

# Rethinking rural development

## Communities get 'smart' about growth

**A**s a turbulent economy becomes more a rule than an exception, approaches to economic development have changed. Learning from the lessons of far-too-many boomtowns turned ghost towns by the departure of one industry, rural communities are finding new ways to grow while maintaining their distinctive way of life.

It's called "smart growth," an approach to development that encourages strengthening and developing within existing neighborhoods, preserving open spaces, and fostering a strong sense of community.

Mark Bower, a Somerset Rural Electric Cooperative (REC) member and superintendent for the Rockwood Area School District, believes community ties begin by creating opportunities for youth.

"For us to meet our mission — really educating our students and preparing them for life after high school — we have to have those partnerships

By Michael T. Crawford  
*Associate Editor*

and those relationships with our community," says Bower, past president of the Somerset County Chamber of Commerce's board of directors. "It's important that there are opportunities for our kids to come back to and, obviously, support the day-to-day lives of our residents."

### Concern for community

Cooperatives have long had a helping hand in supporting growth in their communities — concern for community and member education are among core cooperative principles. In addition to the day-to-day delivery of electricity, cooperatives routinely invest in the next generation through educational opportunities like the Rural Electric Youth Tour and scholarship programs.

Jacqi Knox, daughter of Somerset REC members John and Mona Knox,

received a \$1,000 scholarship from Somerset REC to attend college. Since 2002, the cooperative has awarded 85 such scholarships.

"Four of the recipients ... were from my little school in Rockwood," says Knox, who also received \$200/semester of tuition assistance from Somerset REC. "I'm very thankful for those scholarships."

Having graduated from Pennsylvania Highlands Community College in May, Knox is starting a position with Boyer Financial Planning as director of first impressions. While the job keeps Knox in her hometown, data from the U.S. Census Bureau suggests she may be an exception. The 2011-2015 American Community Survey (ACS) put the median age of rural Americans at 43; the 2013-2017 ACS put Somerset County residents' median

**CONNECTING DOWNTOWN:** A walking trail connects the Omni Bedford Springs Resort with downtown Bedford, providing a safe alternative to Business Route 22 for pedestrian travel.





**COMMUNITY CONNECTION:** Somerset REC member Mark Bower, superintendent for the Rockwood Area School District and past president of the Somerset County Chamber of Commerce, speaks with Mark Mull, Riggs Industries, during the Rockwood Area School District Resource Fair, a job and college fair at the Rockwood Area High School gymnasium.



**CAREER COACH:** Joe Fetzer, director of entrepreneurship & innovation for Startup Alleghenies, joins local business owners and college recruiters in the Rockwood Area High School gymnasium for the Rockwood Area School District Resource Fair.

age at nearly 46. When looking at her options early on, Knox had expected to have to look to more urban areas to continue her education and find work.

“Everyone always said, ‘Oh, there’s nothing in Somerset; you’re not going to have a good career around where you grew up,’” Knox recalls. “You’ve got to go to Pittsburgh; you’ve got to go far away.”

When compared to a more urban area like Pittsburgh, where the median age is under 33, fostering a new generation of workers, as well as jobs they want to hold down, is becoming more critical by the day as large swaths of Pennsylvania’s rural workforce near retirement.

“There are baby boomers retiring all the time, and there are not enough bodies in the younger generation to take those jobs that are available,” notes Kellie Goodman Shaffer, a Bedford REC member and president/CEO of the Bedford County Chamber of Commerce. “It’s something we work on along with many community partners in promoting our region to our own to help encourage young people who might want to stay here to know all the opportunities that they have here.”

## Diversification

Having opportunities across multiple industries isn’t just a good retention tool — it is essential to having a robust and resilient local economy.

“Diversify your employer base,” says Bette Slayton, Bedford REC member and president/CEO of the Bedford County Development Association.

“We have manufacturing, distribution, bio-tech; we just added a medical cannabis grower/processor to our mix ... investing \$13 million in an abandoned industrial building that’s been sitting empty for 10 years.”

Diversification requires being able to meet a variety of needs, a common hurdle for rural communities with traditionally less-robust infrastructure.

“They (developers) do not want to be in the water/sewer business,” Slayton quips. “I can say I have the best workforce in the world, but if I

don’t have a site, they (developers) go someplace else. We were turning down big-box projects — people who wanted larger tracts. So, to that end, our board took the plunge — took the risk — to develop business parks. Because we were ready, we were able to recruit the REI (Recreational Equipment, Inc.) 525,000-square-foot distribution center.”

“If you build it, they will come” can be a risky strategy, so Pennsylvania offers grants and loans to help fund shovel-ready sites. Business in Our Sites, offered by the Pennsylvania Department of Community and Economic Development, offers up to \$4 million in grants, as well as low-interest loans, for site development or infrastructure.

“When you think about businesses that are looking to move in from out of state — or another country — one of the top things they’re looking for is a site that’s already available and one that they can begin construction on right away,” explains Michael Gerber, press secretary for the Pennsylvania Department of Community and Economic Development. “When you have a site like that and you can attract a business that’s going to create even a small number of jobs, that is a big impact on a rural community.”

Still, smart growth development aims to carefully define “they” — not just a big business a community wants to attract, but one that will support smaller businesses already in place.

“A rising tide floats all ships,” Shaffer says. “One of the things we really promote, as the chamber of commerce, is doing business locally. We want our large businesses to utilize the services and products of small businesses and vice versa. Bedford County is a place where that happens quite often.”

Big business isn’t the only ticket to economic development. Small businesses and entrepreneurial spirit can play more directly into the needs of a community and foster resilient economies that don’t hinge on one or two industries.

“Entrepreneurs provide revitaliza-





**SCHOLARSHIP RECIPIENTS:** Rus Ogburn, Somerset REC general manager, left, announces recipients of the cooperative's \$1,000 college scholarship at its annual meeting. Recipients included Jacqi Knox, fourth from left. After furthering her education at a community college, Knox is returning to Somerset to work, bucking the trend of young residents who often settle in larger communities.

tion to communities,” says Joe Fetzer, director of entrepreneurship & innovation for Startup Alleghenies, which spans across Bedford, Blair, Cambria, Fulton, Huntingdon and Somerset counties. “Getting that one person to take on an entrepreneurial endeavor almost immediately starts producing revenues in the area because they’re leveraging the other resources available — business planning, capital formation, marketing, workforce development and all those other elements that are essential to business growth.”

### Filling in gaps

To identify where a particular business — or set of businesses — would be best established, development councils have been ratcheting up direct communication efforts with municipalities and school districts to understand local leaders’ visions for their communities.

“What do they feel their community needs?” asks Carrie Stuart, an Adams Electric Cooperative (EC) member and board member of the Adams Economic Alliance. “When a business calls and says, ‘I want to open up a dry cleaning facility — where can I go,’ we’re not just putting up a map of Adams County and throwing darts. We already know that a dry cleaner is one of the types of businesses that have been identified as a gap in our services.”

Just as important as knowing where

to strategically place businesses that can support each other is knowing how to create positive social impacts on the community at the same time.

“A lot of progress has happened in Bedford County with the revival of the Omni Bedford Springs Resort,” Shaffer boasts. “That isn’t limited to tourism. We have a beautiful walking trail that connects downtown Bedford to the resort that wouldn’t be there if there wasn’t a place for us to go. That’s a great asset to our community and not just to get people back and forth to the resort. People were walking along Business Route 22 before that trail existed or walking along busy streets, and now they have a safe place to walk their dogs and ride their bikes, and it improves the quality of life in general.”

Cooperatives offer a helping hand here, too. Through its Community Development Loan Fund, Adams EC, based in Gettysburg, is one of the state’s cooperatives that offers low-interest loans to facilitate projects creating or improving community facilities that enhance community infrastructure or quality of life in their cooperative’s service territory. For Adams EC, that includes Adams, Cumberland, Franklin, Perry and York counties.

“Low-interest loans like these help so much,” says Abby Avery, director of the Adams County Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals (SPCA), which received a \$150,000 loan in 2015 for a new building. “Without community support, we wouldn’t be where we are. Adams EC has been amazing to us — even with fundraisers, they’ve always been very supportive.”

The co-op has awarded 14 such loans since the program’s inception in 1998, totaling more than \$2.1 million toward investments in improving the quality of life within Adams EC’s service territory. The grants have helped to support everything from emergency services to education and health care, helping to foster a stronger sense of community.

“Electric cooperatives like Adams Electric strive to do more than deliver safe, reliable power at competitive rates to their members,” says Steve



**COMMUNITY FUND:** Duane Kanagy, former manager, communications/community services of Adams EC, right, presents a check for \$150,000 from the cooperative’s Community Development Loan Fund to Abby Avery, director of the Adams County SPCA, left, and Ann Birely, former Adams County SPCA board president.

Rasmussen, CEO/general manager of Adams EC. “They remain local community-based organizations that serve a mission of improving the quality of life in the communities that they serve. The Community Development Loan Fund is one example of how Adams is trying to fulfill that mission.”