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Bruce Snook: Upcoming events to focus on small-town, rural development

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Two upcoming events will provide golden opportunities to learn more about small-town and rural development.

One will take place in St. Joseph County and the other "up North" at Crystal Mountain.



Bruce Snook

Opinion

"Can Small Towns Be Cool?" is the question that will be explored on March 24 during a presentation by Dave Ivan, director of Clinton County MSU Extension, in Constantine.

Many people, including Ivan, believe the answer is yes.

Ivan has studied numerous small towns and cities across the country trying to answer this very important question on rural development.

His research was inspired by the work of authors such as Richard Florida ("The Rise of the Creative Class" and "The Flight of the Creative Class") and Gov. Jennifer Granholm's Cool Cities Initiative.

Ivan will present his findings on the roles that local decision makers play in affecting the local economy during the session in the Large Group Instruction Room at Constantine High School. The program begins at 7 p.m. and is free.

The program is sponsored by the St. Joseph County Land Use Leadership Council and the Village of Constantine Cool Cities Committee with the thought that local-land-use planning can play a role in generating entrepreneurship in the community and, ultimately, creating economic development.

You can explore the ["Can Small Towns Be Cool?"](#) question prior to the March 24 program.

If you have questions about the program, call Brad Neumann at 467-5522. The other event I'd like to bring to your attention is the fourth annual Small Town and Rural Development Conference, scheduled for April 15-17 at Crystal Mountain near Thompsonville.

I attended last year's conference and found it to be excellent. I'm also planning to attend this year's event in hopes that it will be equally impressive.

The conference is hosted by Rural Partners of Michigan, "a public/private partnership whose charge is to develop new, collaborative approaches to build sustainable communities and to enhance the future of Michigan citizens. The emphasis of the Rural Partners' work is on finding new, innovative, non-traditional ways to address the issues, problems and needs of rural Michigan."

In a recent e-mail, RPM's Allan Hooper provided the following overview of the four topics that will be featured at this year's conference:

- **Energizing Entrepreneurs** -- Don Macke, of the Rural Policy Research Institute Center for Rural Entrepreneurship, will provide useful insights that can help rural communities embrace entrepreneurship as a core economic development strategy. Don will highlight the most promising sectors for rural entrepreneurs and the best practices for encouraging the creation of new firms in a community.
- **Measuring rural community prosperity** -- Traditional measures and assumptions of what makes a community prosperous may no longer apply. Surprisingly, a national study of rural communities shows that prosperity was not a function of infrastructure (access to highways), amenities or even growth. Rather, it is centered more on education, social capital and a vigorous, not necessarily expansive, private sector.
- **Appreciative inquiry** -- This technique in developing useable strategies emphasizes what has worked in the past and how it might be applied in the future. After last year's popular session on asset-based community development, a working session on how to conduct a Town Hall Meeting for Community Improvement will be held on Thursday morning.

- **Transfer of wealth** -- Capturing just a small amount of the wealth transferred in estates from one generation to another in your community and applying it to community betterment can make a huge difference in a town's future. The estimates of the millions of dollars moving from one generation to the next have now been put together for every Michigan county. Learn the numbers for your county and some of the strategies for securing a fraction of this tremendous resource for your community's future.

Hooper noted that, in addition to these featured presentations, the conference will include breakout sessions on a variety of topics.

[Registration](#) for this year's conference will be \$160, the same as last year.

I fully endorse Hooper's words of encouragement about conference attendance: "Consider attending and invite others to join you at this event. You are likely to learn what is working elsewhere to reverse the trends of social and economic decline and population out-migration that plague smaller communities. You will have the opportunity to interact with others representing local government, chambers of commerce and community foundations who will all have a role in helping Michigan's smaller communities pursue a new direction in the future."

This opinion column is written by Bruce Snook, retired president and CEO of the Three Rivers Area Chamber of Commerce. He can be reached at 273-8356 or bcsnook@comcast.net.