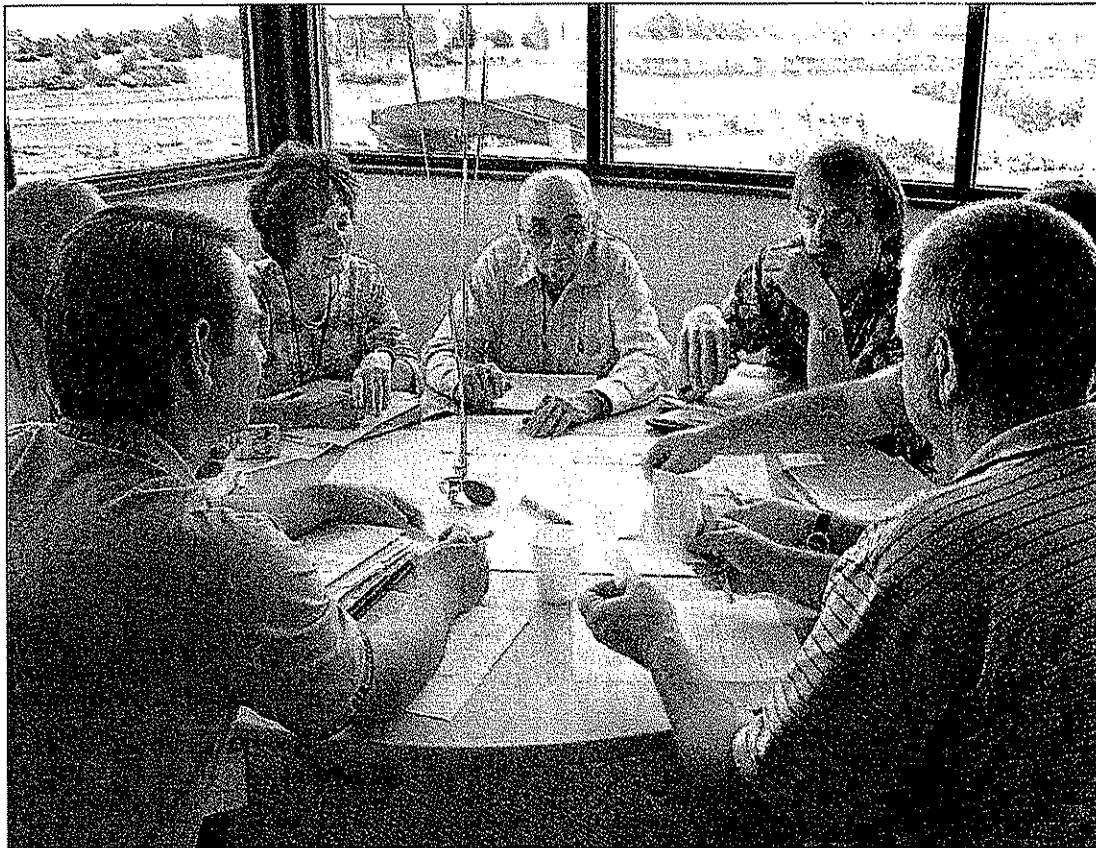


GET WITH THE PLAN



RANDY DOCKENDORF/P&D

A group of Freeman-area residents discuss economic development strategies during a rural development conference held last week in Freeman.

Small Rural Towns With A Plan Can Prosper, Speaker Says

EDITOR'S NOTE: This is the second of a two-part series looking at rural development in the area, as discussed at a forum held in Freeman last week.

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FREEMAN — In his travels across the Midwest, Milan Wall has seen small towns where people are too busy with activities that don't help their town survive.

That could all change if they only had a plan, said Wall, co-director and a founder of the Heartland Center for Leadership Development in Lincoln, Neb.

Wall served as banquet keynote speaker at last week's "Making Connections" conference on the Freeman Academy campus. In a separate interview, Wall said he heard some encouraging — but also disturbing — things at the sessions drawing state officials and local leaders from Hutchinson, Turner



Wall

and McCook counties.

"I heard this afternoon, there are good-hearted people with ideas they could bring into community building," he said. "But the big question is, do we know where we want to wind up 20 years from now? Will today's activities take us there?"

Some communities are thrust into action by a major disaster or massive layoffs, Wall said.

"Parker reinvented itself after a tornado. They took it as an opportunity for creating the kind of community they wanted," he said. "Now, they have a housing program. They target certain household income levels in Sioux Falls who are interested in moving to a small town. They make it affordable and advertise for families to move to Parker."

Jackson, Minn., rebounded after losing a plant

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with 300 jobs by focusing on remaining businesses, Wall said.

"They turned their economic development study upside down. They produced a ring of safety and security for what they already had," he said. "They replaced those 300 jobs in one year, but they did it with 10 employers and not one. Their local base grew, and they felt they had spread out the risk a lot more."

Unfortunately, many rural areas get caught up in projects that don't take them anywhere in the long term, Wall said.

"Many communities need a vision, something to embrace. They have no action plan," he said. "They do stuff as it comes along, but the sum of all their efforts is not representing a strategic direction. It's reactive until an opportunity comes along, then they jump at it."

Small towns need to create their own niche, Wall said.

"What represents unique opportunities for us? What makes us different than the next town?" he asked. "What will bring enough traffic to town? What will get people to look at our community and live here someday?"

Rural towns are being forced to change or die, Wall said. "The little town used to be everything to everybody 100 years ago. It could be comprehensive with hundreds of goods and services. Now, you can't be everything at once."

Regional efforts are now necessary, Wall said.

"If all the little towns battle each other, they won't create the opportunity of working together. It's a matter of collaboration," he said. "We have grant programs that have expectations and requirements in terms of working across boundaries. If they don't cooperate with another entity, they need not apply."

Rural areas also need to develop new leadership, Wall said.

"What is behind a community's success? What leaders say and do makes a difference," he said. "We need to bring people into the leadership circle, to champion new ideas."

Unfortunately, the reverse often happens as towns cling to old ways, Wall said. "Will we be open minded? Do we welcome the newcomer?" he asked.

Three major factors could signal a rural renaissance, Wall said.

"There is the impact of 9/11. There is the sense in rural America that maybe 9/11 underscores why the high rise and big city are not always the best," he said.

"Second, there is a point, when a city grows, at which you reach a kind of social order where you don't think your or your kids will be as safe. Maybe there is more safety or a better education and quality of life in a smaller town.

"And then, there are the changes with the telecom age, where you have different sites of opportunity. How do you define your market? If your product or service is on the Internet, your market is global."

Wall said he sees a renewed optimism in rural areas, reinforced by last week's conference in Freeman.

"The attitude in rural areas is better than five or six years ago," he said. "Not all the nervousness is gone, but the attitude is better."