



Strategies for rural America

I admittedly have an affection for small towns (having grown up in a couple of them), and I love the rural landscape in a lot of Kansas and the Great Plains. What some see as a boring view of a landscape without many trees or people I see as a beautiful, sweeping vista. I love how big the sky is, and by extension how big the planet feels.



Which brings me to news of Horton, Kansas. Horton is a small, rather ordinary town on the Great Plains. Like many, it's struggling to find its identity as it battles 100 years of decline. It recently received some attention from Marcus Lemonis, otherwise known as the host of "The Profit" on CNBC. [Eric Adler](#) writes about his visit and ideas:

But it's in the old downtown that Lemonis said he saw the town's future. Also hanging inside Lentz's convenience store is a print of an idealized, almost Disneyesque version of a small-town Main Street with spotless bricks, shimmering signs and awnings.

"Turn Main Street back into something that is very historic, very memorable and very Hollywood-like, so it has the feel of the 1920s," Lemonis told them.

His prescription included other advice, some of it potentially contentious, such as a recommendation that Horton put ego aside and merge with nearby towns to consolidate services.

“This town cannot survive on its own,” he said. “You can’t afford to have all these expenses all over the place.”

Although Lentz said there is no plan for any town to give up its name or identity, the visit by Lemonis has already prompted him to contact nearby Hiawatha (population 3,170) to talk about the possibility of merging some city services.

Most controversial locally was Lemonis’ suggestion that the city itself become the owner of all the buildings downtown.

He suggested that the city buy them all at a cost that he estimated would be no more than \$1 million, then use \$500,000 in city funds to fix the buildings up and rent them to art galleries, bake shops and organic produce stores.

“You decide what your town needs,” he said. “It has to be a reason to get on a bus and drive to this cute little town that went back to the 1920s.”

This story interests me on so many levels. For one, it confronts the reality of small town USA, not the idyllic image often portrayed in so many movies and tv shows. And, that reality is often pretty grim. Towns like Horton, unless they are near an Interstate or in the commute-shed of a major city have been losing people since the early 1900's.

It's no great secret why that is. The mechanization of agriculture simply removed the need for so many people to live and work in farming and its support businesses, and agriculture has always been the primary industry of most of these towns. So, people naturally sought opportunity elsewhere, and that elsewhere has often been the bigger cities.

And here's the tough part: unless that fundamental equation changes, people are simply not going to repopulate the thousands of little towns sprinkled across the plains and other parts of the country. While I do think the future is going to see a resurgence of interest in small farming (saving that explanation for a future date) it will most likely happen within range of larger cities.

So what's left to do for towns like Horton?

Because I care about so many towns like Horton, I'll use this feature to offer some free advice. Here goes, broken up into three broad categories:

Design

I'm a designer first and foremost, so that's where I'll begin. Like so many analyses, the "what to do with X town" often only tangentially discusses design issues. Lemonis alludes to design with his admonition to create a cute little town from the 1920's, but that's about as far as the article goes. It amazes me how quickly design gets tossed to the bottom of the scrap heap, as if it's not even related to the other critical economic or policy issues. Ever watch a makeover show on television? Whether it's "Bar Rescue" or "Restaurant Impossible" or anything along those lines, you'll always see that one of the critical elements to success is a thoughtful, well-executed design for the establishment.

Cities are no different.

Successful cities continually work on their ambiance and beauty. They do so because beauty and design are central to human happiness. And, if the humans are happy, they're much more likely to stay in that place and put down roots, start a business, or fight for its survival. When Jim Kunstler warns of a nation filled with "places we don't care about," that's precisely the issue. We don't care about ugly, soul-sucking places and will abandon them in a second if opportunity calls elsewhere.

So recipe #1: small towns need to value design and beauty in order to have success. And just a quick scan of images from Google Street View shows that Horton (like so many towns) has a long, long ways to go. The entry into town is uninspiring, several roads are far too wide, the tree canopy is not consistent (trust me, a big deal in the summer), the fire station is an ugly metal building, and there's a gas station on the corner of Main & Main. (not literally Main & Main - that's an industry convention for the most important corner in town).

Horton is like a thousand small towns with which I'm very familiar. They perfectly embody the saying that 100 years ago we built better, more beautiful

buildings in a time when we were much poorer as a society. The old main street buildings and houses clearly have character and just need renovation. The newer buildings lack any redeeming qualities, other than modern plumbing and lighting.

A few simple fixes would make an enormous difference: consistent shade trees along the streets; paint and windows for the old buildings; design standards for new buildings either through arm-twisting or regulation; generous sidewalks and bike lanes (easily done with paint) to make it easy to walk and bike. Small towns like Horton should be some of the best places for walking and biking, but in a sad twist of history they are often very car-dependent. Especially in a community like this with very little traffic, the streets should be filled with kids and their parents on bikes. Want to make a town attractive to visit? Make it everything that life in the big city is not.

As a sidebar: the solution is not to go the route of Greensburg, KS. Overly-expensive and contemporary designs are not going to draw people to your town, except for a few busloads of architects. That desire for a "1920's" look is rooted deep within us, because that was the era where we hit our peak for American architecture and city-building.

So, to sum up the design side, think mostly of this: grace and charm. If your town was a movie set, what would it look like? Hollywood movies do have big budgets, but they also know what resonates with the culture. Make it happen. Google Street views below:





Economy

What about the economy of towns like Horton? Will they continue to slowly shrink until they wither away? It's sad to say, but yes, some will. Cities still need some primary economy in order to exist, and many simply don't have that anymore. A slew of towns have tried to reinvent themselves with industrial parks, but there's only so much employment to be had with modern industry. And, frankly, if you need a reliable, deep labor pool for your manufactured product, you're likely not to locate in a rural area far from a major transportation hub. Tourism is a solid alternative for those towns with uniqueness, beauty or natural features, but not every place will have those qualities.

In order to create prosperity and wealth, a community needs to do well in at least one area that imports money into town. Agriculture, manufacturing and tourism are the three that do it the best, and a city needs a strategy to succeed in

those areas no different than a business needs to understand how to serve customers. Most everything else is a re-shuffling of existing dollars.

For towns like Horton, then, here are a few ideas to start with in creating a productive economy.

Agriculture: Most of the Great Plains obviously is fertile land for all manner of agriculture. This part of Kansas is not nearly as starved for water as western Kansas, and can support a wide variety of crops. One obvious strategy for rural areas is to nurture and develop a high-value agricultural product that happens to grow well in that climate and soil condition. Wine is an obvious example, but so are hops & grains for beer and liquor, fruit orchards, dairy, expensive cattle and more. A high-value product is something people will seek out and take vacations for, and which can create good jobs for a region. Examples in the US include the wine country in California, cities like Asheville that are known for breweries, apple/peach orchards and so much more. Virtually any food product can be made high-end and interesting, so we're only limited by our imagination.

When it comes to using high-value products to drive tourism (and jobs), I personally prefer the European model to what we see throughout the US. In places like France, Italy, Spain, visitors are drawn to the villages themselves to taste the wine or drink the beer (for example) versus the common pattern here where the sights are spread out all over the countryside. The benefits to bringing people into town are obvious: it creates far more synergy and economic spin-off than if people go from farmstead to farmstead. And, if the product happens to involve alcohol, it's even better as it promotes far less driving.

We will still need lots and lots of acres of land for wheat, corn, soybeans and more, but I think rural areas like Horton can develop agricultural products in this manner to drive job creation and economic growth. But, of course, it ties back to design as well. What makes touring the countryside and visiting towns with unique products so appealing is also visual. The "cuteness" of the place has much to do with a visitor's desire to spend more than an hour or two.

Manufacturing: Often the worst approach small towns gravitate toward is building a big industrial park and hoping for businesses to come. Without a

detailed strategy in place, that's a recipe for failure. A better approach is to simply nurture small, craft-oriented businesses already in the area. Why do places that cater to artists and craftsman succeed? Because they make things, and every once in a while a product will be created that can be exported. If one in twenty hits on a viable product, then the job should be to find a hundred people to come to Horton, live inexpensively and participate in a community that supports your efforts. This is a difficult road, but much more likely than spending millions on expensive infrastructure for large industry or warehouse businesses.

Tourism: See Agriculture and Design.

Management/Policy Issues

For a small town, issues related to management and policy are much simpler (because there's less to manage), but in some ways more difficult due to the social ties.

One of the hardest parts of living in a smaller town is saying "no" to someone that wants to build anything. That person is probably a friend or neighbor, since the social circles are very small. But unfortunately we live in a time where the default is to build cheap and ugly, because it's simply very easy to do so. Horton and other towns need to learn to say no to ugly buildings, or at least find ways to get people to do things well. Every increment of bad construction is more critical in a place that doesn't see much of it.

In a normal circumstance, I'd likely argue for the creation of a form-based code or some sort of design regulations in order to prescribe what kind of buildings should be built. Those might work in Horton, but more than likely it takes just getting the right people in town to buy in and work solely with them. Of course, it's always a good idea to review the town's regulations and zoning to prevent anything truly atrocious from happening, and that is another easy first step.

Lemonis' suggestion that Horton buy all the buildings and take control is interesting, and not without precedent. In fact, that's not at all different from the approach a large developer would take in a master-planned community. With the

right leadership, that could actually be successful - after all, there's not a lot to lose as it stands right now. But it's not the only way. A more incentive-based approach combined with the right design standards can accomplish many of the same goals.

The key from a management and policy standpoint is to have everyone reading from the same playbook. This doesn't necessarily mean a detailed 50-page business plan; in fact, I like the "lean" approach that encourages action and experimentation. But the city still needs to have an idea of what it wants to be, so it can align all city rules, laws & incentives. One minor detail: don't give away the store in terms of tax revenues. It won't work in most cases anyway, and just hurts your bottom line. The best incentive is to create a great place and make doing business easy.

In summary, small towns like Horton have a lot working against them. 100 years of decline is nothing to sneeze at. But they also have assets they may not realize. With increasing urbanization, people are looking for opportunities to escape and enjoy some form of rural life. That might just be for a weekend, but it is something to build on.

I'm glad Lemonis took some time to give advice to this small Kansas town, as approaching its fortunes like a business is a good place to begin. Any good business has a vision, an understanding of its target market, and a sound plan to reach it. Small town USA can do the same.

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