourism efforts. To think about these efforts as part of the community development strategy brings an importance and a focus. For most Midwest rural towns, explorer tourism makes sense and fits. Small towns should finally realize that the more hectic the world gets, the more people will crave who we are and what we have to offer. The Kansas Sampler Foundation and a team of We Kanners and explorers from around the state will continue to work on the template for explorer tourism.
Preservation-Based Strategies for Rural Revitalization: An Overview of National Trust Initiatives

Valeria Crisafulli and Robert Nieweg

It would be difficult to take the “rural” out of the work of the National Trust since so much of what it does touches rural preservation issues in some way, from Main Street to heritage tourism, from publications to historic sites, from BARN AGAIN! to award programs, and from training to grants.

But the following five projects, especially, bring together expertise from within the National Trust—and more importantly, from key outside partners—to help communities protect and enhance their rural heritage. These initiatives are still in their early stages, and as they move forward, we hope to apply lessons learned and measures of success to develop a nationwide preservation-based model for rural development.

The field of rural development is already well established. The United States Department of Agriculture, the Federal Reserve, Extension services and other land-grant university programs, and many institutions and foundations have an impressive history of work in rural areas.

What the National Trust adds to the rural development tableau, however, is a comprehensive focus on preservation-based strategies.

Rural Heritage Development Initiative

In early 2005 the National Trust received a grant from the W.K. Kellogg Foundation to carry out an in-depth study of the link between rural preservation and economic development through the Rural Heritage Development Initiative (RHDI). RHDI is a demonstration project working intensively over a three-year period in two rural pilot regions—the Arkansas Delta and Central Kentucky Heartland.

Main Street Arkansas, the state’s Main Street coordinating program in the Department of Arkansas Heritage (the SHPO), is managing the project in Arkansas, in collaboration with Arkansas Delta Byways. They are supported by the Historic Preservation Alliance of Arkansas, the statewide preservation organization. The leading partner for Central Kentucky is Preservation Kentucky, Inc., the statewide preservation organization, working closely with the Kentucky Heritage Council (the SHPO). The Dry Stone Conservancy, a non-profit organization dedicated to the promotion and preservation of dry laid stone structures and their craftsmanship, is also a collaborating partner.

Arkansas Delta

The Arkansas Delta pilot region is a 15-county strip along the Mississippi River. Because of the loss of agricultural and manufacturing jobs, the region has experienced serious population decline over the past 15 years. Much of the region is characterized by a high rate of poverty, unemployment, and a wide array of social problems. Nevertheless, the Delta’s rich river-related heritage—including its agriculture, its African-American heritage, and an indigenous music culture that includes blues, gospel, and country—provides a strong foundation for potential development. The region has a diversity of historic sites including the Hemingway-Pfeiffer Museum in the northern part of the region, Lakeport Plantation in the south, a Japanese internment camp site near Dumas, and a developing Tenant Farmers Union Museum in Tyronza.

The pilot program will focus on five key areas: heritage tourism, local business and entrepreneurship development, preservation and use of historic buildings, heritage-oriented branding and marketing, and preservation education. First-year projects already underway include:

- itineraries for a heritage-based music trail and guidebooks for visitors traveling the region’s two national scenic byways;
- a DeltaMade branding program for locally produced crafts and products;
- a workshop focusing on resources for the eight Rosen-
Central Kentucky Heartland

Central Kentucky’s Heartland, an eight-county region on the western edge of the Bluegrass Region, is the birthplace of Abraham Lincoln and home to Civil War sites as well as an under-explored African-American heritage. Historic religious themes are associated with the Catholic Church; Shaker Village of Pleasant Hill is also a key attraction. The region has a strong agriculture economic base, though many small family farms are threatened by development pressures from Louisville and Lexington.

Several of the key focus areas are similar to those in Arkansas—cultural heritage tourism, enhancement of local products and tourism-related retail businesses, preservation education, and image development and branding. One distinct priority for Kentucky, however, is farm and barn preservation and agricultural land use, since the farmland in the region is threatened and could easily disappear if steps are not taken to protect the working landscape.

Year one projects for the Kentucky pilot include:

- a survey of rural assets and heritage infrastructure, funded through Kentucky Heritage Council’s Preserve America grant;
- consultation on the preservation and reuse of historic tobacco barns;
- brand identification that builds on regional heritage;
- consultations for regional artists and craftspeople, in collaboration with Kentucky Crafted, the state’s craft marketing program;
- a lecture series on preservation economics.

The Foundation for Long-Term Success

One of the first and key factors in determining the success potential for the rural initiative will be the degree to which each region is able to carry out activities and projects at the grassroots level, rather than depending on outside consultants and the National Trust to make things happen.

Though still in an early stage, the Rural Heritage Development Initiative has already found that collaboration with regional, on-the-ground partners is essential if the effort is going to succeed. From establishing the regional steering committees to hiring their own field representatives to making final decisions about the types of projects to be undertaken and the consultants used, this grassroots approach is at the heart of the initiative.

The National Trust’s experience with the Main Street program clearly demonstrates that noticeable economic gains—job creation, business recruitment, property investment—begin to appear only after some four to six years of focused effort. Therefore, RHDI must work hard to manage expectations within the pilot regions for what can reasonably be accomplished within a three-year time frame.

Finally, the National Trust has stressed the importance, even as the initiative is getting underway, of developing a plan for sustaining the rural preservation work after the three-year period of the initiative has ended.

Martinsville and Henry County, Va.

Once a thriving center of textile and furniture manufacturing, Henry County, Va., has suffered serious economic reverses. Today, however, thanks to the visionary leadership of the Martinsville-based Harvest Foundation, this Southside Virginia community is engineering its own recovery.

The history of Henry County and its outlying mill towns reflects a complex story of hard work, enterprise, and survival. There is evident pride in the rich traditions that shaped these communities and a growing interest locally in putting historic buildings to productive use again as attractive places to live, work, and shop. Thanks to generous grants from The Harvest Foundation and the Public Welfare Foundation, the National Trust’s Southern Field Office is working intensively with civic leaders and property owners to promote historic preservation, commercial district revitalization, and heritage tourism. Projects so far include:

- a series of public presentations and outreach meetings to galvanize grassroots support for preservation;
- nominating significant historic properties to the National Register of Historic Places, including Fieldale, an early-20th-century textile mill village, and the Fayette Street area, the core of Martinsville’s traditionally African-American neighborhood;
- conducting a series of bricks-and-mortar assessments of local historic residential, commercial, and institutional buildings to help property owners better understand cost-effective maintenance techniques and potential opportunities for rehabilitation and reuse;
- commissioning an in-depth retail market analysis and small business development plan that will result in a blueprint for the future of Martinsville’s central commercial neighborhood;
- conducting a regional inventory and assessment of tourism attractions and services, which will lead up to a heritage tourism strategic plan involving regional tourism partnerships and a regional marketing alliance.
Journey Through Hallowed Ground

Another model rural heritage project is gaining momentum. In June 2005 the National Trust placed the Journey Through Hallowed Ground corridor on its list of America’s 11 Most Endangered Historic Places. Unfortunately, suburban sprawl is undermining the historic corridor, a 175-mile-long region that generally follows U.S. Route 15 from Jefferson’s Monticello in Charlottesville, Va., to Gettysburg National Military Park in Pennsylvania. The corridor encompasses thousands of irreplaceable historic resources in Pennsylvania, Maryland, West Virginia, and Virginia that represent our nation’s Native American, African-American, colonial, and Civil War heritage. The corridor also boasts 15 Main Street communities, including Great American Main Street Award winner Frederick, Md. The Journey Through Hallowed Ground Partnership, a high-energy nonprofit organization with an extraordinary grassroots constituency, is actively raising awareness of the region’s heritage resources while promoting compatible economic revitalization strategies. (For more information, visit the Journey Through Hallowed Ground Partnership at www.hallowedground.org.)

The National Trust is planning a series of capacity-building workshops along the Journey corridor for community leaders to learn from top experts about the best tools for community revitalization and historic preservation, and about how to solve land-use management and community design challenges currently facing small towns and rural communities. Eleven months after the Most Endangered listing, important progress has been made in preserving the historic region. On April 25, 2006, Virginia Congressman Frank Wolf, a long-time champion of historic preservation, introduced H.R. 5195 and Virginia Senators John Warner and George Allen introduced S. 2645 to create “The Journey Through Hallowed Ground National Heritage Area.” If enacted, the national heritage area designation would formally acknowledge the corridor’s importance to American heritage. The legislation also would authorize creation of a corridor-wide management plan and public-private partnership to enhance local, state, and federal efforts to conserve, promote, and interpret the Journey corridor’s irreplaceable historic resources.

Tobacco Barns of Southern Maryland

For almost 400 years the tobacco industry dominated the economy of rural Southern Maryland. For many generations, thousands of wood-frame tobacco barns have been the defining architectural icons of this fertile five-county region located between the banks of the Potomac River and Chesapeake Bay. Today, however, after the tobacco buy-out, many individuals began to actively pursue tobacco barn preservation in their local areas of Southern Maryland. In response to this grassroots work, the National Trust featured the tobacco barns on its 2004 list of America’s 11 Most Endangered Historic Places as a way to raise awareness of their plight and galvanize grassroots affection for the historic buildings into a viable preservation-based solution.

Nevertheless, the tobacco barns remain a much-loved symbol of Maryland’s rural heritage and, soon after the tobacco buy-out, many individuals began to actively pursue tobacco barn preservation in their local areas of Southern Maryland. In response to this grassroots work, the National Trust featured the tobacco barns on its 2004 list of America’s 11 Most Endangered Historic Places as a way to raise awareness of their plight and galvanize grassroots affection for the historic buildings into a viable preservation-based solution.

In addition, the National Trust’s Southern Field Office helped to convene an energetic coalition of local farmers, preservationists, land-use planners, and civic leaders from
nearby counties. The tobacco barns coalition has closely studied the plight of the tobacco barns and has developed a comprehensive set of strategies to address funding, public policy, educational outreach, and National Register survey work. By consensus, its primary goal is to help property owners find new agricultural uses for the historic tobacco barns.

The keystone of the tobacco barns program is a matching grant program to provide bricks-and-mortar grants to farmers and other barn owners intent upon rehabilitating their barns for agricultural uses. The first round of the matching grant program, which is administered by Preservation Maryland, was a rousing success with more than 50 barn owners seeking grants from $1,000 to $10,000. In May the Maryland General Assembly enacted a new program that will distribute $300,000 each year to support the maintenance and rehabilitation of historic barns statewide.

The Value of Rural Preservation

Most residents of rural areas choose to live there because of the quality of life this offers, and those same lifestyle factors make rural areas attractive destinations for heritage travelers. The National Trust’s current rural programs are seeking ways to achieve economic value for these regions, so that their physical and cultural attributes can be preserved. Ultimately, the goal is to make sure that those who live there or who travel there can continue to experience a cherished way of life.

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A coalition of farmers, preservationists, land-use planners, and civic leaders is working to help property owners find new agricultural uses for the wood-frame tobacco barns that are a defining architectural icon of Southern Maryland. Photo by Joshua Phillips, Preservation Maryland.