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## Community Recruitment and Retention of New Residents: A Study Using a Market Assessment Process

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### **Abstract**

In declining population regions, such as much of the rural Great Plains, many rural communities are competing for both employment opportunities and people to fill the work-force needs. While the former (jobs) has been traditionally emphasized in community development efforts, it is increasingly evident that new resident recruitment and retention is just as critical, if not more, to community sustainability. As part of a larger study of new resident migration into Nebraska's Panhandle region, the purpose of this study was to explore new resident recruitment and retention patterns perceptions and development strategies from both sides of the market—the demand side (new residents) and the supply/provider side (communities marketing themselves as a desirable places to live). Using an iterative Delphi survey process of community practitioners, with input fed into the analysis from new-resident focus group findings, we were able to assess current market performance in terms of the relative effectiveness of new-resident recruitment and retention programs and draw implications for future improvement.

## Introduction

Declining populations have characterized many Great Plains counties since the early 1900s, a trend that has continued with few exceptions up through the most recent 2000 census (Cantrell, 2005<sup>1</sup>; Ruthge, 2005<sup>2</sup>; Johnson, 2006<sup>3</sup>). Due to the socio-economic significance, declining rural populations have always been of interest and concern to demographers, sociologists, economists and policy makers. There are many reasons for rural depopulation including declining farm numbers, reduced job opportunities, and natural population decline (i.e., number of deaths exceeding number of births). Nebraska's location, with its eleven western Panhandle counties being located in the middle of the Great Plains, provides an interesting case of population decline in rural America. These eleven counties consist of Banner, Box Butte, Cheyenne, Dawes, Deuel, Garden, Kimball, Morrill, Scotts Bluff, Sheridan, and Sioux. The Nebraska Rural Development Commission (NRDC) study (Macke, 1999<sup>4</sup>) found that the Panhandle region is a large sparsely-populated rural region characterized by an accelerating rate of depopulation as residents move away.

The movement of young adults away from the rural areas in the Great Plains region is one of the ways by which rural areas in the region (i.e. this includes the Nebraska Panhandle region) are being depopulated, (Ruthge and Highman, 1998<sup>5</sup>; Ruthge, 2005<sup>6</sup>; Cantrell, 2005<sup>7</sup>; Johnson, 2006<sup>8</sup>). In addition, the failure of declining birth rates to outweigh higher death rates, has become a major contributor to the depopulation of the rural Great Plains, (Ruthge, 2005<sup>9</sup>; Walser and Anderlik, 2004<sup>10</sup>). This makes sense since out-migration of young adults reduces the number of children born into their community of origin, (Cantrell 2005<sup>11</sup>).

In turn, as residents move out, the region encounters associated loss of market size, labor force, and political power. The NRDC study also found that the Nebraska Panhandle had significantly lower per-capita incomes and significantly fewer upper-income households when compared to the state, and that compensation rates were significantly lower than the state averages and particularly relative to urbanized areas as of 1999.

The Panhandle had a relatively large economy in the 1990s that could support about 54,000 jobs (Macke<sup>12</sup>). Such employment demographics, it would seem, need to be matched by effective recruitment and retention of both new and long-time residents. In short, recruitment strategies need to go beyond merely creating jobs since potential employers must first be assured they are locating in an area with a sufficient workforce. In the case of areas with population decline, this presents a real "chicken or the egg" dilemma.

Despite continued media attention about residents leaving the Panhandle region, the region has managed to attract new residents in recent years. In fact, one of every eight residents of Nebraska's eleven Western county regions had arrived there from another state or county during the previous five years. Based on the 2000 U.S. Census of Population, the net-outmigration during the 1990s was 0.7%. In-migration to the Nebraska Panhandle was 10,500 people during the same period. The question that arises is, what has attracted the new residents to this rural area?

The Cooperative State Research, Education and Extension Service National Research Initiative (NRI) grant funded a study to provide valuable insight into this in-migration phenomenon. The primary objective of this research project was to identify potential successful strategies for residential recruitment and retention in sparsely populated rural areas. The study included four components: (1) analysis of secondary data for the region; (2) a household survey of new residents to the Nebraska Panhandle; (3) focus groups of new residents; and (4) a multi-staged Delphi Survey of community development practitioners in Nebraska and its neighboring states.

For the fourth component, community development practitioners in this study refer to economic and community development professionals who are currently employed in field locations, experiencing population shifts and changes in the community context. The list was drawn from current membership of the Nebraska Economic Developers Association (NEDA) and similar associations from neighboring states. The economic developers are trying to enhance the relative competitiveness of their respective communities by maintaining economic activity (i.e., economic viability and quality of life) for their community or region of which population is a critical factor.

According to the mail survey, new residents to the Panhandle between 2002 and 2007 came from 38 different states, with the majority of them moving from a metropolitan county. The newcomers and their families brought a variety of assets in addition to their skills, including human capital, professional occupational experience, entrepreneurial backgrounds, and volunteer and community leadership experience. Moreover, new residents were, on average, younger than the current Panhandle residents as well as being more highly educated. The majority came from other parts of Nebraska or from the adjacent states of Colorado, Wyoming, South Dakota and Kansas.

Given these recruitment dynamics, there are two different but complementary questions. **First**, is the Panhandle region, through its community leadership, making deliberate effort to recruit new residents to solve its long-term loss of residents? Are their efforts effective? And if not, what do they need to do? **Second**, are those new recruits staying in the Panhandle? And if not, why are they leaving and what efforts do they think the community leadership should be doing to encourage them to stay?

This paper explains one of the components of the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) - NRI Research study. Specifically, the study seeks to answer what recruiting and retention strategies community development practitioners are using and how this compares to what new residents described. In short, a simplified supply and demand framework is utilized. Using a Delphi technique engaging community development practitioners, the supply side of the market is captured. The demand side is captured through focus groups consisting of new residents to the region.

First, we surveyed an expert panel consisting of community development practitioners across Nebraska and its neighboring states, using an electronically-administered interactive three-phase Delphi survey. Second, we compared the findings against new residents' views as to the factors that were important to them in making a decision to move to the region as well as the factors believed important for them to stay. Both the mail surveys and focus group interviews from other

components of the USDA-NRI study were used to gain insight into what attracted new residents to the Nebraska Panhandle, what factors influenced the move, and what factors were influencing their future intentions for remaining in their new community.

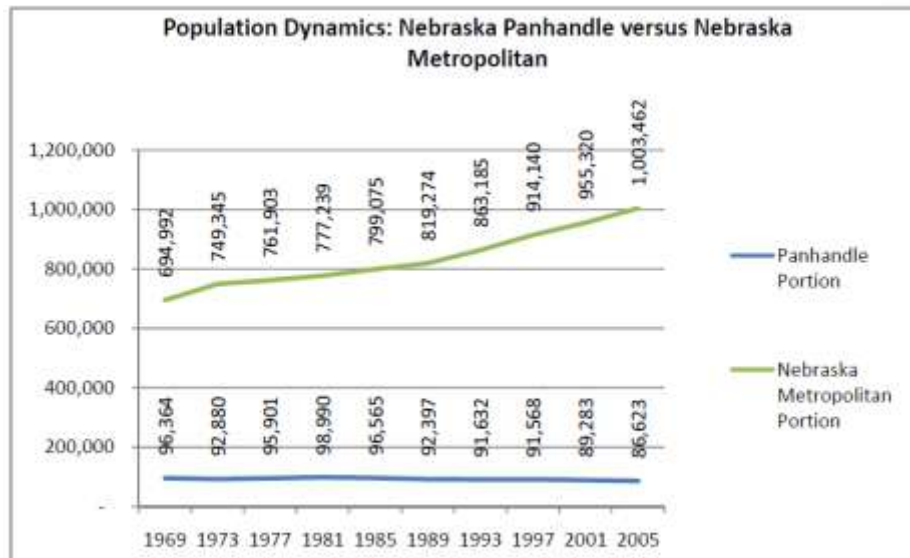
This study is unique in several ways: (1) to our knowledge, no study has addressed the recruitment and retention strategies being taken by community practitioners in a similar region such as the Nebraska Panhandle; (2) no study has attempted to seek new resident opinions and tried to reconcile them with the opinions of the community practitioners; (3) this is one of the first electronically-administered Delphi surveys to address economic development issues; and (4) the Delphi technique we used in this study is unique in that responses from the new resident focus group study were embedded within Phase 3 so that community practitioners knew of the new resident opinions and concerns before they gave their final insights and perspectives (following the research findings of Thomas and Safrit 2002<sup>13</sup> which concluded that focus groups can help to better understand results from Delphi studies).

During Phase 1 of the Delphi portion of the study we first sought community practitioners' views independent of new residents' views. In Phase 2, we presented community practitioners with summaries of Phase 1 results, and based on those results, we further refined the questioning regarding previous topics to see if responses would move toward greater group consensus. In Phase 3, we embedded the responses from new residents about aspects which community practitioners did not previously emphasize in Phases 1 and 2 in order to see if their opinions changed, and to see if their responses moved toward some consensus with those of the new residents. We believe this was important in that the additional information from new residents could likely help community practitioners to become more consumer-oriented; that is, to consider the new residents' views as valid, and focus on addressing them rather than imposing the more conventional ideas regarding new resident recruitment and retention.

### A Historical Account of the Nebraska Panhandle Population Dynamics

Figure 1 shows how the Nebraska Panhandle region's population trend compares to that of the Nebraska Metropolitan area for the period 1969 to 2006. The Nebraska Metropolitan area experienced a continued yearly increase in population between 1969 and 2005.

Figure 1: Nebraska Panhandle and Metropolitan Population Dynamics



Source: Bureau of Economic Analysis

In contrast, the Nebraska Panhandle experienced both increases and declines in population during the same period. The Panhandle region population grew by 7% between 1972 and 1981, this supports the rural migration turn-around of the 1970s where migration produced the bulk of rural population gain as noted by Johnson (2006<sup>14</sup>). The region's population saw a decline of 8% between 1981 and 1991. Between 1991 and 1995 population grew by about 2% and has since declined by 8% between 1995 and 2006. The trend shows the Panhandle region's continued downward trend from 1995 to present as noted by Macke (1999<sup>15</sup>). Similar trends (i.e., an increase in rural population in the 1990s and a continued decline since 2000) were noted by Johnson (2006<sup>16</sup>), as characteristic of much of rural America. The region's population reached a peak of 98,990 in 1981 and has since dropped to about 85,900 in 2006. The dynamics of the population in the Panhandle region also shows evidence of in and out migration.

## Literature Review

Migration to and from rural communities has been studied in many disciplines, beginning with the work of Ravenstein who identified that the dominant factor for migration is economic reasons. While migration literature in general is important in this study, we believe that specific migration theories which encompass migration networks, return and selection, are important for the purpose of the problem at hand. The underlying reasons why new residents relocate to the Panhandle Region may indeed have to do with the ties (networking) they have with residents already living in the Nebraska Panhandle as well as the community's new resident selection criteria (migration selection). Since we use the Delphi technique and focus groups as our tools to gain insight on new resident recruitment and retention, in this study, we review the literature on these areas as well.

## Migration Networks

The role of family networks in potential destinations has been found to play an important role in reducing the uncertainty associated with returns of migration and to increase the returns from migration with higher wages and employment (Massey, 1987<sup>17</sup>; Donato et al., 1992<sup>18</sup>; Neuman and Massey, 1994<sup>19</sup>; and Eren, 2007<sup>20</sup>). The cost of migration has been found to be mainly psychological (Sjaastad, 1962<sup>21</sup>; and Schwartz, 1973<sup>22</sup>) and migrants are likely to be associated with the displeasure of being away from family and friends. Family members in a potential destination may reduce the costs of moving through provision of direct assistance with needs such as food, housing and transportation (Church and King, 1983<sup>23</sup>; Gottlieb, 1987<sup>24</sup>; Grossman, 1989<sup>25</sup>; Marks, 1989<sup>26</sup>; Chiswick and Miller, 1996<sup>27</sup>; and Briggs, 1998<sup>28</sup>).

On the other hand, family ties have been found to reduce the probability of migration (Mincer, 1978<sup>29</sup>; Graves and Linneman, 1979<sup>30</sup>; and Eren, 2007<sup>31</sup>). Local kinship ties and children's social networks deter the migration of families with children, (Dawkins, 2006<sup>32</sup>). Family networks provide information on job market conditions of the potential destination. Many people in the U.S. find jobs through recommendations from family members and friends, Corcoran et al. (1980<sup>33</sup>), and many employers recruit through recommendations from current employees, Cohen and House (1996<sup>34</sup>). Job seekers benefit from the use of networks through reduced search costs (Holzer 1988<sup>35</sup>; and Mortensen and Vishwanath 1994<sup>36</sup>). Information ideas and resources

embedded in networks that link family, friends and neighbors across origins and destination communities influence the direction of migration.

### **Migration Selection and Return**

The migration selection model predicts that labor migrants are negatively (positively) selected on unobservable characteristics (e.g., productiveness) if the source community has more (less) dispersion in its earnings distribution, and negatively (positively), selected on observable skills (e.g., education), if the returns from educational attainment is relatively higher (lower) than in the destination community, (Borjas, 1987<sup>37</sup>). It would then be relatively less (more) rewarding for people with higher skills to migrate than for those with lower skills. The theory of return migration suggests that the forces driving selection in migration also drive selection in return migration, and that people return to their former communities as these may be the optimal residential location over the life cycle, (Borjas and Bratsberg, 1996<sup>38</sup>). The two views to migration selection constitute essential tools for predicting the skill composition of migrating populations when the purpose of migration is wealth maximization, as labor migration generally is, (Rooth and Saarela, 2007<sup>39</sup>). Literature on migration selection and return has been mainly applied to international migration. Rooth and Saarela (2007<sup>40</sup>)'s empirical findings do support the theoretical predictions of migration selection models in international migration.

### **The Delphi Technique and Community Development Studies**

The Delphi technique was developed in the 1950s and later refined by the RAND Corporation in the 1960s. The method, defined as a technique for constructing a group's communication process so that the process is effective in allowing a group of individuals as a whole to deal with a complex problem, was first used for decision making in 1953 (Morgan, Pelissero and England, 1979<sup>41</sup>). The technique is based on a structured process for collecting and distilling knowledge from a group of experts by means of a series of questionnaires interspersed with controlled opinion feedback (Adler and Ziglio, 1996<sup>42</sup>). It comprises a series of questionnaires sent to a pre-selected group of experts. The questionnaires are designed to initiate and construct a dialogue on a problem at the same time allowing the experts to refine their views as they progress through the different questionnaire iterations. This technique is designed to generate a process of consensus building among a group of experts in a given area while the experts remain anonymous throughout the process. The Delphi method was developed in order to make iterative discussion between experts possible without creating a certain social interactive behavior as can happen during normal group discussion and, which can hamper opinion forming (Wissema, 1982<sup>43</sup>).

While the Delphi technique has been used in a variety of applications, only a handful of the studies have applied the technique to study economic development issues. Morgan, Pelissero and England (1979<sup>44</sup>) explored housing, economics, ecology, urban conservation, and community growth and development.

Farkas and Wheeler (1980<sup>45</sup>) applied the Delphi technique to forecast components of regional development. The study involved seventy respondents/experts from thirty-five counties of Appalachian Georgia. Based on projections made by the expert panel, the study provided



insights on population and employment growth forecasts between 1970 and 1985, and how land use would likely change in terms of future residential, commercial and manufacturing growth.

Lewis (2000<sup>46</sup>) applied the technique to determine the manner in which the Australian public health system could be structured. The study facilitated a consensus on which public health functions were important for each community in Australia.

Thomas and Safrit (2002<sup>47</sup>) used a Modified Delphi technique to determine trends and issues affecting county level economic development in Ohio. Fourteen experts participated in this survey involving three iterations of mail surveys. The results of the study highlighted the six key trends and issues that were important to the people of Ohio. A Delphi study prepared by Lewis County Watch<sup>48</sup> conducted in 2004 in Lewis County in Washington State, sought insight into what people value about rural life, and how they see the relationships between economic development and preservation of rural character. The expert panel consisted of Lewis County residents, who were active and knowledgeable about their community. After three rounds of questionnaires, the study's findings provided useful insights as to what people value about rural life.

### **Focus Group Surveys as a Way to Gain Insight**

According to Krueger (1994<sup>49</sup>), a focus group is a carefully planned discussion designed to obtain perceptions on a defined area of interest in a permissive, non-threatening environment. Focus groups are an important tool when: the interaction among interviewees is likely to yield the best information; interviewees are similar and cooperative with each other; time to collect information is limited; and respondents are hesitant to provide information on a one-on-one basis (Cresswell, 2007<sup>50</sup> and Narjes, 2008<sup>51</sup>).

Focus groups have been used for many years in the private sector as a common tool for product development. The method's use in what has been termed "social marketing" is less common, being seen most often in the arena of public health, where basic marketing tools, including focus groups, are utilized in efforts to influence health related behavior (Andreasen, 1995<sup>52</sup>). While there is no specific literature on the use of focus groups in marketing communities, the method had theoretical merit. In this study, focus group interviews were targeted toward market research related to a public good--the retention and recruitment of newcomers to the community. The process provided a unique opportunity of group interaction and a better understanding of why particular opinions were held.

### **Expert Consensus: A View from the Community Practitioner - the Panhandle Region Delphi Survey**

In this study, the Delphi survey consisted of 52 community development practitioners with three phases of question sets. Questions for each phase were electronically made available to the respondents through the software platform, Survey Monkey. After each phase was completed, the respondents were furnished with the results of the previous phase. Based on the observation of the results of the previous phase, respondents were presented with questions for the next phase.

***Phase 1***

The first survey iteration in June 2007 was comprised of general questions dealing with the demographics (population size, changes in population) of the communities and how community practitioners viewed different recruitment and retention factors and strategies, cooperation with other communities and organizations and how involved their communities are in new resident recruitment and retention efforts. A total of 52 practitioners responded to Phase 1. About 60% of the respondents reported that their communities engaged in some dimension of new resident recruitment efforts. More than half (55%) said their communities had worked together with other communities and other organizations in their recruitment efforts. However, the level of new resident recruitment effort had been relatively low, with the majority of the respondents, citing very little deliberate and consistent involvement. This limited degree of effort was, in past, reflecting a hesitancy on the part of their community culture towards attracting new residents. From this, it would appear that most communities historically have not done an adequate job in their new resident recruitment efforts.

When presented with several recruitment factors to choose from, eight recruitment factors emerged as the most important on a 1-5 rating scale (see Table 1).

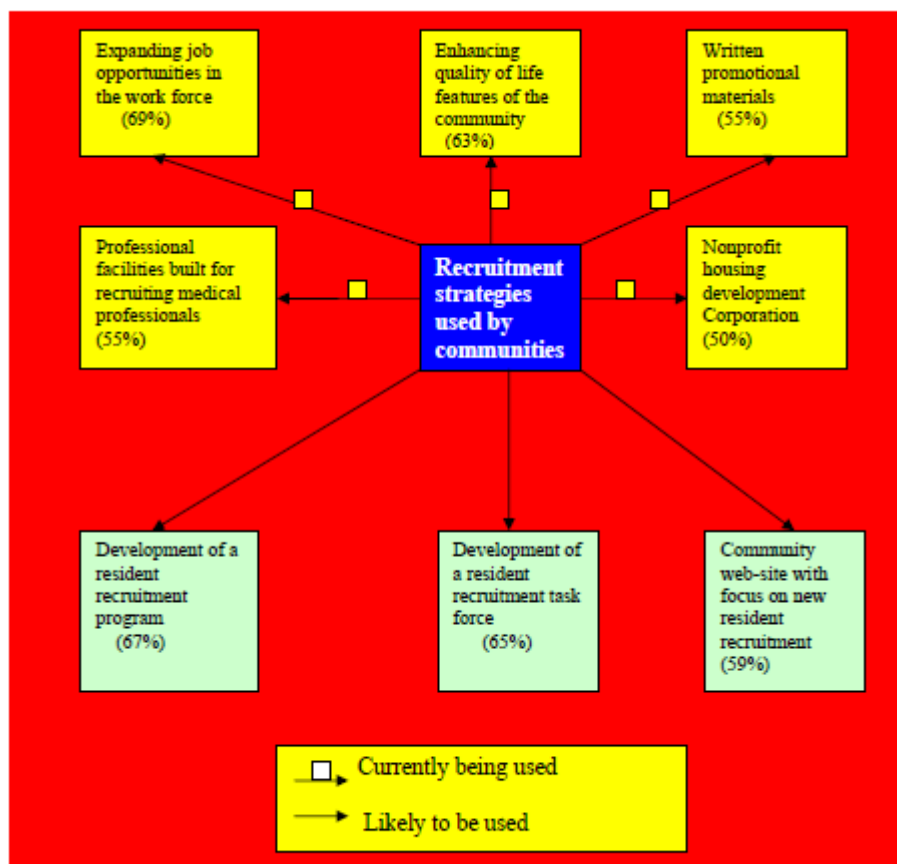
**TABLE 1** Top eight recruitment factors identified by community practitioners

Rank	Factor	Scale 1-5
1	Housing availability	4.45
2	Employment opportunities (within commuting range)	4.42
3	Quality of educational services	4.18
4	Housing affordability	4.18
5	General economic viability of the region or area	4.12
6	Quality of medical services	4.06
7	Progressive community leadership	4.00
8	Availability of high-speed broadband communications	4.00

Source: Panhandle recruitment and retention Delphi survey

Community practitioners were then presented with a set of strategies that can be used to recruit new residents and their responses are shown in Figure 2. Figure 2 shows the recruitment strategies which community practitioners are using and those they believed they would likely use in the future. The percentages in parentheses represent the proportion of respondents in favor of that particular recruitment strategy. The majority of the community practitioners were in favor of expanding job opportunities in the workforce and the enhancement of quality of life features of the community as the top two recruitment strategies they are currently using. However, the development of a resident recruitment program and a resident recruitment taskforce were considered as the two best strategies which the community practitioners are not currently using, but will likely use in the future.

Figure 2: Recruitment strategies currently and likely to be used by communities



Source: Panhandle recruitment and retention Delphi survey

As for retention of new residents, a majority (65%) of the respondents acknowledged their communities were not engaging in any deliberate new resident retention strategies. It was apparent that they had given little attention to specific new-resident retention efforts. When presented with a list of possible strategies, the majority of the respondents (55%) believed community celebration events would be the most effective strategy.

## Phase 2

In addition to a summary of results of the first iteration, a second set of questions was sent electronically to Delphi survey respondents in September 2007. Among the areas covered by the questions in this second iteration were: (1) the factors affecting new resident recruitment success and implementation; (2) the groups targeted for recruitment by community practitioners identified in Phase 1; (3) how community practitioners ranked the top eight recruitment factors from Phase 1; (4) the underlying reasons why community practitioners thought the top eight recruitment factors were important; (5) the future of new resident recruitment; and (6) the likely future strategies they will use to recruit new residents.

Respondents also were asked in this phase to clarify why they perceived their communities were often doing relatively little regarding either recruitment or retention of new residents. During

Phase I, they had noted hesitancy on the part of their community culture towards recruiting new residents. The respondents were presented with several factors that were likely to be contributors to this low new-resident recruitment effort. The four factors which community practitioners considered most important are listed in Table 2.

**TABLE 2** Community cultural factors creating hesitancy regarding new resident recruitment implementation and success

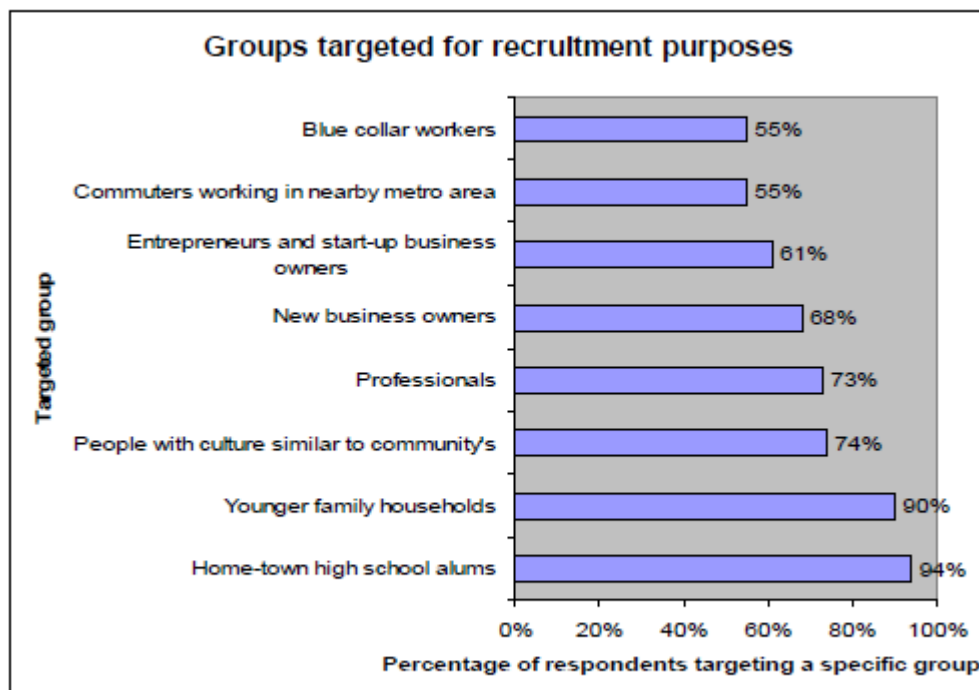
Factor	Respondents who said the factor is important in their community
Fear of change to community culture	74%
Expected increase in crime and disruption	65%
Fear of greater ethnic diversity	55%
Lower income households moving income	50%

Source: Panhandle recruitment and retention Delphi survey

Nearly three of every four respondents identified fear of change to community culture, while two-thirds of the respondents thought expected increase in crime and disruption in the community was an important factor contributing to this hesitancy. The community practitioners were essentially divided on the aspect of lower income households moving into the community as an important community factor inhibiting active recruitment of new residents.

Community practitioners were asked to choose the specific groups they were targeting for new resident recruitment purposes (Figure 3). It appears that recruitment of home-town high school alums, the highest percentage of the targeted groups, may be closely aligned with the hesitancy factor just described, in that long-term residents of the community would see this group as essentially being of the existing culture and therefore less of a threat to change.

**Figure 3: Specific groups targeted for new resident recruitment purposes**



The community practitioners were asked to rank the top eight recruitment factors from the top eight identified in Phase 1 (Table 1). Two-thirds of the community practitioners reported that employment opportunities (within commuting range) was the most important factor (67%); about 17% of the respondents reported housing availability and affordability as the most important factor; the general economic viability of the region was chosen to be the most important factor by 7% of the respondents; and housing affordability, progressive community leadership and availability of high-speed broadband communications, were each regarded to be the most important factor by 3% of the community practitioners. When asked with open-ended questions, the underlying reasons why the top eight recruitment factors emerged as the most important ones, the respondents cited the following:

- Employment and income opportunities drive new resident recruitment.
- Good and affordable housing is key to all potential new residents.
- Progressive leadership leads to a progressive community; and potential new residents find that attractive.

Based on reported use/future use of strategies, community practitioners agreed to the following:

- New resident recruitment efforts will become much more formalized and organized in the future.
- Web-based promotional efforts will be much more common in the future.
- Multiple community contact and follow-up with potential new resident recruits will be the norm of the future.
- Partnering with local businesses to attract new residents (not just economic activity and jobs) will be taking on greater importance.

Asked why they thought the above strategies emerged as the most effective, the respondents agreed that the following factors were important:

- Creating more jobs is the key to new resident recruitment.
- Encouraging high school alums to return home can help, but jobs still are critical.
- Multiple contacts by the community, including businesses and individuals, works.
- Emphasizing a community's quality-of-life features will encourage recruitment.

As for retention the majority (63%) of the respondents reported that deliberate retention efforts by their communities were very limited. However, when asked to rank what would be the most critical aspects of resident retention, respondents identified two strategies as being most important: Specifically, 67% ranked job and career enhancement opportunities first, while 30% saw positive community publicity, e.g., "what's good about..." as being the most important

factor. The underlying reasons why community practitioners viewed these retention strategies as the most effective can be summarized in these following comments made by respondents:

- New residents will stay in a community if they can advance their careers.
- A positive and progressive community environment encourages staying.
- For households with school-age children, the school/community connections promote settlement into the community.
- Opportunity for community involvement is important in retaining new residents once they have arrived.

While most practitioners reported their communities had done relatively little in terms of new resident retention, they indicated they would be willing to engage in such efforts in the future.

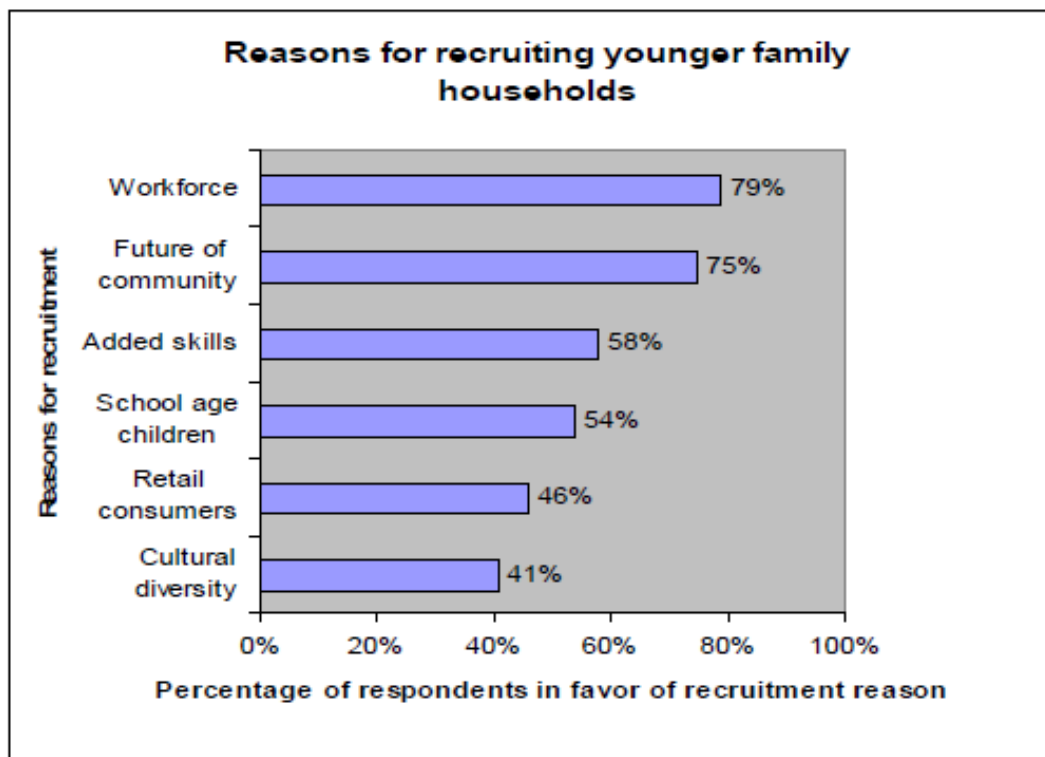
### *Phase 3*

The questionnaire for phase 3 was electronically sent to the respondents in December 2007. As the survey progressed from Phase 1 through Phase 2, we narrowed down the focus of the study and concentrated on the areas in which community practitioners were moving toward agreement.

While practitioners had previously noted “coolness” of their communities to new-resident recruitment, there was growing consensus that this aspect of community culture was gradually changing as evidenced by the following comments of the respondents:

- “These forces are weakening.”
- “Older residents may have this perspective, but it is not strong among other community residents.”
- “My community is generally accepting of these potential changes as part of its future survival.”
- “My community is likely to retain some of these attitudes but willing to accept the consequences.”

Respondents had earlier indicated (in Phase 2) that home-town high school alums were the most common targeted group for recruitment. However, when further follow-up was made in Phase 3, the majority indicated their communities had only begun targeting this group within the past few years, and with limited success.

**Figure 4: Reasons behind the recruitment of younger family households**

Source: Panhandle recruitment and retention Delphi survey.

As to the motivation behind recruitment of younger family households previously identified in Phase 2, community practitioners listed workforce development as the primary factor (Figure 4). But they also acknowledged that recruiting young families would be critical to the future of the community. Community practitioners, when asked about how they viewed various factors likely to be used for recruiting younger family households to a community, saw the following as important:

- “Good employment opportunities for the primary adult wage earners in household” (83%).
- “Quality day-care and other child-care services” (67%).
- “Good employment opportunities for the spouse/significant other adult wage earners in household” (67%).
- “Accessible and affordable entry-level housing” (63%).

The top four areas where strong community effort in recruiting younger family households should be directed were as follows:

- Assurance of quality school system (86%).
- Good access to quality medical services, including obstetrics and pediatrics (86%).
- Family friendly child-rearing environment (79%).
- Good employment opportunities for the primary adult wage earners in household (54%).

As for recruiting entrepreneurs and start-up business owners, survey respondents did consider this to be an important target group. The important factors likely to be used in recruiting entrepreneurs and start-up business owners by the communities included: conveying a positive community attitude towards entrepreneurial activity; providing local venture/angel capital financing to entrepreneurs; and providing a network mentoring group for businesses. These factors were noted by 71%, 54% and 54% of the respondents respectively.

Throughout the three-phased Delphi survey process, the importance of an Internet presence surfaced repeatedly; and the community development respondents saw it as being an important recruitment tool. However, in assessing their community's Internet presence, only a minority of the respondents rated the quality of the internet-delivered recruitment information process of their own community as being high:

- Community effectiveness in new-resident recruitment via Internet (22%).
- The community's commitment (in terms of dollar resources, expertise, and time) to keep the website up-to-date and improving in quality (35%).
- The community's website's degree of user-friendliness in terms of organized information and telephone/e-mail contacts for follow-up interaction (38%).

In short, most communities do not seem to be effectively marketing themselves via the Internet. Moreover, the level of partnering with the business community, specific firms and organizations (which can improve Internet presence), in recruitment efforts was presently rated high by only a minority of the respondents (35%).

Regarding another recruitment tool, multiple contacts of prospective new residents, about 73% of the respondents indicated that they do not have in place a deliberate process for multiple contacts and follow-up interactions with any potential new residents. However they were nearly unanimous (94%) in expecting to develop a coordinated multiple-follow-up process in the future. This response, in terms of future intentions by the respondents' communities could well be reflecting a previously overlooked aspect of recruitment that community practitioners became aware of in the process of participating in this iterative survey, representing a direct educational spillover from a research survey process.



## **Insights and Implications from the Delphi Study**

The Delphi process progressed from a broad array of recruitment and retention efforts to a narrower and consensual ending. The study initially questioned community practitioners about recruitment and retention factors used by communities as well as the targeted groups.

### ***Recruitment***

Regarding recruitment, results revealed that the top two recruitment factors according to the community developers are employment opportunities and housing availability. The findings also indicated that communities typically have had limited specific involvement in the recruitment of new residents. Respondents cited fear of change to community culture and the fear of an expected increase in crime and disruption when new residents come to town as the two leading factors for their community's reluctance to engage in new resident recruitment. However, respondents indicated this reluctance was declining and, conversely, there was greater willingness to come up with sound new resident recruitment plans for their communities. Targeted recruitment appeared to be the most popular with the respondents, with about 80% of the respondents reporting in favor of it. Community practitioners converged on the recruitment of (1) younger families and (2) business entrepreneurs to their communities as their two prime target groups. However, the recruitment of younger people emerged as the top priority/target for communities. Young family households were thought to bring new life to the communities through bringing a younger workforce, new entrepreneurship ideas and leadership skills, continuity in the school system, cultural diversity, and increased retailing activity supporting local businesses. Of the techniques likely to shape the mode of future new resident recruitment, community practitioners came to strong consensus on: (1) strong Internet recruitment efforts, and (2) coordinated multiple-follow-up interactions with any potential new residents.

### ***Retention***

As for retention, a majority of the community developers initially noted their communities presently were not engaging in any new resident retention strategies at all. And when asked what they saw as possible efforts, the respondents viewed community celebration events as the most effective strategy in retaining new residents. On the retention of new residents, the study progressed from community developers acknowledging that their communities were presently doing very little to an overwhelming interest in developing a process for active retention in the future. Again, this was an indication that the survey process itself was possibly educational for the participants.

## **The Demand Side of Resident Recruitment and Retention: A View from the New Residents**

To better understand the views of the new residents on recruitment and retention, the findings of the mail survey and focus groups, both components of the NRI Research project, findings were compared to the results identified by the Delphi study. The mail survey consisted of a self-administered questionnaire mailed in May and June of 2007 to approximately 1,050 households in the Nebraska Panhandle using mailing lists designed to identify households that were new to the area in the previous five years. The return rate for usable surveys was 33 percent, or 321 households. (Cantrell, et. al, 2008<sup>53</sup>). The mail survey respondents were also given the

opportunity to participate in focus groups during the summer of 2007. A total of 78 voluntarily participated in twelve focus groups representing ten of the eleven Nebraska Panhandle counties.

### ***What Motivated the New Residents to Move to the Nebraska Panhandle Area?***

Over 46% of the newcomers moved to the Panhandle to accept employment either through a transfer or with a new employer according to the mail survey to new residents. The focus group research agreed with this finding as participants said job opportunities (47%) were their dominant reason for moving followed by location/housing (35%) and family (18%). These results suggest that the community development practitioners are correct in focusing on job opportunities and housing.

While those factors may have been dominant reasons, the mail survey and the focus group research both found that many of the new movers had looked at other locations prior to moving to the Panhandle. Figure 5 shows that over 50% of the new residents looked at other locations before moving to the Panhandle Region. The new residents were looking for specific factors that included climate, natural amenities, health care and education.

**Figure 5: Locations Considered Before Choosing Current Location**



Source: Cornhusker Economics - [Newcomers to the Nebraska Panhandle: How Do We Keep Them Here?](#) by Burkhart-Kriesel et. al (2007)

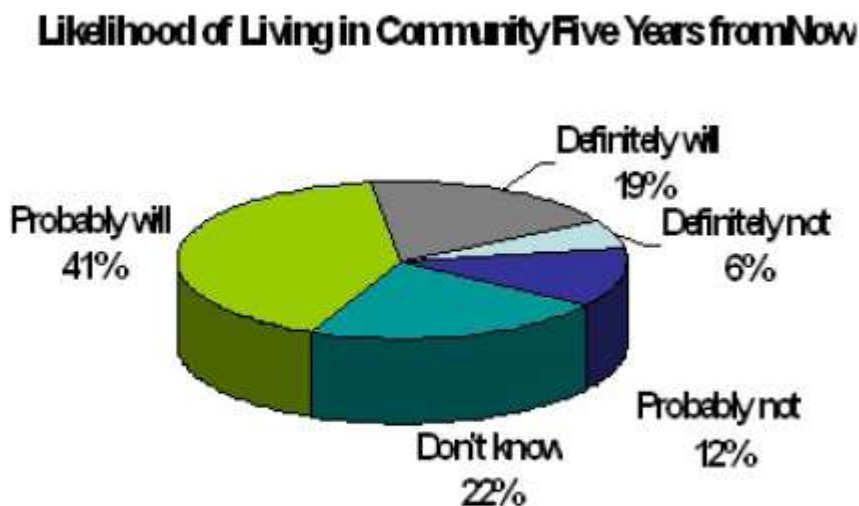
The new residents in the focus groups discovered and found information about the community through: family; friends; previously living in the region (including neighboring states within 50 miles); visits to the community (primarily through job interviews); and the Internet. While many indicated that they searched the Internet for information, they identified sites other than the community as their source. The information sources support the theory of migration networks that migrants look to their family ties for information. The internet is the “*new kid on the block*”

which complements the more traditional networks. There is evidence of return migration in the form of the return of new residents who previously lived in the region or close to the region. In terms of the context of what they were looking for in a community, new residents looked at safety, family orientation, small town atmosphere, and faith orientation associated with their new community. New residents also suggested the importance of marketing a community. As one individual stated, “I think it behooves the cities, the small-town cities to really get together as a group [and identify] what really are the things that their city wants to market. What are their strong points? What are their weak points? If we did this, what and how would that increase our attraction?”

***To what extent are residents satisfied that their new communities meet expectations and provide a welcoming environment?***

The mail survey found that 40% of the respondents may not remain in the community five years (see figure 6). When the focus groups were asked whether individuals planned to remain in the community a time frame was not included. In this case almost 75% of the participants do not know if they will remain in the community.

**Figure 6: Likelihood of Living in Community Five Years from Now**



Source: Cantrell (2008).

Many of the focus group participants identified housing concerns as they were attempting to find a home in their new community. Individuals who moved to communities with populations under 3,500, described housing as affordable while those who moved to communities over 5,000 in population described themselves as lucky to find a house to buy.

A number of participants found adjusting to the small town environment a challenge due to lack of services such as child-care centers, cultural activities, entertainment options, and health care access.

For the new residents that moved without a job, many have found employment positions, but they are often low paying. Moreover, they expressed fear that a dominant industry in their community might leave.

Information sharing was an issue since many of the new residents found it difficult to get information regarding activities such as entertainment, service changes, and school activities. Focus group members commented that communities did not seem very receptive to new residents wanting to continue or start a new business. New residents also were concerned about socio economic-race issues, social responsibilities and serious area drug/alcohol issues, which became evident to them after arriving in their new communities.

### ***Strategies for Adapting and Connecting to Communities: The Retention Factor***

New residents looked to a number of strategies to learn about their new community and become connected. Strategies for adapting and connecting to a new community identified by new residents include, welcome programs, local news media (mainly newspaper and radio), and simply getting involved in community activities. While welcome packages have been used by some communities, such efforts have been inconsistent as not all the new residents receive these services. Most of the newcomers used local media, (i.e., local newspaper and radio stations) as a source of information to make a connection to the community.

The study asked the newcomers to compare their prior pre-move perceptions about the community they moved to and their experience after the move. Prior to their move, new residents viewed the Nebraska Panhandle communities as family-oriented, faith-oriented, small town atmosphere, and free of congestion. After the move, the newcomers, found the communities to be; family- and faith-oriented, free of congestion, small and safe, as they expected. A majority (51%) of the focus group participants indicated they were happy with their decision to come to the Nebraska Panhandle; however, they may move in the future, while 26% plan to stay in the community (Figure 5). A total of 10% of the new residents are planning to leave the region while 13% of the new residents are happy to move to the region but are finding it difficult to adjust.

The above statistics tend to highlight the instability between recruitment and retention. Input from new residents, regarding what they think, could be helpful in convincing them to remain in the community. When asked for advice on retention, the newcomers' indicated communities should:

- Make use of new resident welcome programs, but be consistent,
- Create opportunities for newcomers to participate actively in community affairs,
- Develop and encourage new resident networking opportunities,

- Hold periodic community social functions which include a special reaching out to newcomers,
- Create more opportunities for leadership development and legitimate participation in community affairs for new residents,
- Develop a clear and positive "community vision" for the future,
- Develop individual job and career enhancement opportunities for new residents, and,
- Encourage the development of an open-minded community attitude toward new residents and new ideas.

### **Bringing the Supply side and the Demand Side of the Market Together:**

#### ***Do the Community Practitioners and New Residents Agree on Recruitment and Retention of New Residents?***

The ideal market situation would be total agreement between the supply side and the demand side of the market. However, in the case of communities (suppliers) and their market for new residents (consumers), this is far from reality. Table 3 documents the levels of agreement between the two parties regarding new resident recruitment factors and/or strategies.

**TABLE 3** Do new residents and community practitioners agree on recruitment?

Recruitment factor/strategy	Community practitioners	New residents
a. Housing availability and affordability	Yes	Yes
b. Employment opportunities	Yes	Yes
c. Quality of educational services	Yes	Yes
d. General economic viability of the region/area	Yes	Yes
e. Quality of medical services	Yes	Yes
f. Progressive community leadership	No*	Yes
g. Availability of high-speed broadband communications	Yes	Yes
h. Development of a new resident recruitment program	No*	Yes
i. Community website with focus on new residents	No*	Yes
j. Enhancing quality of life features of the community	Yes	Yes
k. Written promotional materials	Yes	Yes
l. Community radio/ newspaper	No*	Yes
m. Target a recruitment group	Yes	Yes
n. Create a marketing plan aimed at attracting new residents	No*	Yes

Source: Panhandle recruitment and retention Delphi survey, and Narjes (2008)

Yes: recruitment factor/strategy is considered to be important.

No\*: not initially considered important but changed opinion by Phase 3 of Delphi survey to view this recruitment factor/strategy to be important in the future.

No: recruitment factor/strategy is not considered to be important.

Results in Table 3 show that there was only partial agreement between community practitioners and new residents on which recruitment factors/strategies are important. However, community practitioners are willing to bridge the gap, and indicated that they will consider several of the factors/strategies they had not seriously considered prior to this study. Communities fell short on recruitment strategies such as progressive community leadership, new resident recruitment programs, use of community website with focus on new residents, use of community radio/newspaper, and marketing plans aimed at attracting new residents.

With regard to new resident retention, Table 4 summarizes the levels of agreement between the two parties regarding new resident retention techniques and/or strategies.

**TABLE 4** Do new residents and community practitioners agree on retention?

Retaining Techniques/strategies	Community practitioners	New residents
a. New resident welcome programs	Yes	Somewhat
b. Opportunities to participate in community affairs	No*	Yes
c. New resident networking opportunities	No*	Yes
d. Periodic community social functions that includes a special reaching out to newcomers	No*	Yes
e. Opportunities for leadership development and participation in community affairs	Yes	Yes
f. Development of a clear and positive "community vision" for the future	No*	Yes
g. Individual job and career enhancement opportunities for new residents	Yes	Yes
h. Encourage the development an open-minded community attitude toward new residents and new ideas	No*	Yes
i. Availability of services	Somewhat	Yes
j. Job opportunities	Yes	Yes
k. Programs to help small business	Yes	Yes
l. Safety	Yes	Yes
m. Housing availability	Yes	Yes
n. Positive community publicity	No*	Yes

Source: Panhandle recruitment and retention Delphi survey, and Narjes(2008)

Yes: retention technique/strategy is considered to be very important.

No\* : not initially considered important but changed opinion by Phase 3 of Delphi survey to view this retention technique/strategy to be important in the future.

No: retention technique/strategy is not considered to be very important.

Somewhat: retention technique/strategy is considered to be important.

Results in Table 4 show that community practitioners have not tended to take new resident retention seriously. While new residents were expecting a lot in terms of retention efforts in their new communities, community practitioners did not view this in the same manner prior to this study. However, upon being aware of new resident views, community practitioners did show a

willingness to bridge the gap between their own limited retention efforts and the expectations of new residents. In short, the market dynamic was beginning to come together.

### **Conclusions and Recommendations**

Community practitioners generally report that their communities have been rather passive in processes of recruitment and retention of new residents. There is evidence of some recruitment of new residents; while retention efforts have been marginal at best. However, community practitioners expressed interest in doing more in terms of recruitment and retention of new residents in the future. New residents, while generally happy to have moved to the Panhandle community, have faced several challenges which could have been minimized had community developers addressed the issues earlier. New residents found it tough to buy houses, to get services, and to locate small business assistance programs. They often expressed feeling “left out” since their communities are not doing much in terms of social activities and involvement tailored for new residents.

Community practitioners and new residents generally agree on what needs to be done in terms of recruitment; but there appears to exist considerable gaps as to appropriate strategies for retaining new residents. New residents expressed the need for more strategies to be used. Community practitioners need to incorporate the concerns of new residents in their efforts to both recruit and retain new residents, by asking them what they view as important. Specifically, it seems apparent from this study that new residents should be involved in the whole process. And, there should be considerable effort on retention; otherwise even successful recruitment is nullified.

In summary, community practitioners need to make effective use of the traditional media and the Internet to market their communities. In addition, they have to know what they want to market (their strong points), figure out what the overall recruitment message will be, and how they want to position the community. In a nutshell, a community should develop or build a unique *community identity* and *vision* to which prospective new residents can identify.

To retain new residents, communities need to devote ample resources to: reduce the shortage of housing; make services that appeal to different age groups available; create a positive attitude toward new residents; hold periodic community social functions with the purpose of reaching out to the newcomers, create new resident networking opportunities and welcome programs; and give new residents opportunities to genuinely participate in community affairs.

Finally, communities that are being challenged by population declines and associated consequences are in a competitive environment with other communities and regions. They must be active, not passive. Failure to do otherwise may well be their socio/economic demise in these turbulent times.

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