

# Asset-Based Economic Development and Building Sustainable Rural Communities

## Part 3: Existing Infrastructure, Historic and Cultural Resources

A briefing paper from the ICMA Center for Sustainable Communities

Anna Read, ICMA

---

### Asset Based Economic Development and Rural Communities

This is the third briefing paper in a series on asset based economic development in rural communities.

This third paper will examine assets connected to a communities' history: existing infrastructure, such as their traditional compact development patterns and Main Streets; and historic and cultural resources. A community's historic and cultural resources can also be a significant asset for heritage-based tourism or economic development activities.

This paper will examine Main Streets, and cultural and historic resources—with an emphasis on cultural heritage and heritage tourism—though case studies of Silver City, New Mexico and Lindsborg, Kansas.

#### Main Streets

Many small towns and rural communities have Main Streets, which were once central to their economies and can again be a significant asset for economic development. The National Trust for Historic Preservation's Main Street Four-Point Approach,\*—which recommends a coordinated preservation-based strategy of organization, promotion, design, and economic restructuring—has helped build a network of 37 statewide Main Street programs and over 2,000 community programs.<sup>1</sup> Investing or re-investing in Main Street as a community asset can help revitalize downtowns and support small businesses, create jobs, restore historic buildings, highlight community heritage, and create a renewed sense of place and community pride.

### Case Study—Silver City, New Mexico, Population 10,315

Silver City, New Mexico—historically a mining town in the southwestern part of the state—has a thriving Main Street, but it wasn't always that way. In 1985, the year Silver City's Main Street program was started, the vacancy rate downtown was 40 percent. As of 2011, that number had fallen to 13 percent.<sup>2</sup> "I grew up in the area. The program started the year I graduated from high school. At that time the downtown was dead. And now we've turned into a nationally recognized Main Streets program, through the efforts of the program and the town," said Alex Brown, Silver City's Town Manager. "It has been a mainstay of our downtown, with the small businesses, and in creating a sense of community."

Silver City's Main Street program—one of New Mexico's five original Main Streets programs and the oldest remaining program in the state—relies on close coordination between the town and the Main Streets program. In order to maintain a Main Streets designation in New Mexico, it is necessary to send an annual resolution to the State Legislature showing community support for the program, something Silver City has done for the past 27 years. Additionally, the town provides operational funding for the Main Streets program and has funded capital infrastructure upgrades in the downtown area.

For many years, due to severe flooding a century ago, stores along Silver City's Main Street turned their frontages. As a result, the entrances were no longer at ground level, creating accessibility issues. The flood also created a large ditch, which gave its name to Big

Ditch Park. The town and the Main Streets program were able to procure funding to for infrastructure improvements, which included new sidewalks at entry level for the storefronts, as well as for the creation of Big Ditch Park. Through the Main Streets program, Silver City was also able to obtain funding for decorative street lighting in the downtown area.

By all accounts, Silver City's Main Street program has been a success. The program has leveraged \$2,165,075.00 in public investment and another \$4,637,334.00 in private investment. In addition to substantially reducing the vacancy rate in Silver City's Downtown area, the program has resulted in the creation of 150 jobs, the rehabilitation of 151 buildings, and the construction of two new buildings.<sup>3</sup>

Following on the success of the Main Streets program, Silver City applied to the State of New Mexico for an Arts and Cultural District designation. The Arts and Cultural District designation was adopted by the New Mexico State Legislature in 2007 and made available to New Mexico Main Street Communities to encourage "place-based economic development focusing on the unique cultural and arts assets of each authorized district."<sup>4</sup> Silver City adopted an Art and Cultural District Cultural Plan, which was created through a community-based planning process and which recognizes the increasing importance of artists and the arts to the local economy. The plan has six defined goals for the district, including to "support artists, cultural/arts groups, and cultural entrepreneurs in all disciplines," to "foster sharing and appreciation across cultures, past and present throughout the region," and to "support the preservation, protection, and celebration of local historic resources."<sup>5</sup>

The Arts and Cultural district, which includes Silver City's historic downtown is now home to many of Silver City's special events, including a three-day Blues Festival, held annually in May, and the new Silver City Clay Festival, a celebration of clay-based arts. Silver City is also home to the Tour de Gila, an international cycling race which takes riders from Silver City through the Gila National Forest. In addition to these annual festivals and events, the Main Streets program hosts events every weekend during the summer, which promote the art and culture of Silver City. These include music festivals and restaurant tours.

Due in part to the Main Streets program and its success, Silver City has not seen any significant decreases in its revenue, even during the recession. The town ended fiscal year 2012 with the most revenue it has ever recognized and has been able to issue bonds

for quality of life projects, including upgrades to the municipal golf course and a new sports complex. The town is also developing a comprehensive walking and biking trail system and creating bike routes through town. Silver City is also working to create a stronger corridor linkage between Main Street and Western New Mexico University, which is about two blocks away.

"We look at ourselves from a regional quality of life aspect—we may not have the infrastructure for job creation, etc. but our greatest asset is quality of life," Brown noted. "People come here to live and they work in adjacent counties. And even if they live in adjacent counties, they come here to shop or use our health services."

## Cultural and Historic Resources

Rural communities often have significant cultural and historic resources. These assets can be leveraged into economic potential through historic preservation and Main Streets programs and through cultural heritage events and tourism. Investing in cultural and historic resources can strengthen a community's sense of place. Making improvements through Main Streets programs can strengthen downtowns and build on an existing asset of many small towns—their compact, walkable core. Investing in these resources can also help attract tourism.

### Silver City, New Mexico

**Population (2010):** 10,315

**Asset:** Historic Main Street

**Summary:** Silver City has a thriving Main Street and an emerging Arts and Cultural District. Over \$2 million in public funding for the Main Street has leveraged more than twice that in private sector funding. The Main Street is home to a number of special events and is a draw for community members, residents of surrounding communities, and tourists. Investment in Main Street has been a factor in growing Silver City's revenues and allowing for quality of life investments.

**Key takeaways:**

- Build strong partnerships
- Look at how existing Main Streets and infrastructure, even if they pose challenges
- Highlight local culture with arts and festivals
- Invest in local infrastructure and quality of life

## Case Study—Lindsborg, Kansas, Population 3,458

Lindsborg, Kansas—Little Sweden, USA—celebrates its Swedish heritage through festivals and events, cultural customs, and the arts—all of which tie into the cultural heritage tourism in the city. Cultural heritage is defined by the National Trust for Historic Preservation (NTHP) as “traveling to experience the places and activities that authentically represent the stories and people of the past and present. It includes irreplaceable historic, cultural, and natural resources.”<sup>6</sup> According to US Travel Association, cultural heritage tourism contributed \$759 billion to the US economy in 2010, employing more than 7.4 million people, and generating \$118 billion in tax revenues for the federal government and state and local governments.<sup>7</sup>

Lindsborg, located in central Kansas, about 20 miles south of Salina, has seen the benefits of investing in its cultural heritage. “From an economic development standpoint, what makes Lindsborg unique is that the history and so forth were developed not as attractions, but as the culture of the community,” said Greg DuMars, Lindsborg’s City Administrator. “They are real and not manufactured for tourist purposes. It has a greater appeal to a cultural heritage traveler. The attractions were not created to promote, but we do promote them.”

Lindsborg observes a number of Swedish holidays and customs. The Swedish National Holidays of Midsummer’s Day, Lucia, Julotta, and Våffeldagen are celebrated. Lindsborg also holds the biennial Svensk Hyllningsfest, a festival honoring Swedish traditions. In addition to these holidays and festivals, Swedish customs such as Fika—having coffee twice a day—are observed in Lindsborg, and children learn Swedish



Lindsborg has many historic buildings dating from the late 19th and early 20th centuries in the downtown area. Many of the small businesses in these buildings have Swedish names. Photo courtesy of Lindsborg CVB.



A herd of wild Dala horses—large Dala Horses designed by local artists—can be found around Lindsborg. This one, entitled Fala the Dala Brick Road, is located in front of Lindsborg’s City Hall. Photo courtesy of Lindsborg CVB.

folk dances beginning in first grade in the local public schools. For high school students, there is the Lindsborg Swedish Dancers Troupe, a competitive dance folk dance group, which travels internationally, and there are also the Folksdanslag, a folk dancing group for adults.

In addition to festivals and cultural traditions, Lindsborg has an active heritage arts scene, which includes the Birger Sandzén Memorial Art Gallery, named for a Swedish immigrant and well known artist, and the Lester Raymer Society/Red Barn Studio, which provides artists in residence with studio and living space. Additionally, there is the Pearson wood carving studio, which was the first art studio in the city and now represents three generations of woodcarvers.

Local artists have also designed a series of Dala horses—the Dala horse is a symbol of Sweden and Lindsborg is home to the Hemslöjd, a Dala horse factory, which makes signs, door harps and other hand-painted wood gift items painted in the Swedish folk style—that form a herd of Wild Dala horses around the city. The Dala horses serve as both public art and a fun activity, as people search for them.<sup>8</sup>

Lindsborg’s Convention and Visitor’s Bureau (CVB) actively works to market the city’s cultural heritage. CVB engages in limited print, radio, and television advertising, and actively engages in e-marketing. This includes the publication of a monthly e-newsletter—the CVB Posten—which has information on upcoming events and features a local artist, and active use of social media, including Facebook, Twitter, and Flickr. CVB also maintains a website ([www.VisitLindsborg.com](http://www.VisitLindsborg.com)) with information on cultural offerings, a calendar of events, and other information about visiting Lindsborg.



Lindsborg's Swedish heritage is evident beyond the city's tourist attractions. The community designed and built Viking Valley playground has a Swedish castle, a Viking dragon ship, a Dala horse, and part of the Swedish pavilion from the 1904 World's Fair. The playground is a point of community pride and has become a draw for families from neighboring communities. Photo courtesy Lindsborg CVB.

Lindsborg is home to Bethany College, a small Lutheran liberal arts college. CVB targets marketing at Bethany alumni, as well as alumni of other Lutheran affiliated colleges throughout the country. In addition, CVB works with the Swedish Council of America, a group that works to promote knowledge and understanding of Swedish heritage in the US and foster relationships between the US and Sweden.

Lindsborg's Swedish heritage is also evident around the community, in the names of local businesses, and in the investments the city is making in community quality of life. An example of this is the Viking Valley Playground, which was designed and built by the community in 2005. Students at Sonderstrom Elementary School designed the playground, which was built by 1,200 volunteers with \$250,000 in donated materials. Construction took just over a week. The playground now serves as a point of community pride, as well as a draw for families from neighboring communities. "It is

very Swedish American. The students' Swedish heritage comes out in some of the elements they asked for that make up the playground," said Carla Wilson, the CVB Director, of Viking Village's design.

Lindsborg's investment in its cultural heritage has had positive economic benefits for the community. Property values have remained steady throughout the recession and sales tax revenues have been growing at a rate of about one percent per year. DuMars noted that both property values and sales tax revenues are driven by a combination of quality of life and tourism and that "Quality of life investments and visitors have helped stabilize Lindsborg and weather that downward cycle of the economy. In my opinion that is quite an achievement in a rural community in a down economy."

With the increased sales tax revenue, Lindsborg has begun construction on the Sundstrom Conference Center. A feasibility analysis conducted showed that Lindsborg could host up to 106 conferences of business meetings of up to 300 people a year. The conference center will also expand the venue space for weddings and family reunions, both of which are frequent occurrences in Lindsborg.

## Lindsborg, Kansas

**Population (2010):** 3,458

**Asset:** Cultural Heritage

**Summary:** Lindsborg has a strong Swedish heritage, which it celebrates by observing Swedish cultural customs, national holidays, and festivals, and by supporting traditionally Swedish arts and crafts.

### Key takeaways:

- Market cultural heritage activities strategically
- Incorporate heritage into community infrastructure and amenities, so that cultural heritage continues to be a part of community life

## Conclusions

Many small towns and rural communities have significant historic and cultural resources. These can include historic sites and buildings, as well as Main Streets, or they can include the community's cultural heritage and the traditions and celebrations that go along with that. Investing in these resources, or assets, can help communities revitalize Main Streets, support small businesses, and attract visitors. And, in the case of both Silver City and Lindsborg, support thriving local arts scenes, which reflect the heritage of the communities.

In Silver City and Lindsborg, investment in historic and cultural resources has also been an investment in community quality of life. These assets, when leveraged for economic development, can attract both visitors and residents. They can also be a significant draw for residents from surrounding communities, who may come and use local businesses and services.

## Notes

- 1 National Trust for Historic Preservation. "About Main Street." <http://www.preservationnation.org/main-street/about-main-street/> and "The Main Street Four-Point Approach®."
- 2 National Trust for Historic Preservation. "Silver City Main Street Project." <http://www.preservationnation.org/main-street/awards/gamsa/2011-gamsa/silver-city-mainstreet.html>
- 3 National Trust for Historic Preservation. "Silver City Main Street Project." <http://www.preservationnation.org/main-street/awards/gamsa/2011-gamsa/silver-city-mainstreet.html>
- 4 New Mexico Main Street. "Arts and Cultural District Toolbox." [http://nmmainstreet.org/Arts\\_and\\_Cultural/index.html](http://nmmainstreet.org/Arts_and_Cultural/index.html)
- 5 New Mexico Main Street. "Silver City Arts and Cultural District Cultural Plan." [http://silvercitytourism.com/wp-content/uploads/2012/01/ACD\\_plan.pdf](http://silvercitytourism.com/wp-content/uploads/2012/01/ACD_plan.pdf)
- 6 National Trust for Historic Preservation. "Cultural Heritage Tourism 2012 Fact Sheet." [www.preservationnation.org/information-center/economics-of-revitalization/heritage-tourism/additional-resources/2011-CHT-Fact-Sheet-6-11.pdf](http://www.preservationnation.org/information-center/economics-of-revitalization/heritage-tourism/additional-resources/2011-CHT-Fact-Sheet-6-11.pdf)

## Key Takeaways:

- Identify existing historic and cultural assets and evaluate their benefit to the local economy
- Identify how development of assets and an asset-based economic development strategy tie into your existing economic development strategy
- Look at your communities assets, their potential benefit to the local economy, and how they can be leveraged as part of an economic development strategy
- Identify resources that can be leveraged to support asset-based economic development and make investments necessary to grow the asset base, whether those be in infrastructure, quality of life, education, or workforce or leadership development
- Form partnerships between key stakeholders to more fully leverage resources
- Engage the community in the planning and implementation process

- 7 US Travel Association as cited in National Trust for Historic Preservation. "Cultural Heritage Tourism 2012 Fact Sheet." <http://www.preservationnation.org/information-center/economics-of-revitalization/heritage-tourism/additional-resources/2011-CHT-Fact-Sheet-6-11.pdf>
- 8 City of Lindsborg. "Wild Dala History." <http://www.lindsborgcity.org/index.aspx?NID=605>

# Asset-Based Economic Development and Building Sustainable Rural Communities

## Part 3: Existing Infrastructure, Historic and Cultural Resources

A briefing paper from the ICMA Center for Sustainable Communities

---

### About ICMA

Founded in 1914, ICMA, the International City/County Management Association, advances professional local government worldwide. Our mission and vision is to create excellence in local governance by developing and fostering professional management to build sustainable communities that improve people's lives worldwide. ICMA provides member support; publications; data and information; peer and results-oriented assistance; and training and professional development to city, town, and county experts and other individuals and organizations throughout the world. The management decisions made by ICMA's members affect millions of individuals living in thousands of communities, from small villages and towns to large metropolitan areas.



*Leaders at the Core of Better Communities*

### About NADO

The National Association of Development Organizations (NADO) is a national membership organization for the national network of over 520 regional development organizations (RDOs) focused on strengthening local governments, communities, and economies through regional strategies, partnerships, and solutions. Founded in 1988, the NADO Research Foundation is the nonprofit research affiliate of NADO. The NADO Research Foundation identifies, studies, and promotes regional solutions and approaches to improving local prosperity and services through the nationwide network of RDOs. The Research Foundation shares best practices and offers professional development training, analyzes the impact of federal policies and programs on RDOs and their local communities, and examines the latest developments and trends in small metropolitan and rural America. Most importantly, the Research Foundation is helping bridge the communications gap among practitioners, researchers, and policymakers.



For more information about ICMA's Center for Sustainable Communities, contact Tad McGalliard at 202.962.3563 or [tmcgalliard@icma.org](mailto:tmcgalliard@icma.org)

