

Community Builders Process for Local Food System Development

By

Frank Spillers, Global Horizons, LLC

Kimberlee Spillers, Global Horizons, LLC

LaVon Eblen, Atlantic, IA

Ardyth Gillespie, Harrisdale Homestead

Gil Gillespie, Harrisdale Homestead



Overview of the Community Builders process in Cass County, IA

- A grassroots process conducted 2004-2006, 2009
- Successfully engaged a wide range of people in long-term change in the participating communities
- Led people to see their communities in new and more favorable lights
- Brought about positive economic & food-related developments informed by the program
- My role is helping to share this process with people involved in community development and to help to examine long-term impacts of this process

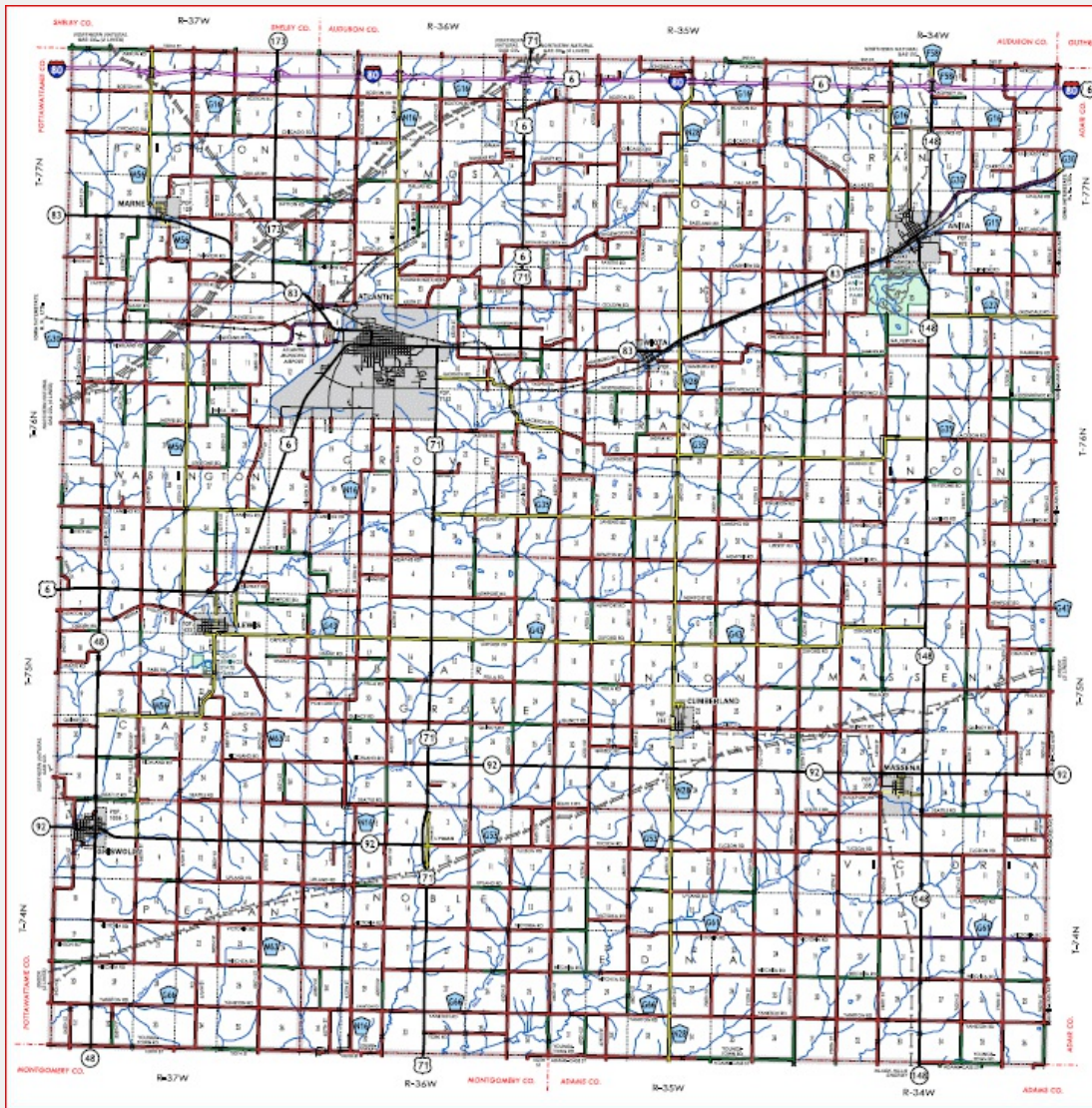


Cass County, Iowa: General Context

- Declining population in both the county & towns over the last 100+ years
 - ▶ 1900: 21,274 people → 2010: 13,956 people
 - ▶ Increasing ave. age & outmigration of young
 - ▶ School consolidations, closed churches, etc.
- Loss of small town businesses & shift in commercial activity toward regional centers
- Fewer, but larger farms



Cass Co. Towns (2010 pop.)



Atlantic (7112)

Anita (972)

Cumberland (262)

Griswold (1036)

Lewis (433)

Marne (120)

Massena (355)

Wiota (116)



The Community Builders Process History

- Started by Frank Spillers and Don Macke in the 1990s in Nebraska as part of Governor Ben Nelson's *One Nebraska* program
 - ▶ CB emphasized facilitating local people addressing what they saw as their needs by solutions consistent with their own values & goals
- Frank took economic development director position in Cass County (CADCO) in 2003 & in 2004 adapted the program for the county
 - ▶ The deliberative dialogue process from the Kettering Foundation's National Issues Forum (www.nifi.org) was added in 2005



Model Underlying Community Builders



The Community Builders Process

1

- Each of the participating towns formed a core group of 5-10 members
 - ▶ Included the mayor & at least 1 council member
- County-wide meetings were open to everyone
 - ▶ Had participation by policy-makers, including from the county Board of Supervisors & the Iowa Senate & House



The Community Builders Process

2

- Intensive process April-Sept. 2004-6, 2009
 - ▶ Spring kick-off meeting for orientation
 - ▶ Monthly county-wide meetings rotating around the participating towns
 - ▶ Each local team also met monthly to discuss what they had learned from the previous county-wide meeting & to plan an event for their town
 - ▶ Mayors came to meet quarterly to discuss issues & sharing resources (leading to instances of cost savings)



The Community Builders Process

3

- Monthly meeting format
 - ▶ Tours of local businesses & other assets at ~4:30pm
 - ▶ Locally prepared dinner featuring local foods at ~6:00pm
 - ▶ Educational program on a topic pertinent to rural development ending ~9:00pm



Community Builders in Cass Cty.

The Unfolding Process

■ 2004

▶ Participants (~60)

- Got to know each other through the monthly meetings
 - Relationships developed among people across the county, especially around the dinners
- Discovered businesses & civic features in both their own and neighboring towns about which they were previously unaware
 - Revitalized their assessments of their own & other towns
 - Developed a friendly sense of competition with other towns
- Found new avenues for business, government, & civic collaboration with others from their own & other towns



Community Builders in Cass Cty.

The Unfolding Process

■ 2005

- ▶ Participants learned about the National Issues Forum (NIF) deliberative dialogue process for addressing “wicked issues”
 - Developed a citizen-generated NIF style “issue book” titled *“What is the Purpose of Economic Development in Cass County?”* with 3 approaches to local growth:
 - Local business creation/expansion
 - Fostering community
 - Outside business recruitment
 - Conducted a deliberative dialogue in each town
 - “Community Conversations”
- ▶ Local leadership group calling itself “Front Porch Builders” emerged, leading in Dec. to the “Progressive Rural Iowa Development Enterprise” (P.R.I.D.E.) being formalized as a 501(c)(3) umbrella organization for Community Builders & for economic development education



Community Builders in Cass Cty.

The Unfolding Process



- 2006
 - ▶ Two Foci:
 - Local business development (led by the Spillers)
 - Local food system conditions & business opportunities (led by LaVon Eblen)
 - ▶ A key goal was raising awareness of the contemporary food system, including its different facets and the fact that most food consumed was imported from elsewhere
 - The “Cultivators,” a food system planning/strategizing group was formed & local “food summits” took place



Community Builders in Cass Cty.

The Unfolding Process

- 2009
 - ▶ Focus chosen was “technology,” especially rural broadband capacity
 - Participants learned what each community's capabilities were in broadband expansion.
 - Iowa has the most independently-owned telephone companies of any state, including 5 serving towns in the county
 - Communities took what they learned in the 2006 issue dialogues to look for entrepreneurs & business start-ups that could utilize expanded broadband capabilities.



Achievements of Community Builders

- A wide range of positive outcomes from the program have been identified, incl.:
 - ▶ Specific cases of increased local business activity & expansions through learning about opportunities for selling & buying goods/services/products, including food
 - ▶ The formation of the Cass County Local Food Policy Council
 - ▶ Creating **economic development plans** for the 7 individual towns & for the County through the NIF dialogue process
 - ▶ Support for a **co-op grocery store** & keeping a **community childcare facility** open in one town
 - ▶ All 5 telephone companies installed "**fiber-to-the-home**" service, motivating one family to relocate from Massachusetts to Cumberland & telecommute.
 - ▶ Programs for providing **free building lots** in 2 towns
 - ▶ Ongoing **monthly meetings with legislators** rotated around the participating towns when the legislature is in session
 - ▶ A \$250,000 grant to fund **housing rehab program** that renovated 12 homes across 6 of the towns



Key Properties of the Community Builders Process

- **Local control & autonomy**

- The team in each of the towns developed their own unique agenda for their town
- Shared & discussed agenda with participants from other communities for ideas & collaborations

- **Emergent**

- The topics addressed over the years came out of the group process
- Relationships developed among people from all over the county, leading to better understandings, business deals, and collaboration among towns

- **Motivating**

- Despite the heavy workload & long-term commitment, people stuck with the program & followed through well

- **Local leadership development**

- A number of “ordinary” citizens became actively engaged in their communities, including running for local offices



Concluding Comments

- Small rural towns currently face many challenges. The Community Builders process has left the small towns in Cass County in significantly better positions for addressing those challenges
- Community Builders is a strategy for fostering local food system development in smaller localities because it promotes:
 - ▶ Knowledge about what others are doing
 - ▶ Relationships & collaboration
 - ▶ Strategic planning & action



Questions/Comments?

- For more information:
 - ▶ Handout on Small Community Builders Institute (ask for a copy)
 - ▶ Global Horizons website: www.bewuca.com



Abstract

- People in many rural localities face challenges in maintaining their economic and social viability. The waning of smaller-farm agriculture, traditionally supported by local businesses, has resulted in rural communities suffering declines in common bonds rooted in shared understandings and culture. The erosion of these bonds has undermined the density of social networks and the viability of local organizations. As residents increasingly purchase goods and services from metropolitan areas and the Internet, loss of local economic opportunities leads to declining populations. One process, Community Builders, experienced by a SW Iowa county, offers potential for countering tendencies toward local decline through cultivating awareness of existing local businesses and relationships among people. During its four-year run, annual themes were local businesses, local foods, economic development, and technology. Each year of Community Builders began with a general explanatory meeting. Then each participating town led a tour of their town focused on the annual theme. Tours showcased local businesses, schools, art – anything the town hosts felt was a valuable asset. Following each tour was a social event organized around a meal emphasizing local foods and an educational event related to the annual theme. The tours helped local people to "discover" the richness of their own and nearby towns, to get to better know others, and to discover others with similar interests. This program changed people's views about their towns through increasing local knowledge, pride, and confidence and some businesses reported sales increases.

