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## Top 10 planning practices for making things happen in rural and small towns

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**CT.org...**The following article offers ways for rural towns to fight regression and stabilize their social and economic systems. However, the presumption is that rural towns have the resources, economic and civic, to activate the needed actions. Free-standing, rural communities not connected to a larger metro area have few options for arresting their decline; but, they do have a few.

[Jim Segedy](#), Ph.D., FAICP, quoted below, concluded by offering six ingredients for successful rural and small town development in addition to the ten items from Schindler:

- Think and act locally
- Think and act creatively
- Close the loop
- Build linkages
- Create places for people ([placemaking](#))
- Celebrate character and identity

As with redevelopment in larger towns, the process starts when someone cares to change the status quo; someone has the “want to” to get started, to find like-minded citizen and to engage in forward thinking. Small communities becoming part of something bigger seems a fruitful path [Item #10]. Enhancing existing assets including agricultural and natural resources provide economic benefits [Items #3 and #4]. Participation, patience and persistence seem to be essential.

Placemaking and new economy can also work in rural small town Michigan. Here are the top 10 best practices for making that happen.

You should not leave rural areas and small towns out of the new global economy, placemaking and community development success. [Jim Segedy](#), Ph.D., FAICP, *The Planning Guild*, speaking at this year’s [Michigan Association of Planning \(MAP\) annual education conference](#) presented his “Top 10” list of best planning practices for rural areas and small towns.

Before running down Segedy’s top 10 lists, he pointed out a basic first rule: “Plan” is a verb, it is what we do. “Planning is looking ahead and then doing it,” Segedy said.

**10. Consolidation/Regionalization:** Smaller communities will need a larger geography to have all the resources and attributes which comprise a globally-competitive region. So spend time to determine what the best level of organization is. Shared services such as a joint planning commission, working at a council of governments, regional councils can assemble the assets for a competitive area. Segedy pointed out that people’s lives happen regionally, so communities need to be planning regionally also.

**9. Changing Demographics:** It is important to keep track of population data and demographics for a region and its communities. It is more than looking at current numbers, but looking at the data in depth. For instance, many rural areas will show an increase in the number of senior citizens. Knowing this is important in order to recognize and plan for the special needs of an aging population.

Different age groups desire different housing types, services and types of communities. Aging populations, for example, are more likely to seek smaller housing in urban walkable neighborhoods, with community supports and services, where they can age in place. A variety of housing options that are accessible and affordable become more important. Young persons (prior to marriage) are seeking similar lifestyles. These two population groups, the boomers and millennials, are the two largest population cohorts in the United States. Other age cohorts may seek larger houses on larger parcels, such as found in many Michigan suburbs, but these will be comparatively smaller numbers of people.



In Michigan's new economy, economic regions are now defined as these shown on this map. State agencies, in the future federal agencies and maybe regional planning will all follow these regional boundaries. For local government, these might be the “big picture” globally competitive regions. But local governments will also have smaller regions, or subregions, which will make sense, or even regions that cross over the boundaries of these state regions, maybe even cross into neighboring states and provinces.

**8. Adequate Infrastructure:** It is important to provide a complete set of public services, including telecommunication, internet and effective traffic management. Traffic management includes [complete streets](#) efforts now a part of the [Michigan Planning Enabling Act](#). The planning job here is to identify the different needs and expectations which are a result of changing demographics.

**7. Economic Viability:** The current retail trend is toward shopping on main street – even in small towns. It becomes a planning task to find the right mix of land uses, with diverse enterprises and taking advantage of special opportunities. The special opportunity may be a celebration of a local cuisine, a unique local market or a farmers market as examples.

[Economic gardening](#) (see also [Kauffman.org](#), [ICMA](#), [Michigan Economic Development Corporation](#)) is now the economic tool for many communities and regions. This is an organized process of working with existing small businesses in a community so they can grow in the community. Both the business and the community experience economic growth. Economic development also means work on and improvements in quality of life, amenity development, enterprise development/entrepreneurship, community identity and community character.

**6. Brain Drain:** Segedy points out young talented people leave a rural region because they have huge debts, see minimal opportunities, have poor access to capital, see minimal support for entrepreneurs and have differing value systems. But each of these things can be fixed in a community-region. Programs to teach entrepreneurial skills, investment to provide incubator services for businesses are steps in that direction. A home-town advantage is people will tend to move back because it is “home,” it is near family and it is where they realize they want to raise their family. Regions need to be ready to respond to the capital and entrepreneurial needs when they move back.

**5. Growth/No Growth:** Communities need to resolve the internal dispute between “growth” and “no growth.” However, when working on a regional level, the resolution can often be solved by geography. At a regional level, one can identify growth areas (and draw on the map where those are) where appropriate infrastructure, economic programs and strategies that address brain drain are focused. It is okay for part of a region to say “we do not want to grow.” That part of the region may be the source for those elements of quality of life that include rural tranquility, scenic vistas, natural areas. Remember a regional approach provides a large enough area for all the resources and attributes which comprise a globally competitive region. Again, Segedy said people’s lives happen regionally, so communities need to be planning regionally also.

**4. Changing Face of Agriculture:** Agriculture is like any business in a global new economy. Farm operations need to be able to innovate, to grow new and different crops, market and produce value-added products in new ways which may not have even been thought of yet. Thus, agriculture needs flexibility in its operation and local regulation to be able to innovate.

**3. Conservation, Resiliency & Going Green:** Local planners must understand systems and how they work. From that understanding, work should include projects such as restoring rivers to natural courses (not channelized), establishing riparian corridors/buffers which shade and keep the water cold, as well as separation of the river from farm fields, and utilization of conservation design (see also Land Choices, Planetizen and Randall G. Arendt).

**2. Bridging the Gap:** Regions and communities should conduct a gap analysis, identifying what retail and service stores are missing from the area, what ones are wanted in a location, a downtown for example. Then make sure regulations, policy and activities allow that variety in the central business district. Like agriculture, allow innovation, including use of sidewalks (fencing, eating, trees, sale of goods and so on). Capitalize on the unique community character that the downtown presents.

**1. You Tell Me . . . . :** Segedy concluded by offering six ingredients for successful rural and small town development:

- Think and act locally
- Think and act creatively
- Close the loop
- Build linkages
- Create places for people (placemaking)
- Celebrate character and identity

This is done, Segedy said, by doing the following things to make things happen in our small towns and rural areas: building community, memories, identity, celebration of the human spirit – in other words all the things that make up Michigan’s Placemaking (with a capital “P”).

Michigan State University Extension land use Educators can help you community with introductory or extensive placemaking training.

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Many states have universities and their agricultural extension services becoming active in rural town development. The US EPA has resources at **LINK:** <https://www.epa.gov/smartgrowth/smart-growth-small-towns-and-rural-communities>. Regional planning agencies are also available.

**LINK:**

[https://www.canr.msu.edu/news/top\\_10\\_planning\\_practices\\_for\\_making\\_things\\_happen\\_in\\_rural\\_and\\_small\\_towns](https://www.canr.msu.edu/news/top_10_planning_practices_for_making_things_happen_in_rural_and_small_towns)