



BROADBAND AND BEYOND: RECALIBRATING SMALL TOWN ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT

Taylor Stuckert

Executive Director, Clinton County (OH) Regional Planning Commission

October 2021

Over the past decade and more there has been what feels like a dramatic shift in economic development strategy and policy discussions. Prompted by transformational events such as the Great Recession and now a global pandemic, as well as continued discernable demographic and geographic shifts, there has been a growing sense of skepticism of, and increased efforts to challenge, prior assumptions and tactics upon which economic development strategies relied. Strategies primarily focused on leveraging the limited resources of a community to meet the prospective demands of outside investors making promises premised in lofty assumptions are not as likely to go unnoticed or unchallenged as they might have years ago.

Though much has changed, it still seems that economic development strategies remain primarily centered on scalability and transferability of new, similar hope-based tactics, while avoiding addressing the fundamental challenges facing communities. This appears to be especially the case in many rural communities, where there remains a perpetual longing that something profound will happen that will swiftly repair decades worth of economic and community deterioration.

While still grappling with an on-going pandemic, conversations exploring what the fall-out from COVID-19 might be and what the post-pandemic economy might look like are already taking place. In these conversations, particularly amongst rural development circles, there seems to be an inclination to feel hopeful that this shock will lead to a profound and swift demographic and economic shift. Though the data suggests otherwise, there are those who feel that there will be greater economic opportunities for communities which were on a trajectory of economic decline prior to the pandemic due to behavioral changes and cultural pivots caused by the pandemic. One thing is for certain: the recent shock caused by the pandemic has led to an unprecedented effort to focus on

infrastructure issues, and in particular, broadband infrastructure - and rightfully so. However, it is important that we not limit ourselves to the fallacy that infrastructure investment alone will solve the many challenges our communities face.

As we find ourselves, just over a decade from the Great Recession, responding to unprecedented circumstances yet again, there may be no greater time to recalibrate our attention to the fundamentals of good planning and economic development. Planners and economic development professionals giving renewed attention to initiatives such as Comprehensive Economic Development Strategies (CEDS) and comprehensive planning processes need to ensure that they are tending to community-based development strategies and are giving attention to areas such as affordable housing, public health, education, transportation, broadband access, issues of equity and inclusion, natural resource protection, amenity development, and general preservation of community assets. These areas of focus will not only address the needs of existing citizens in the community, but also increase the attractiveness to prospective new residents and investment.

As we look toward the future it is essential that we continue to learn from the past to inform our present and future community and economic development policies and strategies. Examining the connection between historic events and trends in our community, Clinton County, OH, proved to be a very important component of our redevelopment efforts both following an economic shock and when identifying goals and aspirations after the Great Recession. Today, rural development professionals will need to take time to gain perspective from past lessons and future goals to formulate strategies that go beyond specific issues, such as broadband expansion, to successfully confront today's challenges and improve community sustainability and resiliency.

□ HOW DID WE GET HERE?

The economic recession of 2008 began what has felt like a barrage of “unprecedented circumstances” that have shocked communities and economies - and seemingly have had no end in sight. Since then, we have continued to learn more lessons including, for example, the importance of diversifying economies, supporting local businesses, entrepreneurship, and the need for sustainability. While the novelty of these topics has worn off a bit, each of these things were noteworthy pivots from the policies coming out of development circles since the late 1980s. We were no longer focused squarely on **“growth solves all problems” and “smokestack chasing” strategies.**

Today, faced with yet another unprecedented circumstance in a global pandemic and new looming economic questions, we are still in a discovery phase of what the fallout will ultimately end up looking like and how future strategies will be shaped. The federal government’s response to the pandemic dwarfs the American Rescue and Recovery Act (ARRA) from 2009, and is providing unprecedented resources into many key areas that could provide a transformative boost to a diverse array of prospective initiatives.

For rural communities, many of the themes that came out of the Great Recession over the last decade continue to stay at the forefront of development strategies and policies. However, the pandemic experience has brought new opportunities to the table—most notably, an **increased ability and potential desire** for individuals to work remotely, and an unproven hunch that a more spacious existence where **many of the vulnerabilities of a pandemic in an urban environment** are less prominent may too be a desirable characteristic of place.

□ CHALLENGES REMAIN

There remains an obvious challenge with this opportunity, and one that is already being explored—how do we expect rural communities to benefit from the prospect of more remote workers without the **needed broadband infrastructure** to accommodate them? And once this infrastructure issue has been addressed, whenever that may be, a second question comes to mind: with all things broadband being equal, what will be the driving factors for new interest in rural communities led by remote workers?

Starting with the first question—how to bridge the broadband divide? Plenty has been said and written about the **gap in rural broadband coverage.** One of the few things of which there is near-universal agreement is that current broadband coverage

in rural America is unacceptable for the twenty-first century. Like many rural communities, this was a strategic concern of ours even prior to the pandemic as evidenced by the Clinton County Regional Planning Commission’s **2019 white paper** on the state of broadband in Clinton County, Ohio.

In the paper we discuss the similarities of the need for broadband today to the issue of rural electrification in the early twentieth century. In the 1930s while electricity was common in cities, only about 11% of farms had electricity. After only a few years following the passage of the 1936 Rural Electrification Act, that figure doubled to over 25%. Today, it is estimated that only **63% of rural areas have access to broadband.** And, as anyone who has looked into the geography of broadband knows, these figures **tend to be quite conservative.** Not to mention that the **federal definition of broadband**, which is twenty-five megabits per second download speed and three megabits upload speed (often referred simply as “25/3”), is already being accepted as **insufficient** for today’s technological demands.

The spotlight that the pandemic placed on these types of issues has certainly elevated the national interest in resolving the broadband divide. The pandemic exacerbated what were already wicked planning challenges, especially for rural communities, such as: **remote education**, remote work, **telehealth**, and **improving community and civic connectivity** through virtual engagement platforms. As we have seen ever-increasing amounts of money expected to go towards broadband expansion, it is quite clear that the case for broadband expansion could not have been made any stronger than through the pandemic.

What remains to be seen is how effectively these dollars can be deployed to provide quality broadband infrastructure for both short and long-term needs. Like many other unprecedented moments of investment, there are already the signs of money potentially being wasted on unproven technologies that may provide short-term fixes without addressing the underlying disparity in coverage between different types of communities, and the disadvantaging effect this disparity will continue to have on communities lacking equal access to broadband. As communities look to expand access to broadband, it is essential that the issue of equity be a fundamental part of any strategy. For many low-income families, both **the physical availability and affordability of broadband can be a challenge to overcome.**

Like so many other moments in history, it will also be important for communities to not be solely fixated on the provision of a new technology, or new infrastructure alone, as the key to unlocking future prosperity. As **emerging data starts to**



reveal migratory patterns during the pandemic, the same trends appear to be as before: communities that were successful before COVID-19 continue to attract new residents, and those that were not seeing success continue to lose, or at best, fail to gain new residents.

MAINTAINING DIVERSE STRATEGIES

It is also important that these development efforts not view broadband in a vacuum. Not only is broadband expansion a matter of providing a basic necessity to a modern world, it also provides opportunities for communities to be better positioned to develop diverse strategies aimed at a myriad of other challenges. Issues such as youth education, brain drain, entrepreneurship, aging in place, workforce development, and many other areas are all directly affected by equal access to sufficient broadband services.

Many of the same strategies that emerged following the Great Recession should absolutely remain a part of post-pandemic community and economic development strategies. In our community of Clinton County, following an unprecedented economic shock caused by the loss of a major employer which coincided with the recession, we pivoted towards an economic development strategy focused in five areas: local businesses, local food, local people, and local vision/planning. The underlying philosophy was diversity in economic and community development initiatives aimed at reducing the vulnerability to, and improving economic resiliency from, future economic shocks.

This strategic pivot for our community was also intended to directly confront what had up until that time been the only measure of economic success—job creation. It was important for us to move away from the never-ending chase of landing that large whale of an opportunity that would lead to community salvation, and instead come to view that the measure of economic and community success is, and should be, more complex and nuanced than simply counting jobs and ballparking the economic impact of those jobs.

In addition to the shiny object that is new infrastructure spending, particularly broadband, it will be important to ensure that resources are given to less sexy, but equally important, issues such as infrastructure repair and maintenance, technology education and adoption, and equity and accessibility, among others. In addition, we should not lose sight of the importance of maintaining diverse strategies that address entrepreneurship, brain drain, downtown development, quality of life amenities such as parks and trails, and the issues and opportunities that come with an aging population. The prospect of a more remote workforce only draws added attention to the simple question we should be asking ourselves: “Why our community?”

WHY LIVE HERE?

Back in the mid-90s, at the dawn of the “Internet Age,” Wilmington, OH was featured in a Time magazine article about the emergence of the Internet and overnight shipping that had Americans moving to small towns. Census data up until and since then has continued to paint a different picture. And yet, after decades of confronting existential crises in rural communities, we still seem to cling on to this notion that some external event, whether positive or negative, will lead to the “rural renaissance.” It seems that these hopeful ideas are relied upon in an attempt to avoid the work it will take to sustainably build more desirable places.

It is necessary that transformative opportunities are kept in perspective and attention is given to the fundamentals that present hurdles to the sustainability of rural places (and there are many). This is particularly important as we contemplate what the post-pandemic geography will look like. Greater caution should be given towards our continual journey down the path of hope-based strategies, and yet another race to the bottom, as we regularly see headlines of communities attempting to out-bid one another to draw in new residents. Instead of simply hoping advertisements will sell people on places based on lower taxes, there should be a minimum expectation that any procured new arrivals will be wanting more than platitudes and promises.

Economic developers view jobs as a critical component of anchoring residents in place but it is also accepted that talent does not move for jobs alone. It would then follow that remote workers, especially the skilled and talented, will be more liberated than ever before from the anchors of jobs to communities. As such, communities will need to consider investing more in the other aspects of community choice such as amenities, addressing the full spectrum of housing choice (particularly the “missing middle”), and the attachments gained through civic engagement and greater inclusivity.

WHERE DO WE GO FROM HERE?

This again is why broadband expansion is first and foremost about providing a basic amenity or utility to both current and future residents in small towns and communities across the country. Broadband connectivity is a critical tool in addressing the challenges of a global pandemic, of an aging population, education, brain drain, and workforce development. In addition, aggressive broadband expansion can be leveraged to encourage entrepreneurial and innovation-based development opportunities, and a minimum level amenity to encourage new residential growth.



With that said, it should not cause us to lose sight of the myriad other issues that may also limit our competitiveness in the human capital economy. While broadband does potentially open the door to new opportunities of growth via remote work, or enable more people to stay in their communities, issues such as education, transportation, and natural resources and amenities will still be relevant and increasingly important considerations in the desirability of place. Some amenity-rich rural places are demonstrating this, while others are **facing the challenge of becoming “too attractive.”**

Put succinctly in a recent paper, in the twenty-first century, “economic growth will be led by highly educated and skilled workers living in communities that are attractive and accessible.” Rural communities should capitalize on these features as they both attract new residents as well as improve the quality of life for existing residents. It also means being open to reforming **immigration policy** to address rural workforce needs and as rural communities better understanding our **relationships to our urban and suburban neighbors**.

When broadband is as ubiquitous as we aspire for it to be, we will be back to where we have been for the last several decades—that is, being confronted with the basic questions of what causes people to join, stay, or leave a community. The factors that contribute to that decision should be informing our planning and economic development strategies right now.



The NADO Research Foundation’s Stronger CEDS, Stronger Regions program, funded by the U.S. Economic Development Administration, provides capacity building and training support to Economic Development Districts and other regional organizations as they plan, write, and implement their Comprehensive Economic Development Strategies (CEDS). Learn more at www.CEDSCentral.com.

This brief was published by the NADO Research Foundation using Federal funds under award ED17HDQ3030005 from the U.S. Economic Development Administration, U.S. Department of Commerce. The statements, findings, conclusions, and recommendations are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the views of the U.S. Economic Development Administration or the U.S. Department of Commerce.

