Introduction

In 2014 the Lincoln-Lancaster County Planning Department, Lancaster County Board of Commissioners, and Lancaster County Extension Office of the University of Nebraska completed an application for a Citizens' Institute on Rural Design award on behalf of the small towns of Lancaster County. The award was to provide funding for a rural design technical workshop that would bring information and resources to the small towns of Lancaster County to initiate a conversation regarding the particular challenges and opportunities afforded to small towns which share their county with a major city.

County Landscape

Lancaster County is approximately 846 square miles, 91 of which are within the City of Lincoln, Nebraska's State Capital. Lancaster County lies within the Platte River Valley in southeastern Nebraska, a little more than 50 miles west of the Missouri River. The natural historical features are dominated by mixed grass prairie, rolling hills, and stream terraces. While dominated by Lincoln, there are twelve incorporated, and nine unincorporated towns in Lancaster County. Of the twelve incorporated towns, two, Hickman and Waverly, are of a size that qualifies them as Cities of the Second Class, according to Nebraska State Statute. The other ten are classified as Villages.

Since the 1960s, the City of Lincoln has made up about 90% of the County population, with the remaining population being divided between the other towns in the County and the rural and unincorporated areas. This 10% of the County population has seen a shift over the years from about 2% in the incorporated towns and 8% on acreages and farms, to a current split of about 3% in towns and 7% in the unincorporated area. The 2040 Comprehensive Plan for Lincoln and Lancaster County assumes the shift will continue and that 4% of people will live in incorporate villages and cities by 2040, with the remaining 6% on acreages, farms and in the unincorporated villages in the County. Lancaster County has experienced about 1.3% growth per year over the last several decades. Growth is seen in Lincoln, the other small towns, and in the rural areas of the County, however, the annual percent growth for the small towns and unincorporated areas of the County has been higher than the annual percent growth of the City of Lincoln.

Lancaster County is about 84% white, 5.85% Hispanic, 3.38% African American, and 3.47% Asian. The median age in Lancaster County is 31.4 years and the median age for the City of Lincoln is 30.6 years. If Lincoln makes up about 90% of the County population, the median age in the rural part of the County is closer to 38.6 years, significantly higher than the City of Lincoln. A review of 5-year age cohorts shows a lower proportion of the youngest children and adults between 18 and 39 and a higher proportion of older children (6 to 17) and adults between the ages of 40 and 65 living in the rural part of the County as compared to the City of Lincoln.

The small towns in Lancaster County have a mixed history of growth. Some of the smallest towns have seen declines since 1990, while others have seen increases. Waverly, Hickman, and Bennet,

the three largest towns in the County (other than Lincoln), experienced the sharpest growth between 1990 and 2010 with 75%, 53%, and 32% growth, respectively.

County Map

Lancaster County is dominated by the City of Lincoln, which is a City of approximately 280,000 and is the capital of Nebraska and home to the flagship campus of the University of Nebraska. The other small towns in Lancaster County developed along rail corridors at 7 mile spacing, which was typical for the distance a steam train could travel before requiring additional water. Typically, in counties dominated by a larger City, you would see the small towns growing and becoming suburbs of the larger City until their margins were indistinguishable to those driving through. Lincoln, however, while it has annexed surrounding small towns as it grew, has not sprawled out significantly into the rural land between its fringes and the other small towns. As such, these towns have maintained both a physical separation from Lincoln and a unique identity, and the County includes 13 very distinct communities.

The County is home to a very unique ecological community as well, the Eastern Saline Wetlands, which exist only in Lancaster County and Saunders County to the north. In addition, Lancaster County has significant tracts of virgin tall-grass prairie and an effort is being made to preserve a particularly valuable corridor from Lincoln, through the village of Denton, to Nebraska Audubon's Spring Creek Prairie. There are several bicycle and pedestrian trails built along old railroad right of way that branch out from Lincoln and into the surrounding rural areas.

Community assets will vary from town to town, however all towns are at least 100 years old, most include at least one church, a post office, and other businesses such as grain elevators, restaurants, vehicle services, personal services, banks, and others. Two of the towns, Hickman and Waverly, include a wider variety of businesses, full time municipal offices, and employment opportunities. These two towns have also seen significant growth over the past two decades.

While Lincoln can be viewed as an asset to other small towns, it is also a challenge. Because of the increased mobility of today's residents, compared to those 100 years ago when many of these towns were new, the small town no longer plays the same role it once did in the daily lives of its residents. These towns are at most 20 minutes from Lincoln's City limits and have become "bedroom" communities for many of their residents. In addition, consolidation of school districts, first seen in the 1970s, has moved the local school out of all but a few of the communities. The City of Lincoln is served by Lincoln Public Schools while there are nine other school districts serving the rural parts of the County. The combination of having the majority of jobs and services located in Lincoln, and the children attending school in some other town or rural consolidated school, has removed that central role the town once had. Children no longer walk to school, residents work in another place, and many must drive 30 miles, round trip, in order to buy even a gallon of milk.

While there is still growth in these towns, many of the towns complain that it is increasingly difficult to engage their residents in the business of their community. Residents seem to be interested only in their immediate surroundings, their neighbors, and don't often patronize local businesses. Downtowns are becoming increasingly run-down and the towns are losing their "spark". While many of these towns once had annual festivals that drew people from all over the region, many of them now cannot get enough residents interested in participating in their organization to be able to conduct these festivals. The towns could all benefit from a redefinition of their unique identity and engagement of their population in the day-to-day life of the town.

Most of the towns show steady population and several of them have shown significant growth over the past few decades. In general, the percentage of growth in the small town population is greater than the percentage of growth in the unincorporated areas. There appears to be strong interest in small town life. If the towns are to continue to function sustainably, they must build their capacity to serve the needs of their residents. Since the vast majority of these communities operate almost entirely on the volunteer service of their residents (to serve as village board members, planning commissioners, and members of other boards such as park and community center boards) there must be a stronger bond between the residents and a desire to participate in their communities.

One way to build this bond is to make the appearance of the community itself attractive, important, and a source of pride to its citizens. There is great opportunity to build on the particular assets of the individual communities through the use of design and to foster this community pride. The 2008 Nebraska Historic Buildings Survey, mentioned in the UNL Extension's discussion of previous collaborative efforts, identified 571 properties in the rural area of Lancaster County with historic integrity which would be eligible for listing on the National Register of Historic Places. Of those, 193 are located within the incorporated small towns in Lancaster County. There is opportunity for those communities to consider these properties as amenities that may have further value to the community as a whole.

Town centers are often run down and underutilized. In many cases older buildings have been retrofitted in ways that hide their particular design characters—cladding placed over old brick, a sign covering up design features on the facade, HVAC equipment placed in a position visible from the street. In some cases parks have aged equipment that is unattractive to children and families and possibly even dangerous. Sidewalks are discontinuous, broken, and sometimes missing entirely.

Downtown Raymond

Davey Playground

Street trees are aging, uncared for, and not replaced when they must be removed. Older housing, which often has a charming architectural character, is sometimes in ill repair with overgrown vegetation surrounding it, and goes unnoticed and unappreciated by those living in the community.

Finances are also a major challenge for most of the towns. Property taxes are the main source of municipal revenue and the majority of those taxes are used to maintain and improve utility services, primarily water and wastewater, and maintaining roads. A few of the towns have privately funded foundations or booster clubs, some of them have fees collected from the use of practice fields or community halls, and a few have keno revenues. Information on how to kick off large projects with smaller, less expensive, demonstration projects would serve the communities well as would information on funding sources or fund raising techniques.

There is continued interest by much of the County population in residing in these small towns. The towns are often considered to be friendly, safe, family-oriented communities; however, once new residents arrive they may not find making a real connection with their new community to be as simple as they thought it would be. Attractive public spaces that invite new and long-time residents to engage with others in their community could foster connections to that community that will increase participation in the day-to-day life of the town. Young people who grow up in a community with such connections are more likely to participate in their community whether they stay in that town or move on to another. Unified design themes or particular design characteristics could also foster commercial investments in these towns.

Many of the towns have vacant store fronts, underutilized commercial space, or gaps in their commercial districts. With proximity to Lincoln and the capacity of many businesses to function through the internet, there is opportunity for the towns to benefit from the relocation of businesses to their downtowns. These small town commercial districts are also ideal for those who might be looking to begin a new business. The University of Nebraska Center for Entrepreneurship and the Southeast Community College Entrepreneurial Center are both active programs to develop entrepreneurs in the region. Lincoln has been successful in the last several years in attracting both entrepreneurs and investors in these ventures. Invest Nebraska, a statewide entrepreneurial organization, states that Nebraska as a whole attracted more out-of-state investment in entrepreneurial enterprises in 2013 than in the previous 5 years combined. It is reasonable to believe there are entrepreneurs in the region who would find a small town setting, available space at reasonable rates, a personal experience with the local governing authorities all located just minutes from Lincoln, attractive. Lancaster County has a long standing and formal policy of directing commercial and industrial development to the cities and villages rather than the rural area, which allows them to benefit from the property and sales taxes generated by these businesses.

The migratory pattern called “rural flight” occurs in a region following the industrialization of agriculture. This trend has been evident in the US since World War II with the spread of industrialized agriculture. Small family farms gave way to specialized large farms. The loss of population in rural areas leads to the abandonment of small towns as the rural customers of retail and service businesses move to larger communities. Those who do stay are no longer as likely to find employment in the town as these businesses close, and so must commute to larger communities. These lead to many of the issues noted previously in this application: lack of involved and committed community members, empty storefronts, and a general decline of public spaces. This is certainly not confined to Lancaster County, Nebraska, but has likely been experienced in communities all over the US, and probably beyond, as rural populations decline.

However, in situations where there are larger communities near enough to provide employment with reasonable commute times, there is opportunity for savvy rural communities to benefit from the unique lifestyle a small town can offer. In Lancaster County, the presence of the City of Lincoln provides such an opportunity. I doubt this is unique in the US, either. Indeed, Lancaster County has seen the population of its small towns increase at a rate greater than the overall population of the County. However, anecdotal comment from the towns themselves indicates many of these residents are not fully engaged in their community. If these communities can tap into the desire that many express for "small town" lifestyle for themselves and their families, they may be able to increase their populations not only in number but also in dedication to their communities.

The planning of this workshop could provide a sort of template that could be applied to communities with similar conditions. If a sort of toolbox can be compiled with ideas and techniques that could be tailored to a particular community this could be a powerful resource for struggling communities.