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**A New Vision of the Heartland:**  
**THE GREAT PLAINS**  
**IN TRANSITION**

# *A Case Study of Superior, Nebraska*

## *Part One*

*Prepared for the  
Center for the New West  
Denver, Colorado  
by the Heartland Center for Leadership Development  
Lincoln, Nebraska*

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# **Studying Communities in Transition:**

## **A Model for Case Study Research and Analysis**

**Featuring  
A Case Study of Superior, Nebraska**

Prepared for the  
Center for the New West

by the  
Heartland Center for Leadership Development  
Lincoln, Nebraska

Vicki Luther, Ed.D.  
and Milan Wall  
Co-Directors



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**Heartland Center for Leadership Development**

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This project was coordinated by Vicki Luther, Ed.D., and Milan Wall, who serve as co-directors of the Heartland Center for Leadership Development. The Heartland Center is an independent, nonprofit organization developing local leadership that responds to the challenges of the future. A major focus of Heartland Center activities is practical resources and public policies for rural community survival and small town vitality.

Based in Nebraska, the Heartland Center was organized in 1985 by a group of Great Plains leaders as an outgrowth of Visions from the Heartland, a grassroots futures project. Today, the Center is known throughout North America for its "20 Clues to Rural Community Survival" and for its hands-on programs for community leadership development.

Milan Wall is principal author of this case study report. Vicki Luther is principal author of the companion report, "STUDYING COMMUNITIES IN TRANSITION: A Model for Case Study Research and Analysis." Background research assistance for this project was provided by Katherine Endacott and Marian Todd of the Heartland Center. Field research assistance was provided by Lou Higgs, Colleen Murphy, John Shepard, Claudia Giannetti and Phil Burgess. Lou Higgs and Colleen Murphy also assisted with the analytical phases of the project.

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# **PART ONE**

## **SUPERIOR, NEBRASKA**

### **A Small Town in Transition**

The people of Superior, Nebraska, (pop. 2,400) have heard about the theories that the Great Plains should be turned back to the buffalo, but they're not paying much attention to what outsiders say about their community's chances for survival.

What they are doing is learning how to work together, getting more people involved in local leadership, and setting priorities for new projects under the guidance, mainly, of a core of volunteers who want their small town to keep up with changing times.

While the town's economy remains heavily dependent on traditional agriculture, the area is also undergoing a slow but sure transition into the global economy.

"Our town is doing business differently today," says veterinarian Mike Moore. "If you don't change the way you think, your business will decline."

Moore is typical of area business owners who are trying hard to stay at the cutting edge of their specialty. His large-animal practice serves about 1,000 farmers, and he and his two partners saw their business increase 17% last year. The entire operation is heavily computerized, and they've started a newsletter to keep clients up-to-date on innovative practices and treatments.

#### **Off-The-Main-Road Location**

Surrounded by diverse farm operations and nestled in a bend of the Republican River near the Kansas border, Superior both benefits and suffers from its off-the-main-road location. It's 60 miles in either direction to an Interstate highway. The nearest large town, with 23,000 people and a new Wal-Mart, is a 50-minute drive away.

Some see the location as a handicap. It's hard to get semi-trailer trucks in and out of the Mid-America Dairymen cheese factory, where 170 employees produce most of the mozzarella for Godfather's Pizza throughout the U.S.

Others see it as a plus. The town has an active retail community, and on Main Street, all the storefronts are filled. A modern medical center serves a population base of 8,000 in Nebraska and Kansas. And a large reservoir and recreation area, just over the Kansas border, brings people into town to shop.

Competition for local loyalty is viewed here as a positive factor. The town has two banks, for example, and two up-to-date groceries. Everyone seems to subscribe to the competitive spirit. "Choice is a good thing to have," is a comment heard commonly in conversation about community strengths.

#### **Victorian Capital of Nebraska**

The town also has a new focus for community development: it's staked out its claim to the title, "Victorian Capital of Nebraska," exploiting the presence in town of a number of lovely Victorian-style homes. The theme is reinforced with the new "Lady Vestey Festival," named for a turn-of-the-century native who made a fortune working in the meat-packing industry after she moved to Chicago and then married into English royalty.

Now a huge celebration named after Lady Vestey is planned for each Memorial Day. The festival has lots of new leaders all fired up, but it's not without its own brand of small-town

controversy. Some people don't see promoting tourism as creating jobs, and they're not sure the effort is really worth all the attention it's getting.

The festival idea resulted from the community's efforts to write a strategic plan. Hospital Administrator Mike Oglevie believes it is important for the town's leaders to learn to think strategically if Superior is going to prosper. "We have to get together to plan, to dream, and then to find a way to make that dream a reality," he says.

### Two Plants Close in 1980s

Like many other towns on the Plains, this one was in an economic bind during the farm crisis of the mid-80s. Here, though, the trauma was made worse when a World War II-vintage cement plant was closed and 150 well-paid workers were laid off. A year later, a large meat-packer nearby in Mankato, Kansas, also closed up, putting another 150 out of work. At about the same time, J.C. Penney closed the Superior store, and the community lost its largest local retailer.

Some residents thought Superior wouldn't survive that triple blow. But now a few leaders believe the cement plant's closing may have had some positive impacts. Several said wages at the plant, running \$18 an hour plus generous benefits, were "artificially high" for the area, creating a false sense of security for the local economy.

Now the cheese factory is the big blue-collar employer, and there top wages average about \$11. Still, there's some fear that the cheese plant may one day be moved to a site closer to a major highway, and people wonder whether the town would last if it did.

Although the hospital is debt-free, it's had to dig into reserves the last several years to make up for operating losses, blamed on the smaller reimbursements provided rural health providers through Medicare.

With an aging population and more Medicare patients, there's also community concern that the hospital may one day be in trouble. But the hospital is one of Nebraska's rural health care success stories. From its own strategic planning, the hospital has cautiously but successfully expanded, making Superior a regional center for CAT scans and other new health care technologies.

### Attitudes Are Upbeat

Any community has its naysayers. But most people's attitudes here are upbeat.

"There's been a whole turnaround from five years ago," said Carol Oglevie, who with several other cottage-industrialists have started a downtown mini-mall selling crafts and gifts.

While the economic base hasn't changed drastically since Superior was founded in 1872, there's a lot of interesting new economic activity, much of it related in some way to global economic transformation.

AGREX, a subsidiary of Mitsubishi, operates a space-age elevator here, and it exports internationally about 25% of the grain it ships, mainly via unit trains to Mexico. As the northernmost point on the Sante Fe Railroad, Superior can transport locally grown products quickly and efficiently into the southwest, Mexico and the Gulf.

The Farmer's Co-Op has more than tripled its business volume in the last five years. It now ships grain from the area directly into Mexico and the West Coast.



The cheese plant, home to three unique dairy-industry processes, hosts overseas visitors on a regular basis. They come to marvel at the plant's modern technology and, according to Plant Manager Darwin Fritz, see if they can learn enough to replicate the plant's patented innovations back home.

The cheese plant has also enjoyed record-setting growth, doubling its work force since 1983 and increasing production by 700%.

Tim Aldrup is a local graphics wizard whose custom-designed T-shirts promote the Victorian homes tour, but he's learning how to expand his market and now he's supplying a mail order house in Nevada. He bought the latest computer graphics software for his T-shirt designs, and he's already planning a technical upgrade. Although he sells lots of shirts locally, he knows he can't survive on hometown sales alone. "You have to have a product you can sell outside."

### Banks among Local Entrepreneurs

Both banks have learned that lesson, as well. The Farmers State Bank expanded into residential loans throughout Nebraska, and now it has loan representatives in several larger towns as far as 200 miles away. That portfolio now totals \$19 million, all resold into the secondary market. The residential loan unit has added three people to the bank's payroll.

Both the Farmers State Bank and Security National, just two blocks away, bought branches in smaller towns in Nebraska and over the border in Kansas.

Newspaper Publisher Bill Blauvelt figured he'd have to lay off at least two employees when the cement plant went under and when he lost another large commercial customer. "Then I read an article in *The Wall Street Journal* about single fellas staying on the job in the country, while women had to go to the city to find work." His entrepreneurial response is a newsletter called "Country Connections," which matches up men and women who are looking for partners and want to stay in or return to rural areas. Its national circulation of 1,700 has saved the two jobs that were threatened, and the newsletter's got the town lots of publicity, generated by features on CBS and National Public Radio and in *The New York Times*.

### 'Can't Compete with Wal-Mart'

Blauvelt said his own business and the others that are flourishing have had to learn to change with the times. "You can't compete with Wal-Mart. You've got to find a niche" that stores such as Wal-Mart can't fill. "If you sing a tale of woe, after a while everyone will believe it."

The town's recent strategic planning effort, called START for the acronym of the state economic development program that fostered it, has helped to change local attitudes and get new people into leadership. A leadership group was ready for change, and it saw the new state program as an opportunity to energize the town's economy.

Deb Hansen, a farmer who has been very active in local development efforts, says, "The mood in the community has changed a lot. I think 95% can be attributed to the START program." She said the program hasn't influenced farming yet, but it's made a big difference in town. Besides the Lady Vestey Festival, she said, the strategic plan led to construction of a trolley for tours of Victorian homes, a new track and field at the school, renovation of the band shell and several city park improvements. It also resulted in a series of leadership seminars designed to get more people active in community affairs.

The town's strategic planning may not be changing farming practices locally, but other forces are.

## Innovation on the Farm

Rex Kirchhoff, who farms east of Superior on land that's been in the family for three generations, borrowed ideas he picked up on a visit to an Israeli kibbutz and is now talking with his neighbors about sharing purchase and use of farm equipment. He's gone entirely to minimum tillage practices.

Now, part of his land is in a "special protection area" monitoring nitrate pollution in ground water, a first-in-the-nation study involving nine local, state and federal agencies.

"Conservation of resources will play a big role" in the future of farming, impacting fertilizer, fuel, equipment and materials, he said. Staying in farming is becoming "a big efficiency game."

Banker Sam Baird, a behind-the-scenes influence in community leadership, sees more consolidation in the future: bigger farms, fewer school districts and hospitals, and one day, even fewer counties. Institutions doing just an "average" job won't make it, he says: "You've got to be above-average to survive."

He wishes there were more risk-takers in the area, people who are willing to take the plunge and start new businesses that will create a few jobs.

Some of that is happening now.

## New Residents

Plumber Rob Krause just moved back to Superior from Denver, looking for a place to raise a family where small town virtues still prevail. He brought along another plumber, so two families were added to the town's population with his decision to come back home.

Stockbroker Paul Hoefs, who moved here a year ago, chose Superior among 200 towns where he could have relocated. Others on the list included Houston, Tucson, Las Vegas and Golden, Colorado.

He likes the "tremendous community spirit" and he believes people here are "willing to take a chance." Local demographics and bank deposits indicated to the Edward D. Jones company that a stockbroker would make it in Superior, and Hoefs is happy with his decision. A small town boy himself, "It takes me back to my roots," he says.

Dr. Judy Butler grew up and raised a family here, then decided to change careers. Nine years later she returned and started a family medical practice. In the early '80s, the town had lost all its physicians. Now it's back up to four.

Dr. Butler admits that she's had to struggle to make ends meet, and she's in a never-ending tug of war over reimbursements from third-party payers. But she's tied into the University of Nebraska's medical computer network, giving her complete access to reimbursement forms, library and pharmaceutical information. "I could never afford even the software as a sole practitioner," she said.

## Change Often Slow

Tying into outside assistance and learning how to stretch local resources are lessons that surviving small towns are learning, even though the change is often slow.

Two country churches are now sharing one pastor when, as few as five years ago, it wouldn't have worked because of bad memories about who won the football championship in 1940, said Rex Kirchoff. "We realize we're all here together and will either sink or swim together."

Outsiders look at a town like Superior and see little hope. The town's not even the county seat, in a county labeled severely distressed by researchers far away whose data banks show population decline, little new construction, an aging population, and rural isolation.

Inside, the view is different.

Not that everything's okay. People say day care and senior care need more attention. The school has a good reputation, but some parents wish it could offer more in math, science, foreign language. There aren't enough things for kids to do, and not enough jobs to keep them after high school or bring them back after college. More loyalty to local businesses, a common small town complaint, is heard here, too. Some people still hope for that mythical clean, light industry will come to town, create 100 high-paying jobs, and stay forever.

Despite the new spirit of cooperation and the emerging leadership, some "we/they" thinking still creeps into local conversation. And lots of people complain that city government is too conservative fiscally.

## New Enthusiasm

But there's an undeniable enthusiasm that folks say just wasn't here a few years back.

One of the people who gets lots of credit is Glenda Thayer, a Superior native who's been the Chamber of Commerce executive since 1983.

"Glenda has made a difference," says Dee Krotzinger, who owns a successful cottage industry. Since the strategic planning program got underway, said Krotzinger, she feels more like a part of a community working toward a common goal.

Dick Rempe, who owns the Jack and Jill grocery in Superior, agrees. "The more people work together, the better it is for the community."

From an economic standpoint, Superior is trying to learn how to keep up with the highly volatile, increasingly global economy that every city, large and small, must face. Looking up and down Main Street, Banker Steve Wright talks about how the face of retail has changed and is still changing. He points to the shoe store that just opened and, across the street, storefront renovations that accompany another retail expansion.

"Retailers have to change or go out of business," he says. "It's the same in every part of our economy here."

He pauses and then reflects: "We're just a microcosm of what's going on in the larger economy."

## BACKGROUND ON THE CASE STUDY APPROACH

The Great Plains region of the United States stretches from Texas to Canada, from the tall-grass prairies of Minnesota and Iowa to the Front Range of the Rocky Mountains. It is an area larger than every country in western Europe, home to world-class industries, and the origin of some of the nation's most important exports. It is also an area undergoing profound transition.

Many scholars and commentators have suggested that the Great Plains region is in serious, perhaps irreversible decline. The problems confronting the region are real, and they are immediate. However, the Center for the New West believes that change has been mistaken for decline. The Center also believes that many people have been drawn off-key because they rely on flawed and insufficient economic indicators to measure local distress and/or local vitality. When these flawed local data are aggregated for larger areas, distortions increase. When standards are nationalized and applied to unique communities and regions, inequity in interpretation results.

With this belief as background, the Center for the New West retained the Heartland Center for Leadership Development to create and field test a Model for Case Study Research and Analysis for Studying Communities in Transition. The Heartland Center is known nationally and internationally for its study of 19 healthy small towns in 12 states in the Midwest and the Great Plains and for the list of "20 Clues to Rural Community Survival" which emanated from these studies. This Model builds (and adds considerably to) the Heartland Center's applied research approach.

This research model is concerned with issues of current viability (overall health of a community) and with evidence related to transition into a new economy. The rationale for this research model rests with the inadequacies of the current, widely publicized research that deals with large-scale economic and demographic trends.

Predictions of community vitality based on such data ignore both the day-to-day workings of the small community economy and the realities of change at the local level.

Research that describes change only from a large-scale, data-based perspective is research that relies principally on lagging indicators of change, from a state, regional or national perspective. This research model was designed to help identify leading indicators of change, from a local, community or county perspective.

This research approach is qualitative. It relies on the ability of researchers to hear, see and sense important indicators; to put those indicators into a broader community context; to analyze those indicators in terms of their potential importance for describing otherwise tough-to-detect transitions or for telegraphing future trends.

It is a discovery, not a forensic, process. It is systematic but not scientific. It recognizes that the intervention of outside researchers will, by itself, have an impact on community leadership, attitudes, and image.

At the same time, it offers the promise of detecting leading indicators before they appear in large-scale data analysis.

## Selection of the Community

Superior, Nebraska, described here in detail, was selected for this case study after extensive collection of data and analysis of information about communities in Nebraska and Kansas. These communities were selected first on the basis of their location in counties identified as distressed by Frank and Deborah Popper in their research leading to the Buffalo Commons thesis. Population size was used as a further screen, and 1990 census data was reviewed as a reference.

Eventually, community leaders were interviewed by telephone in about a dozen towns. The telephone survey was developed around paradigms of the "new economy," with focus on such issues as civic leadership, use of technology in new or existing businesses, unusually wide market areas, use of outside resources, evidence of planning for the future, evidence of highly entrepreneurial or promising business ventures, and community organizations dealing with change.

Three communities were selected for additional study of existing data, and, finally, Superior was chosen for in-depth research and analysis.

A team of researchers from both the Center for the New West and the Heartland Center for Leadership Development visited Superior for two days in August, 1991, and interviewed 30 civic, business and community leaders using a standardized interview approach.

Subsequently, 200 pages of interview notations were studied in depth and themes were identified for particular attention and, in some cases, additional investigation through telephone interviews.

Finally, this report was prepared as a way to highly the strongest themes indicating the community's current conditions and possible future position. Themes that drew particular attention were organized according to four categories:

1. New Economy Themes
2. Economic Development Themes
3. Clues to Rural Community Survival Themes
4. Vulnerability Themes

These themes are explicated in detail with examples and comments drawn from the Superior interviews themselves and with contextual frameworks drawn from experience of the Heartland Center in work with communities throughout the Great Plains.

### **Economic Dynamics: New Economy Changes**

The perspective referred to as the New Economy is one that emphasizes the changes common to the economic dynamics associated with global economic realities and the transition to an information-based economy.

This outlook is marked by attention to such factors as:

- \* global competition
- \* new technologies and new markets
- \* entrepreneurial activity
- \* information-based competitive advantages
- \* less dependence on place
- \* relatively rapid and significant demographic changes

It focuses on such key economic variables as wealth, choice, enterprise, innovation and entrepreneurship.

### **Community Dynamics: Leadership and Institutions**

The introduction of community dynamics into the equation marks a departure from traditional, data-based approaches to economic analysis. But it is not inconsistent with more recent studies of local economic vitality. Studies by the National Governors Association, the Council of Governors' Planning Agencies and the Heartland Center, among others, have concluded that leadership is the key controllable variable in community vitality today.

This is consistent with the dynamics associated with the transition into the New Economy, with its emphasis on information over place, innovation over demographics. It emphasizes such community variables as leadership, attitude, participation in community decisions, and use of outside resources.

## CONTEXT FOR THE SUPERIOR STUDY

### History and Background

Located on the Republican River in south central Nebraska, Superior (Pop. 2,400) is only two miles from the Kansas border. Superior is at the crossroads of Highway 8 east and west and Highway 14 north and south, approximately 60 miles south of Interstate 80 and approximately 60 miles north of Interstate 70.

Superior is located in a county that exhibits three of the land use distress factors used in the Popper study: 50% population loss between 1930 and 1988; median age above 35; and limited new construction per capita. Nuckolls County experienced a 14% population loss from 1980 to 1990.

In November of 1986, a cement plant in Superior closed with the loss of a \$5 million payroll and jobs for approximately 150 people. In 1988, 16 new businesses opened or changed hands. Today, there are no empty buildings on Main Street.

The major employer in Superior now is Mid-America Dairymen, owner of a cheese factory that has expanded over the last 20 years with contracts for companies such as Godfather's Pizza.

A Japanese firm, AGREX, has an elevator in Superior that ships 75 to 150 cars of grain weekly. Superior also has a small cottage industry producing Victorian decorations with outlets on both coasts and marketing in the AAA directories. Another individual repairs dolls, makes doll fashions and porcelain dolls and has published a catalog.

KRFS radio broadcasts from Superior, and the local newspaper has a circulation of 4,100 that reaches into five surrounding counties in both Nebraska and Kansas. Superior is served by three package express lines and one trucking line. The municipal airport is adequate for light aircraft. Superior is also served by two railroads, Burlington Northern and Atchison, Topeka and Santa Fe.

An analysis of Superior's retail pull shows that per capita retail sales is higher than the state per capita, with a relationship of 1.405 (see Table 5). Many people are retiring to Superior, in part because of good medical services. They have four full-time physicians and a residency, with visiting surgeons and specialists. Superior is host city for CAT scan equipment that serves a regional area, and it has a heliport pad constructed with local donations.

People in Superior feel that they need a new senior center and are working on that. They also hope to renovate the city auditorium, one of the recommendations in the recent University of Nebraska design study. People are aware of the drop in population and are working together to promote industry and tourism.

## Basic Facts

### *Population*

An analysis of United States Census figures from 1980 through 1990 indicates that the population in Nuckolls County has decreased from a total of 6,786 in 1980 to 5,786 in 1990. Net migration in the county during this period was -14.6%. A breakdown by category is shown in Table 1.

### *Non-Farm Employment by Sector*

According to the Nebraska Department of Labor's Work Force Summary, manufacturing jobs in Nuckolls County during the last decade decreased from 290 in 1980 to 201 in 1990. Average non-farm employment figures by sector for 1980 and 1990 are listed in Table 2.

### *Types of Businesses in Nuckolls County*

The latest County Business Patterns report from the University of Nebraska's Bureau of Business Research indicates that as of March 12, 1988, 1,369 people were employed in Nuckolls County. The number of business establishments totaled 202. Businesses ranged from 2 agricultural companies and 17 construction firms to 54 retail trade establishments. For a breakdown of the types of businesses located in Nuckolls County, refer to Table 3.

### *Net Taxable Sales by Industry*

Retail and agricultural related businesses are at the top of taxable sales by industry in Nuckolls county. According to figures released by the Nebraska Department of Revenue and the University of Nebraska's Bureau of Business Research, retail sales in 1989 totaled \$13,298,114 and agricultural industry sales totaled \$1,242,940. A breakdown of the net taxable sales by industry is listed in Table 4.

### *Retail Pull Factor*

The retail pull factor for Superior ranged from 1.588 in 1970 and 1.729 in 1980 to 1.405 in 1987. A breakdown of Superior's retail pull factor is shown on Table 5.

### *Annual Average Employment*

The Nebraska Department of Labor's employment figures for Nuckolls County indicate that the total number of people in the labor force totaled 3,101 in 1980 and decreased to 2,794 by 1990. The unemployment rate, which was at 3.1% in 1980, decreased to 1.4% in 1990. For more information, refer to Table 6 for a breakdown of employment figures.



### *Personal Income Average*

The personal income average of residents of Nuckolls County in 1989 was \$13,832, according to the Business in Nebraska report from the University of Nebraska's Bureau of Business Research. During this same period, the county ranked 71 out of 93 statewide in personal income listed by county. A breakdown of personal income in the county is shown on Table 7.

### *Average Selling Price of Family Homes*

The average selling price of a family home in Nuckolls County in 1989 was listed at \$18,206, according to the Nebraska Statistical Handbook. From the beginning of 1980 through 1987, single family homes showed a steady increase in resell value. The data shows that in 1988 a dramatic decrease occurred in the resell value of homes in the county. A breakdown of the resale average resale price of family homes is shown on Table 8.

### *Library Usage*

According to the Nebraska Library Commission during fiscal year 1989-1990, the total items in circulation in the Superior library system was 23,166. Per capita, Superior's residents borrowed an average of 9.3 books. For more information refer to Table 9.

### *Popper Location*

Nuckolls County is divided in half by the 98th meridian which is the easternmost boundary of the Buffalo Commons. The community of Superior lies just west of the 98th meridian. For more information refer to Figure 1.

### *Nebraska Location*

Superior, Nebraska, is located near a bend of the Republican River near the Kansas border. Superior is at the crossroads of Highway 8 east and west and Highway 14 north and south, approximately 60 miles south of Interstate 80. See geographic location of Superior in Figure 2.

### *Traditional Economic and Demographic Trends*

Superior is located in a county that exhibits three of the land use distress factors used in the Popper study: 50% population loss between 1930 and 1988; median age above 35; and limited new construction per capita. Nuckolls County experienced a 14% population loss from 1980 to 1990.

## **Business and Enterprise Indicators**

### *Total Number of Businesses*

There are 255 businesses listed in the current Nebraska Business Directory. A total of 202 different business establishments are listed in the 1988 publication County Business Patterns. Breakout by category is shown in Table 3.

Mid-America Dairymen, the owner of the cheese factory, has its home office in Springfield, Missouri. AGREX is a Japanese company. Except for insurance agencies, a brokerage firm, and bank and savings and loan branches, most other businesses are locally owned.

### *New Kinds of Businesses*

The major employer in Superior is the cheese factory, which has made a significant investment recently in new technology. According to the Chamber of Commerce, the cheese factory has recently installed innovations with three to four million dollars worth of equipment. Mid-America Dairymen employs approximately 170.

At the other end of the scale, a new cottage industry employs people in their homes making Victorian gift items.

### *New Markets*

Mid-America Dairymen has been successful in developing new markets for its cheese such as the Godfather's Pizza chain. AGREX ships grain directly to Japan. The cottage industry has established outlets on both coasts for its Victorian gift items.

### *Employment by Type of Business*

Non-farm employment by sector in Nuckolls County shows a fair diversity including manufacturing employment as well as both wholesale and retail trade, transportation, services and government (see Table 2). Net taxable sales by business type in 1989 also shows this diversity in the economy (see Table 4).

## **Business and Community Indicators**

### *Telecommunications*

Lincoln Telephone Company service to Superior includes touch tone and custom calling features. Fiber cable extends to Superior and packet switching networks provide high-speed data transmission capacity.

According to the Chamber of Commerce, one savings and loan company in Superior has a satellite link to its Des Moines headquarters. A brokerage house recently opened, and it has a telecommunications link to the stock market. The hospital is linked to a hospital in Omaha for immediate reading of some tests. The school does not have any interactive telecommunications classrooms, but does have a computer lab in the high school with plans to add one at the junior high.

### *Use of Local Information Resources*

The area community college offers adult education classes in Superior using the high school computer lab facility. Superior has a city library with inter-library loan services (see Table 9).

### *Internal and Area-Wide Cooperation*

Superior is exploring cooperative tourism promotions with other communities. A joint two-county economic development coordinator position was considered but has not been approved. Local churches are beginning to cooperate.

### *Use of Outside Help*

Superior has been involved in the START program, a community strategic planning process assisted through the Center for Public Affairs Research at the University of Nebraska at Omaha. Superior recently arranged for a team from the University of Nebraska-Lincoln College of Architecture to conduct a community wide design study. The mayor has also enlisted help from the Department of Public Administration at the University of Nebraska in Omaha for an evaluation of efficiency in city government.

### *Use of State Financial Assistance Programs*

Superior received a Community Development Block Grant in 1983 for comprehensive activities including housing and public works.

### *News Sources*

A weekly newspaper is published in Superior and one radio station is located there. Other available radio stations include Nebraska public radio out of Hastings and commercial stations in Hastings and Lexington, Nebraska, and Beloit and Belleville in Kansas. Superior has cable TV service with 21 channels.

### *Commuting Patterns*

An analysis of commuting zones using 1980 Census data shows Nuckolls County in a zone with three Kansas counties to the south and southwest (see Figure 3).

### *Local Investment*

A campaign to raise \$30,000 for economic development projects was a big success.

### *Local Self-Knowledge*

Superior is currently involved in an extensive program of strategic planning, including a survey of current conditions and future opportunities.

### *Leadership*

Over 100 people are active in the recent strategic planning activities. Other existing citizen groups include Lions, Kiwanis, Business and Professional Women, Retired Teachers, Ministerial Association, Red Caps (a Chamber of Commerce athletic support group), the Mother's Club (which focuses on youth activities), Boy Scouts, Girl Scouts, 4H, Extension Clubs and 14 churches.

### *Economic Development Leadership*

Superior's Chamber of Commerce provides active leadership. Economic development leadership is also organized in one committee of the current START program.

### *Migration Patterns*

Net migration from 1980 to 1990 was -984 or -14.6% for Nuckolls County (see Table 1).

## THEMES

### New Economy Themes

#### Markets: International, National and Niche

Key industries in Superior and surrounding areas are developing new markets, including international and niche markets, and in the process they are creating business opportunities that place them squarely in the New Economy. Exploiting those new marketing opportunities has often meant turning conventional wisdom on its side.

For example, both AGREX and the local Co-Op elevator switched their marketing strategy from sell-buy, not buy-sell as in days past. In the New Economy, they encourage farmers to hold on to harvested grain until the elevator has a buyer, then a price is negotiated. In the old days, the elevators bought and stored grain before a buyer was found. The new system means less central storage space is needed, and it gives the producer a bigger say. When the local elevators are ready to make an offer, the producer can check grain prices in other markets and decide where and when to sell.

Both elevators are selling grain nationally and internationally, shipping by rail from Superior into the Gulf and the Southwest, and into California and Mexico. They've learned to exploit Superior's access to rail lines, taking economic advantage of a local asset.

The Mid-America Dairyman cheese plant, a world leader in cheese production processes and holder of several envied patents in the industry, has developed a niche market with the help of a highly sophisticated R&D approach. Its research-based approach has paid off:

- \* Since 1983, its work force has increased from 90 to 170, and now employees drive as far as 30 miles one way to get to the plant.

- \* Production is up 700% in the last eight years, productivity up 250%.

- \* A world leader in pizza cheese production, a semi-truck pulls out of the plant every 45 minutes, delivering frozen, shredded cheese to Godfather's, Domino's and Pizza Hut and customized cheese products to other buyers.

- \* The plant's patent on "starter media," a key ingredient in cheese processing, makes it an international leader.

- \* The plant operates seven days a week, 24 hours a day, 365 days a year.

The ag-related industries, represented by the elevators and the cheese factory, are not the only ones seeking to expand their business into other markets.

Both local banks have bought banks in the area, in Nebraska and in Kansas, in an effort to satisfy loan demand with a larger deposit base. The Farmers State Bank also has developed a niche market of its own in secondary loans for home buyers, serving several communities as far as 200 miles distant. In nine years, it went from a minuscule home loan portfolio to one now totaling \$19 million, most resold to Freddie Mac. The direct local economic impact is three new jobs. Beyond that, the bank has hired representatives or contracts for help in Kearney, McCook and Lincoln, all much larger towns in other parts of Nebraska.

Other local businesses have also penetrated distant markets:

\* Locally produced T-shirts are sold into a mail-order network originating in Nevada and, in fact, only about 30% of the T-shirt company's products are purchased in the local market.

\* *Country Connections*, the local publisher's newsletter for rural singles, has found a unique market among men and women seeking mates all across America. Its 1,700 readers typically subscribe only for one year. By then, it's either brought them in contact with someone, or they've given up on it as a source for them. The publisher says he learned about the value of niche markets from a journalism professor at Kansas State University, where he got his degree.

\* A cottage industry employing several homemakers produces a unique craft item known as a "Love Knot," about 90% of which are sold outside the local area. The local entrepreneur who started the business found a national market by mailing to craft shops advertised in AAA travel guides. Eventually, a distributor in the Northeast came to her, asking if he could represent her in New England. During the Gulf War, the firm produced a Desert Storm Love Knot.

\* A farm wife has developed a hobby into a business that makes high-quality, expensive porcelain dolls. She's taking advantage of the town's Victorian tourism theme, and she's experimenting with direct mail and advertising strategies to reach into regional and national markets.

### **Information and Technology Intensive**

Businesses, farms and professional offices in Superior are learning to use new technology to enhance their competitive position or improve their access to distant data bases. The cheese plant has become a national leader in uses of biogenetic research and development in mozzarella processing, and it has invented unique production line machinery to keep ahead of its competition.

T-shirt designer Tim Aldrup, who just won a state logo contest, buys the latest in computer graphics for his screen-printing operations. Dr. Judy Butler, a general practitioner, lets the University of Nebraska Medical Center, 200 miles away, keep track of changes in reimbursement regulations and then updates her own computer files by electronic mail hookup.

Veterinarian Mike Moore and his partners are keeping track of ups and downs in their business with a complex series of computer print-outs, charts and graphs that analyze business trends for the past five years. At Brodstone Memorial Nuckolls County Hospital, the latest technological advancements include access to modern mammography and ultrasound equipment and a portable CAT scan unit.

Area farmers are hooked up to data bases that provide them, literally, with minute-by-minute information on current and future prices for locally produced grain, which they can sell directly to distant buyers or to local elevators.

The savings and loan and a stockbroker have direct satellite connections to regional offices.

### **Enterprise Development, Entrepreneurism, Innovation**

Many local businesses are open to new ways of doing business, and a number of them are learning how to develop their businesses and their entrepreneurial skills through their own innovations and inventions.

Publisher Bill Blauvelt, who edits and prints the *Superior Express*, found that new postal procedures meant items mailed locally were sent to Grand Island, then Omaha, Kansas City, Wichita and Salina before they were delivered just two miles away across the Kansas border. So Blauvelt hired someone to drive to a post office across the Kansas line so that his subscribers in the neighboring state could get one-day delivery, like his Nebraska customers do.

With the help of the community, several local craft makers started a cooperative operation known as the Lamppost Mall, a Main Street mini-mall housed in an old retail storefront location. The Mall sells craft items, Victorian-theme knickknacks, locally produced Love Knots, balloons, decorated sweatshirts and other cottage industry-produced goods.

The seven businesses share retail employees, so that all of them can remain open full time with part-time help. The Mall also has become a tourist attraction included in the Victorian tours. Mall Co-owner Heral Jean Schultz said they all invested a lot, including their own "sweat equity."

Other examples of innovation and entrepreneurship abound:

- \* Doll maker Addie Meyer has developed a unique and high-quality product that would compete with porcelain dolls made and sold in much bigger markets.

- \* A music store added carpeting, paint and vacuums to its line of organs, pianos and sheet music. The new items were the strongest sellers from another retailer that went under.

- \* A beauty salon is expanding into a larger Main Street location and adding a line of clothing.

- \* At a time when conventional retail wisdom says that shoe stores won't make it in small towns, a new one recently opened. It's part of a tiny "chain" of small town shoe retailers founded by business women in a nearby community.

- \* A local developer has a plan to transform the historic Leslie Hotel into condominiums and, at the same time, update meeting facilities and a popular local coffee shop.

Innovation is not escaping the farm either. Rex Kirchhoff, a farmer who's been active in leadership development in town, is one of a number of area producers who are transforming their practice in ways that fight tradition. He has switched to minimum tillage techniques, retrofitting his own equipment, and cutting by half the number of passes he makes in his planting and growing operations. He's saving fuel, time and wear and tear on machinery. Further, he and some of his neighbors are talking about shared purchases of new farm equipment, or cooperative use of equipment to cut down on capital expense.

## **Economic Development Themes**

### **Building on Existing Strengths**

Superior's community and business leaders know they need to build on local strengths, rather than trying to transform the area into something it has never been. A highly visible example is the emphasis on historic preservation, featuring the Lady Vestey Festival, named after a famous native who made a fortune in the meat-packing industry in the early part of the century and then married into British royalty. The Festival features tours of several restored Victorian homes.

The town has claimed for itself the title, "Victorian Capital of Nebraska," and a group of volunteers built a vintage-looking trolley car that takes visitors on tours of the Victorian homes on major holidays. Local craft makers are also capitalizing on the Victorian theme, with items for home decorating. Addie Meyer, whose shop just off Main Street is home to hundreds of porcelain dolls dresses in Victorian attire, is struggling to find markets for a high-quality and pricey product line.

On Main Street, there is a healthy retail sector, drawing customers from both Nebraska and Kansas. Clothiers, shoe retailers, grocers, hardware stores and other retailers are working hard to make sure that they retain their share of customer traffic, staying one step ahead of the threats posed by the Wal-Marts and K Marts in larger towns an hour or two away.

Building on a diversified ag base and good rail service, local elevators and grain shippers are expanding operations, and focusing their marketing on niches served by the Santa Fe Railroad. The cheese plant is using all the milk it can buy locally, plus tank loads trucked in from as far away as Denver.

Dee Krotzinger's Victorian Love Knots are produced by eight people in home-based businesses, and other women in the community have turned their own ingenuity into new businesses in a market where low unemployment translates into few opportunities for qualified people looking for jobs.

The hospital has built a strong base of support from a 20-mile radius and has arranged for specialists to visit the hospital on a regular basis. It also represents a strength on which the community can build to attract retirees.

### Plugging Leaks

A common economic development strategy for small towns is known as "plugging leaks," a metaphor for efforts to stem the flow of money from the community into distant markets.

Superior starts on relative good footing. Although its retail activity level has declined slightly since 1970, retail "pull" remains strong compared to the state average. The hospital, a local strength and drawing card for a 20-mile radius, has used strategic planning to strengthen its base of operations. School and community recreational improvements were given high priority when the community went through its strategic planning process, so that residents have plenty of softball, baseball and tennis opportunities locally.

A strong retail sector, plus continued retail improvements, is a peculiar and critical competitive asset. Local attitudes embracing retail competition are expressed commonly. The two grocers applaud the fact that local consumers have a choice. Both banks say their continued presence keeps more deposits in town. A longtime shoe retailer volunteered that the new shoe store, bringing his business competition just across Main Street, was good for everyone. Main Street also boosts two drugstores, and both J.C. Penney and Sears catalog stores.

One insightful retailer said malls are popular in part because consumers have so many choices in one spot. Small towns can offer choices, too, he said.



## Quality of Life as Economic Development

A perennial ray of hope for small towns shines out from the bigger cities, where maintaining quality of life has become a central issue. As center cities continue their relentless decay, say the theorists about rural repopulation, people tired of the hassle and squalor of metropolitan areas will swarm back to small towns.

Population data, as recent as that of the 1990 census, do not support such prophecy, except for those small towns in the obvious paths of suburban expansion. But towns such as Superior are beginning to attract people who had other choices, and they cite small town quality of life as a big factor in their relocation decisions.

Plumber Rob Krause moved back from Denver, where he'd worked for six years, for the small town "quality of life, to raise kids and to have more controllable time." People here are "more upbeat," he said, and they more readily invest time as volunteers for their town's future. His family's decision to move actually increased Superior's population by two families: a colleague decided to leave Denver as well, and now he and Krause have more than enough work to keep busy in their new location.

Stockbroker Paul Hoefs grew up in another small Nebraska town in a far different part of the state, so moving to Superior wasn't exacting coming home. What he's found here does remind him of his small town roots, however. He likes the fact that "you can walk on the streets without fear." His employer, Edward D. Jones Company, provided him with demographic print-outs on 200 communities he could consider. Quality of life was a primary decision factor for him. Now he and his family live in one of the town's Victorian homes, and they've become active in community activities. He also has a new brand of small town caution about recruiting industry: "People here want to bring in a big industry. It probably would be good for the economy, but it may not be good for the community."

High-quality health care and good schools are other drawing cards for small towns, and Superior has both. Predicted consolidation of both hospitals and small schools will probably help Superior in the long run, as smaller and poorer institutions give way to larger and larger service areas. Some local leaders even talk quietly about eventual consolidation of county governments, thoughts few would even have whispered in the past.

## The Changing Relevance of Place

Despite long-term predictions about increased cooperation across community, county and even state lines, there is little ongoing evidence of planned collaboration or clustering among communities in this area. Other Great Plains communities are doing a better job of that.

Yet there is a tingling feeling about changed attitudes that suggest place is not as important as it used to be. Farmers Deb Hansen and Rex Kirchhoff, to name just two, are playing significant leadership roles for the Superior community. Although it's common for community boundaries to extend beyond the legal town limits, it's not been as common for farm and town folks to work side by side on "town" issues.

In the countryside, Kirchhoff describes new cooperative ventures that would have been out of the question not so long ago: a multi-government, cooperative and entirely voluntary (so far) effort to curb nitrate pollution of underground water, for example, and open conversation about cooperative purchase of new farm equipment.

The definition of place also extends to "place of business," and for many successful local businesses the place of business reaches far, far away. That's true of the grain shippers, most notably, and the cheese plant. But it's also true for Love Knots and T-shirts, most of which are

sold outside the local market area. And for farmers trucking sweet corn to Omaha. And for Dr. Butler, who depends on the University Medical Center's computer network for assistance in diagnosis and record-keeping. And for Sam Baird's bank and its residential loans. The list goes on.

Once location meant survival. But that was in the Agricultural and then the Industrial Age. Now opportunities are defined by Information Age variables. It's what you do with place that counts. Not the place itself.

### **Role of Government**

Surviving communities don't ignore assistance from government -- local, state or federal -- but they don't count on it either. Superior is no exception.

Here private sector initiative is the driving force behind community development. Local government has a critical role: maintaining streets and sidewalks, operating local utilities, lots of "day-to-day things," according to private sector leaders who wish local government had a longer-range view.

New state legislation gives communities the option, by vote of the people, to increase real estate taxes for economic development projects. Private sector leaders aren't sure local government will support it. There's also some private grouching that opportunities for business expansion or recruitment were lost due to tight-fisted government attitudes toward local public investment.

But Superior is one of many towns where few are willing to run for local office. "A thankless job" is the way membership on the City Council was described. Business leaders in towns such as Superior complain that an unpopular vote on a controversial issue can lead to unannounced boycotts of firms owned by City Council members. Town councils tend to attract those for whom such threats mean little, and Superior is like that, too. Only one of six council members is in business locally. Others have distant business interests, are retired or serve in non-business roles, such as clergy.

Local leaders regularly call on state economic development field staff. But there's little dependence on government resources for direction. A tourism grant was attracted to help boost the image of an already-developed local tourism strategy.

## **Clues to Rural Community Survival Themes**

### **Evidence of Community Pride**

There's a sense of community pride in Superior that goes with healthy small towns. It's something an outsider feels immediately, driving through. Streets swept, houses well-kept, gardens tended, yards mowed. Storefronts in good repair.

On the side streets, visitors are drawn to the stately Victorian homes, their clapboard siding freshly painted and their gingerboard trim in good repair. On Main Street, the only empty storefront is undergoing renovation to accommodate retail expansion. In the city park, a beautification program has led to improvements in camper hook-ups, restoration of a band shell, and relocation of an historic bridge. More such improvements are on the priority list for the START subcommittee on community image.

The Nuckolls County Museum houses an impressive collection of Native American artifacts.

### **Willingness to Invest in the Future**

In the late 1980s, local leaders began raising funds for community improvement projects. A three-year drive to raise \$30,000 was undertaken by the Chamber and the Economic Development Corporation, and enough "Statesmen of Superior" pledged \$5 a month for 36 months to reach the goal. Now their names are inscribed on the "SOS" marker downtown, so everyone can see who's helping.

But others are helping, too. Some 100 people are investing time as members of five task forces: Community Image, Economic Development and Job Creation, Communications and Leadership, Recreational Facilities, Tourism.

The seven women who developed the downtown mini-mall put up their own capital to renovate the space and get the operation going, and local banks are investing in local business start-ups and expansions.

Service clubs, such as Lions and Kiwanis, are active in community affairs, investing their time for long-term community betterment.

### **Emphasis on Quality in Business and Community Life**

Superior is one of those communities where one local motto might be, "If we're going to do it, we might as well do it right."

That emphasis on quality, a hallmark of lasting success, finds its way into all parts of community and business life. The Victorian emphasis is but one example, with a professional logo, printed sweatshirts, comprehensive brochure. On Victorian theme days, people dress up in elegant costumes of the '90s. (Chamber executive Glenda Thayer has five of them.)

The hospital has access to the latest equipment, plus a myriad of transient specialists, to make quality health care a local option. The cheese plant has installed modern management techniques, with quality teams, to make sure its products are better than any competitor's might be.

Out at AGREX, a company brochure puts it on the line: "It is critical that our end users receive the quality product they need, when they need it."

For banker Sam Baird, a similar lesson applies: "You've got to be above average to survive."

### **Participatory Approach to Community Decision Making**

Superior has its power brokers, as most towns do, working behind the scenes to make sure things get done. Here, however, there's a new emphasis on participation in community priority-setting. The strategic planning and task force approach has opened the door to people who previously felt left out. For the first time, said one local business owner, "I feel like part of a group that is working toward a common goal."

Chamber of Commerce executive Glenda Thayer, is credited along with others for much of the new enthusiasm among people working hard, cooperatively, to make dreams come true. Thayer, who left behind her homemaker duties when she took the Chamber job in 1983, sees a big change in local attitude since "things hit bottom" when the cement plant closed. "There was no way to go but up," she chuckles.

## Cooperative Community Spirit

The kind of cooperation seen in local activities, such as the downtown mini-mall, are evidence of a new spirit of cooperation that's affecting both town and country in Nuckolls County. Farmer Rex Kirchhoff sees the results all around him: "People on the farm are becoming more active all the time," he says. "If they want (access to) goods and services locally, they'll have to get more active" in community and economic development.

Churches in two tiny towns near Superior are sharing a pastor for the first time, said Kirchhoff. "Five years ago that wouldn't have worked."

Others noted that retailers are working together better than in the past. There are still complaints that communication and coordination could be better, but things are improving. "We have to work together in order to survive," says Kirchhoff. "We need to realize that we're all here together and that we will either sink or swim together."

## Active Economic Development Program

The strategic planning process was the idea of the Economic Development Corporation, whose board members wanted to get more people involved. It worked: 250 people attended the Town Hall meeting that kicked it off; 100 signed up and are active in the five task forces.

Thirty-eight priorities were set. A dozen or so, those with potential for short-term success, were completed in about eight months. Others, many of which will take years to complete, are still on the drawing boards.

Other economic development strategies have been tried, not all with success. An ad placed in *The Wall Street Journal* announced that Superior was willing to buy a business and move it to Nuckolls County. It brought 33 inquiries, but, so far, no deal. Contact has been made with a Mennonite community in California to see if some of them might be willing to relocate their dairy farming operations.

A cold storage company in a larger town two hours away wanted to build a facility just across the street from the cheese plant, so the plant didn't have to truck its finished product so far away. But the deal fell through. There are several explanations about what didn't work. Buyer and seller couldn't agree on a price for the land. And there were disagreements about who was to pay for utility hook-ups.

The new emphasis on community image and quality of life will be good not only for people already here, according to Larry McCord, Chamber of Commerce president. It will also help attract new industry, he said.

## Willingness to Seek Help from the Outside

A key strength of healthy small towns is their willingness to seek outside help and, further, their ability to use outside resources to improve their chances of success. Superior gets very high marks in this area.

For example:

\* The College of Architecture at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln sent a Community Planning and Design Assistance Team into the community, and the team produced a 53-page report of recommendations on improving community appearance and storefront design.

\* The University of Nebraska School of Technical Agriculture, itself located in a small town in western Nebraska, is helping with highway signage at town entryways.

\* A tourism grant from the Nebraska Department of Economic Development helped promote the Vestey Festival. Interstate 80 rest stop tour guides were given a tour of Superior, so they could talk about its features first hand. The state's tourism division came out to train local employees on how to be more hospitable to visitors.

\* The hospital convinced a private company to locate one of its mobile CAT scan units in Superior.

\* A local banker is vice chairman of the state's recently created Nebraska Rural Development Commission.

\* The local publisher has exploited national publicity for his *Country Connections* magazine.

### **Conviction that, in the Long Run, You Have to Do it Yourself**

Leaders in Superior and Nuckolls County are not waiting for someone else to give them the permission to change. Nor are they dependent on the ideas of others.

Here there's a kind of resiliency that's come with adversity, a willingness to adapt, a realistic view on future opportunities, a link into the community's history and culture, a wisdom that future success is built on current assets and existing strengths.

The strategic planning group identified leadership development as a priority need, and a subcommittee is developing a leadership course called Superior Awareness Seminars that will educate people on how the community functions, with briefings on such topics as health care, government, education, business and industry, and agriculture.

"Just getting people involved, it can't do anything but help," says Rex Kirchhoff, who's helping put together the leadership course.

"Leadership is the reason that Superior is strong," says Stan Sheets, a lumber company owner who is hoping to develop the hotel into retirement condos. "William Loudon, founder of the town in 1875, was a strong leader," he said, and that tradition continues today. Still, leadership remains a challenge, Sheets admitted. Some don't really want change. Others would rather "react than lead." Some "young people do not seem to feel that leadership is necessary. But some are showing interest because they know that the value of their house is tied to the town's vitality."

Sue Trapp, a City Council member who with her husband owns a carpet cleaning business in town, is a Superior native who decided she wanted to return. "The size is good, it's a good place for kids and recreation, it has an excellent school system." Those are strengths that Superior has had for a long time. But the challenges to leadership are changing. Trapp says 20 or 30 years ago the community "was kind of self-sufficient" and leadership was relatively "passive." Then, "they didn't need to promote."

"We're in a transition," says Kirchhoff. But he also adds: "We're always in a transition."

## Vulnerability Themes

In spite of its many strengths, Superior is still vulnerable on a variety of fronts. Leadership, though strong, is one of them. In the last year, the leadership group that got enthused because of the strategic planning program ran into burn-out by the time the Memorial Day Vestey Festival was over, and during the summer projects got less attention. "The motivation and determination are there," says Deb Hansen, "but time is a problem."

Other ways in which the community and the county are vulnerable include:

### Dependence on a Few Major Job Providers

New jobs are scarce here, and with an unemployment rate of only 2% there's not an available labor pool for big new employers in any case. Spouses have trouble finding meaningful work and some employers, like the cheese plant, by policy prohibit spouses from employment by the same firm. Beyond that, the community relies on a few major employers: the cheese plant, the hospital and the school are the most obvious examples.

There's constant worry about whether Mid-America Dairymen might move the cheese plant to a location closer to major highways. But the investment in equipment and in local people is significant, and most leaders assume it will be here for years to come. Unlike the cement plant, which relied on 50-year-old equipment, the cheese plant is a new-technology operation, with a proud record of increasing productivity and a leading-edge inventiveness. Others say even if it moved, the town would find a way to survive.

Others worry about the future of the hospital, beset financially by Medicare and Medicaid reimbursements that cover only 70% of costs. For four out of the last five years, the private not-for-profit health center has had to dip into cash reserves to break even. But they're not just sitting still, either. Staff reductions and cuts in outside contracts are improving efficiency; a foundation has been established; and the hospital lobbies the Nebraska congressional delegation in a never-ceasing effort to get rural and urban reimbursement rates equalized. Hospital Administrator Mike Oglivie is confident that the facility's strategic approach to future planning will pay off. "Our hospital will continue to service this area 10 years down the road," he says.

The school is big enough and sufficiently distant from much larger districts that people are confident it will survive. And recent state legislation is encouraging more school district consolidation that, in the long run, will probably benefit Superior.

### Lack of Political Power

As with other rural areas, political power is diminishing compared with larger towns and urban centers. The 1990 census will only exacerbate the problem, according to most political analysts.

An obvious byproduct is the variance between urban and rural reimbursement rates for Medicare and Medicaid. But there are other looming expectations with political implications:

- \* New requirements for solid waste disposal.
- \* New regulations affecting wetlands.
- \* Ground water pollution problems.
- \* Ambitions for educational reform without additional dollars.
- \* A property tax crisis, unique to Nebraska, that may return farm and business inventory to property tax rolls.
- \* Doctors complain that peer reviews are conducted by physicians who have no idea what rural practice is like.

A giant local controversy developed, and then subsided, when some local leaders saw an opportunity for economic development in the announcement that Nebraska would be the site for a regional low-level nuclear waste disposal facility. Other locations were judged more appropriate according to engineering standards, and the controversy moved there, where it has since grown into all-but-unmanageable proportions. The point is that those kinds of facilities will be located in rural areas... somewhere... not cities.

In Nebraska, many development experts consider towns outside the so-called "fishhook" to be outside the area with potential for successful economic transition. The fishhook basically runs the width of Nebraska, west to east, along Interstate 80 and then hooks southeast to Lincoln and back northeast to Omaha. Superior is not in this defined territory.

### **Absence of Typical Success-Factor Infrastructures**

Successful smaller communities often have a base of locational advantages and institutional infrastructures that, while essentially outside their control, still have a positive impact on local economies. Superior has relatively few of those. Rail service is a plus. But there are several negatives:

- \* The fact that Kansas starts just two miles south of town is a problem, because it effectively blocks school district consolidation, mail service and state economic development assistance programs that cannot cross state boundaries.

- \* Superior, although the largest and dominant town in Nuckolls County, is not even the county seat. That historical advantage was bestowed on Nelson (pop. 700) about 15 miles north.

- \* The town is about 60 miles either way (north or south) from major Interstate highways. U.S. Highway 81, 20 miles to the east, has been designated as a possible north-south four-lane thoroughfare.

- \* Although Superior has a school system that wins praise from local residents, no two-year or four-year college is located within easy driving distance. A public two-year campus is located in Hastings, about 50 miles away, where a private four-year college is also located. The nearest public four-year college in Nebraska is about 150 miles distant.

### **Lack of Redundancy in Vital Skills and Services**

Superior is not big enough to enjoy much redundancy in vital skills and services.

For example, when one of the town's four doctors moved recently to a different practice in a distant community, the remaining three doctors felt the pressure. Rural physicians already are under the gun, with, on the average, four times more patients than their urban counterparts. Further, a physician in sole practice said it is so difficult to find someone else to cover for her when she's gone and the liability risks are so great, that she is essentially hand-cuffed to her office.

Although the town prides itself on competition and choice in retail and banking, there is no over-abundance of educated professionals to help with community and civic projects. Burn-out is a potential problem.

Absentee ownership is, by conventional wisdom, a problem of urban centers. It's also a problem in many small towns. In Superior, as in other rural communities, land is sometimes held prisoner by owners who no longer live in the community or, worse, inherited a piece of property that they believe will one day bring sizable profits. Too often, absentee-owned land and buildings deteriorate due to owner inattention.

### Few Business Assistance Resources

Due to the fact that it is distant from major service centers and higher education institutions, Superior is not in the path of highly accessible business assistance resources ...for marketing assistance, business management help, Main Street development.

The new Nebraska Development Network, an initiative of Governor Ben Nelson's administration, is a major attempt to network regional service providers of community and business assistance into a pro-active coalition with an ambitious outreach function. Once up and running, it may help towns off the beaten path.

Further, however, there are few examples of networking among local entrepreneurs for business development purposes. The mini-mall is the outstanding exception, and there is some informal networking that goes on as a by-product of community activities, but local entrepreneurs could probably do a better job of learning from one another.

### Lack of Inter-Generational Support Services

Several local leaders complained that Superior needs to pay better attention to support services for both older and younger residents: senior day care, child day care, recreation for seniors and winter activities for young people.

Others noted that many single-family homes are occupied by a surviving spouse who has trouble keeping up with yard, garden and home repairs. Rental housing is virtually non-existent. A large retirement facility downtown has helped and so would the retirement condos in the old hotel, if that project proves feasible.

### Dominance of Old Economy Activities, Emergence of New

There are many "new economy" initiatives in Superior, but the "old economy" still dominates. Some of the old economy is a plus, however. The solid agriculture base is helping Superior and the entire Great Plains weather the recessionary tendencies that whipsaw either coast, for example. Here there is a strong work ethic, at a time when metropolitan employers complain that people don't have the work habits of old.

What the old economy may buy is transition time, that is, time to undergo the transition with an economic safety net. That can be an advantage.



## CONCLUSIONS

The Superior case study describes economic transition in one Great Plains community. Here there remains a mix of both traditional agricultural-based economic activity and "new economy" activity.

From analysis of one community, conclusions can only be drawn about one community. Even one community's experience, however, can give other communities confidence.

This case study focuses more deeply on economic transition than have other Heartland Center "healthy community" success stories, now totaling 19 in 12 states in the Midwest and the Great Plains. In all, however, these 19 rural community profiles underscore the impact of local leadership on community vitality.

The Superior story adds to the body of evidence demonstrating that local ingenuity, hard work and cooperation can make a big difference... in attitudes as well as actions.

In an Industrial Age, location was considered the critical variable in community survival and local economic vitality. Today, in an Information Age, leadership plays the same crucial role.

**TABLE 1****Population with Components of Change:  
1980 and 1990**

	Nebraska	Nuckolls
1990 Population	1,578,385	5,786
1980 Population	1,569,825	6,726
Change from 1990-80		
Number	8,650	-940
Percent	.5%	-14%
Births	255,693	866
Deaths	146,951	822
Natural Change		
Number	108,742	44
Percent	6.9%	.7%
Net Migration 1990-80		
Number	-100,182	-984
Percent	-6.4%	-14.6%

**TABLE 2****Non-Farm Employment by Sector - Annual Average**

Nuckolls County		
	1980	1990
Manufacturing	290	201
Mining/Construction	46	41
Transportation/ Utilities	108	63
Retail Trade	395	385
Wholesale Trade	200	194
Banking/Insurance/ Real Estate	81	81
Services	281	386
Government	403	419

Source: Nebraska Department of Labor  
Labor Market Information  
Labor Force/Work Force Summary

**TABLE 3**

**Types of Businesses in Nuckolls County  
1988**

---

Nuckolls County

---

Total # of Employees Week of March 12	1,369
Total # of Establishments	202
Agriculture	2
Mining	2
Construction	17
Manufacturing	6
Transportation/ Utilities	17
Wholesale Trade	27
Retail Trade	54
Banking/Insurance/ Real Estate	15
Services	54
Unclassified	8

Source: County Business Patterns  
Bureau of Business Research  
University of Nebraska-Lincoln

**TABLE 4**

**County and Town Net Taxable Sales by Industry  
1989**

---

	Nuckolls (Superior)
Agriculture	\$ 1,242,940
Mining	
Construction	
Manufacturing	
Transportation	5,066,642
Wholesale	662,638
Retail	13,298,114
Services	2,300,277
Other	<u>1,159,932</u>
Total	\$23,730,543 ( \$17,601,163 )

---

Source: Nebraska Department of Revenue  
Bureau of Business Research  
University of Nebraska-Lincoln

**TABLE 5**

**Retail Pull Factor\***

	1970	1975	1980	1985	1987
Superior	1.588	1.486	1.729	1.281	1.405

\*Per capita taxable sales of the community divided by the state per capita taxable retail sales.

**TABLE 6**

**Annual Average Employment  
Nuckolls County**

County	Number in Labor Force		Number Unemployed		Rate of Unemployment		Total Unemployment	
	1980	1990	1980	1990	1980	1990	1980	1990
Nuckolls (Superior)	3,101	2,794	95	39	3.1%	1.4%	3,006	2,755

Source: Nebraska Department of Labor  
Labor Market Information

**TABLE 7**

**Personal Income for Nebraska and Nuckolls County**

	Nebraska	Nuckolls
Average Annual Change in Per Capita Personal Income 1988-89 (%)	6.7	9.9
Income 1980-89 (%)	6.0	8.2
Per Capita Personal Income 1989	15,685	13,832
Rank in State	--	71

Source: UNL Bureau of Business Research  
Business in Nebraska May 1991



**TABLE 8**

**Average Selling Price of Family Homes**

---

	1980	1985	1986	1987	1988	1989
Nuckolls County	17,898	20,769	23,040	24,093	19,800	18,206

---

Source: Nebraska Statistical Handbook, 1991

**TABLE 9**

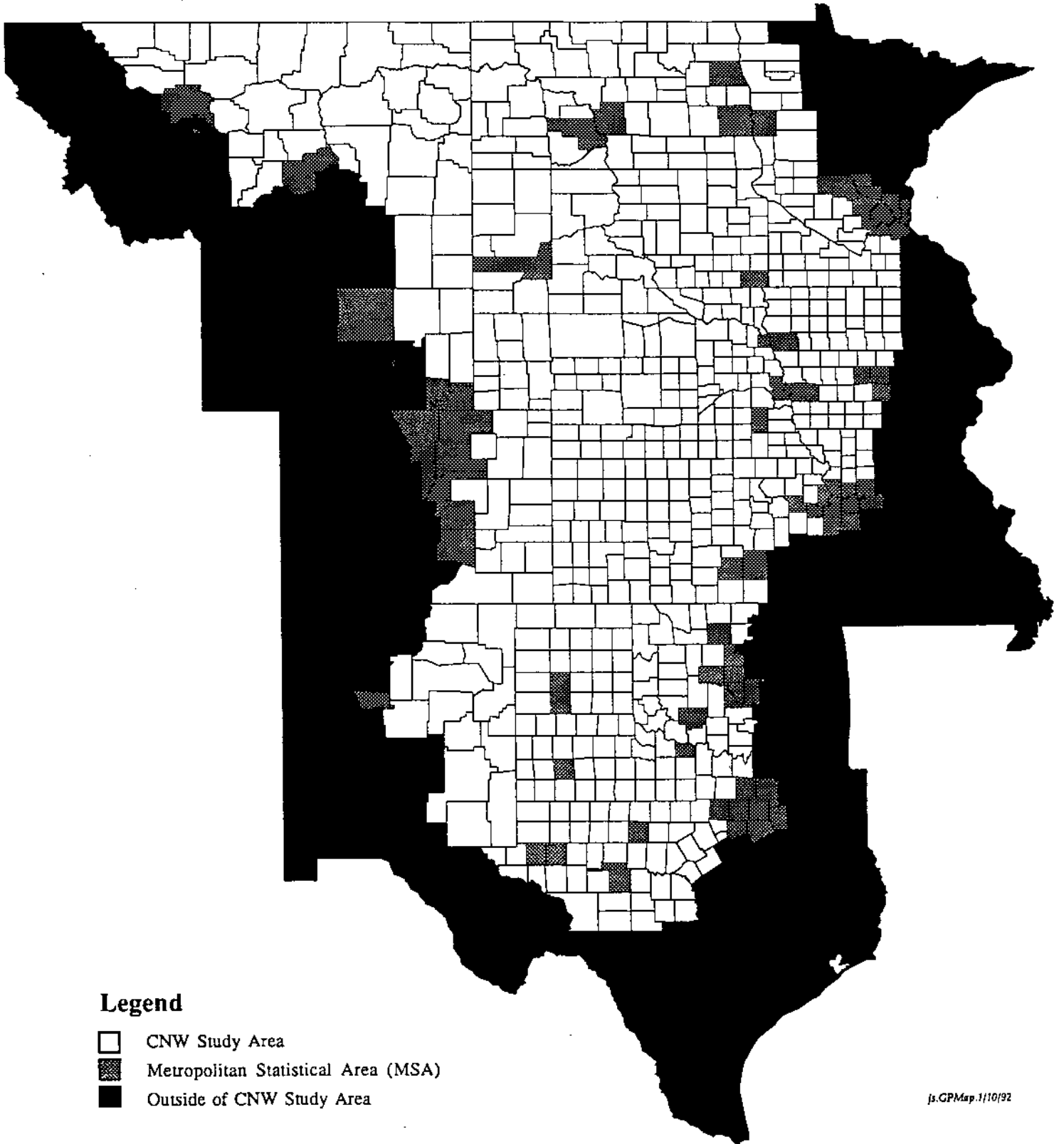
**Library Use  
1989-90 Fiscal Year**

	<u>Library Circulation</u>		<u>Inter-Library Loan</u>
	Total Items	Per Capita	Total Items
Superior	23,166	9.3	136

Source: Nebraska Library Commission

# THE GREAT PLAINS

Center for the New West Study Area Boundary

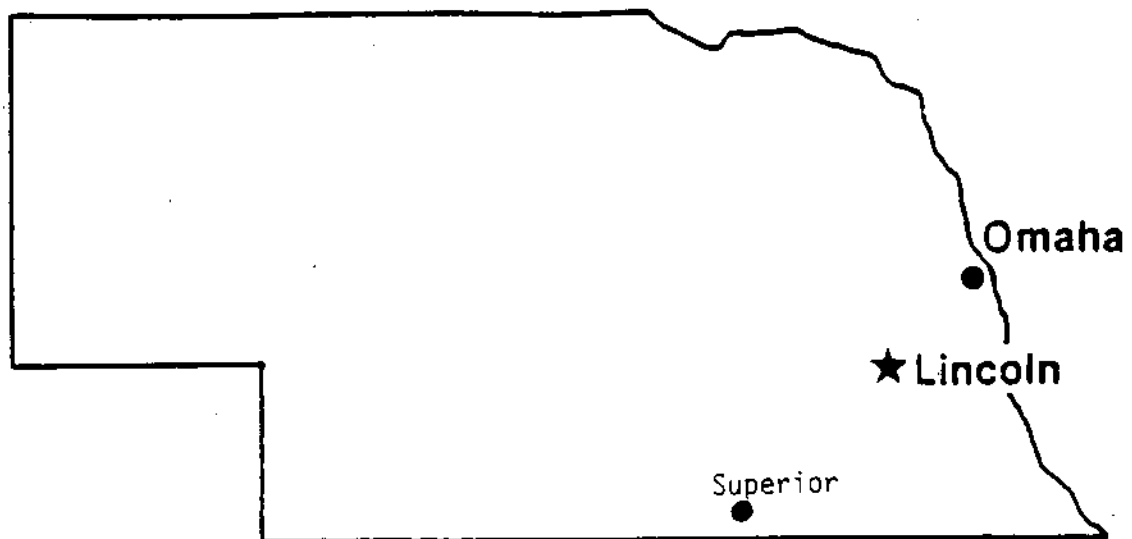


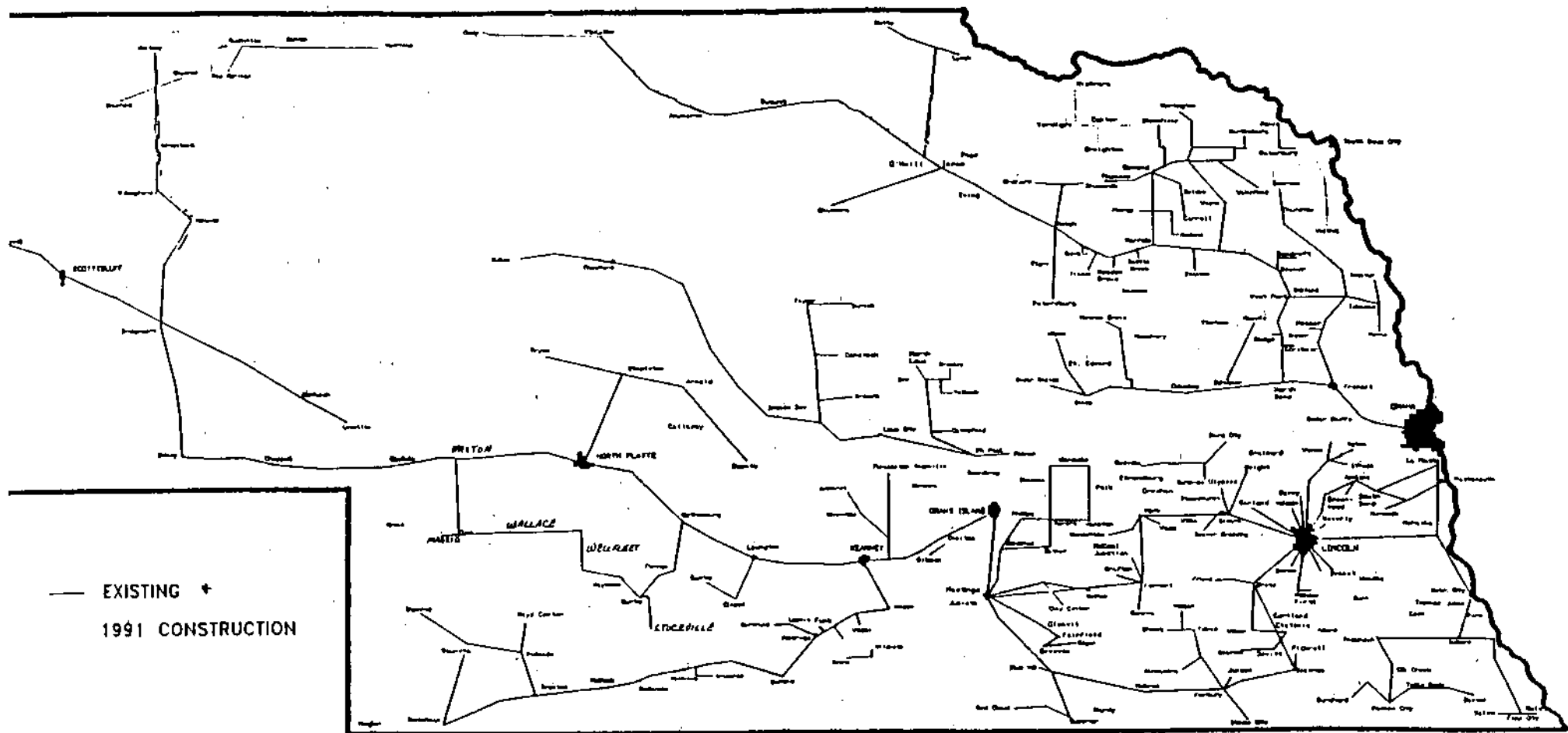
## Legend

- CNW Study Area
- Metropolitan Statistical Area (MSA)
- Outside of CNW Study Area

NEBRASKA SITE MAP

Figure 2





# FIBER OPTIC CABLE

NEBRASKA PUBLIC SERVICE COMMISSION

APRIL, 1991  
D. JOHANSEN



FIGURE 3



Center for the New West, 1625 Broadway, Suite 600, Denver, CO 80202 — 303.592.5310

## Great Plains Special Studies and Papers

The following reports and working papers are available upon request from the Center for the New West:

- | #                  | Title or Topic   |
|--------------------|--|
| 91-701             | Murphy, Colleen. <i>Survey of Successful Communities</i> . Denver: Center for the New West. January 1991.  |
| 91-702             | Quantic, Cathy. <i>The Great Plains, Canada and Mexico: Policy Issues in Rural Development and the Free Trade Agreement</i> . Denver: Center for the New West. August 1991.  |
| 91-703             | Shepard, John C. <i>Leadership Through Partnerships: The National Trust's Main Street Program as a Community Economic Development Tool</i> . Denver: Center for the New West. November 1991; and in <i>Urban Design and Preservation Quarterly</i> , Spring 1992.                                |
| 91-704             | Heartland Center for Leadership Development. <i>A Case Study of Superior, Nebraska</i> . Denver: Center for the New West. November 1991.   |
| 91-705             | Giannetti, Claudia. <i>The New Role of Librarians and Libraries in Economic Development</i> . Denver: Center for the New West. December 1991; <i>The Burlington Record</i> , January 30, 1992; and <i>The Fort Morgan Times</i> , January 27, 1992.  |
| 91-706 &<br>92-707 | Murphy, Colleen, Louis D. Higgs and John C. Shepard. <i>Survey of the Future of the Plains</i> . Denver: Center for the New West. January 1992.  |
| 92-708             | Murphy, Colleen, John C. Shepard and Louis D. Higgs. <i>A Case Study of Brush, Colorado</i> . Denver: Center for the New West. May 1992.   |
| 92-709             | Drabenstott, Mark and Tim R. Smith. <i>The Changing Great Plains Economy: New Directions for Economic Policy</i> . Federal Reserve Bank of Kansas City. March 20, 1992.  |
| 92-710             | Shepard, John C., Colleen Boggs Murphy, Louis D. Higgs and Philip M. Burgess. <i>A New Vision of the Heartland: The Great Plains in Transition</i> , A report to The Ford Foundation and the Aspen Institute, Denver: Center for the New West, March 1992.                                       |
| 92-711             | Higgs, Louis D. and Claudia Giannetti. <i>The Economic Development Strategies of the Great Plains States</i> . Denver: Center for the New West. June 1992.   |
| 92-712             | Shepard, John C. <i>Redefining "Place": Community and Vitality in the New Economy</i> . Denver: Center for the New West. Forthcoming Summer 1992. (Master's Thesis, University of Colorado at Denver).   |
| 92-713             | Shepard, John C., Matthew Muehlbauer, Louis D. Higgs and Colleen Murphy. <i>Measuring Distress: Economic Indicators and the Great Plains</i> . A report to the Economic Development Administration of the U.S. Department of Commerce, Denver: Center for the New West, Forthcoming Summer 1992. |

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**A New Vision of the Heartland:**  
**THE GREAT PLAINS**  
**IN TRANSITION**

# *A Case Study of Superior, Nebraska*

## *Part Two*

*Prepared for the  
Center for the New West  
Denver, Colorado  
by the Heartland Center for Leadership Development  
Lincoln, Nebraska*

*Center Report 91-704  
November 1991*

*Center for the New West*

---

This report was funded in part by the State Rural Policy Program of the Aspen Institute and The Ford Foundation, the Denver Regional office of the US Department of Commerce, Economic Development Administration and the Center for the New West.

A publication of the Center for the New West  
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telefax: 303.592.5315

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for Leadership Development

Additional copies of this report, Great Plains Project  
special studies, and other Center publications are  
available at the above address.



## **PART TWO**

# **STUDYING COMMUNITIES: A MODEL FOR CASE STUDY RESEARCH AND ANALYSIS**

Prepared by the  
Heartland Center for Leadership Development

for the  
Center for the New West

September 13, 1991

## **Introduction and Rationale**

This design offers a framework for descriptive community research of three distinct but related aspects. First, using a case study approach, the model can be used to identify and examine small towns in the Great Plains region. Second, the design suggests a means of analyzing an already existing case study. And lastly, the model can be used to develop a survey to study towns via mail or telephone.

The research is concerned with the issues of **current viability** (overall health of the town) and activities related to a **transition into a new economy**.

The rationale for the research rests with the inadequacies of current, widely publicized research that deals with large-scale economic and demographic trend data. Predictions of community viability based on such data ignores both the day-to-day workings of the small community economy, and the realities of change at the local level. Rather than focusing only on lagging economic indicators, leading indicators should also be considered.

Understanding the future of Great Plains towns requires a considerably different approach. This research design offers a **model for identifying viable communities and analyzing them at the level of the community**, not the area or the multistate region.

## **Components of the Research Design/Model**

A Baseline Information Table (Table 1) lists the various data pieces necessary to identify a community for case study selection. This baseline information represents a variety of information sources and should not be considered exhaustive but rather a minimal listing for the purposes of this type of research. This Table is the most basic feature of this research design/model.

**TABLE 1**

**Community Baseline Information**

---

<b>Location</b>	Map Commuting Zones-Subareas of Labor Market
<b>Population</b>	Number and Percentage of Change Births Deaths Natural Change Net Migration (1980-1990)
<b>Employment</b>	Non-Farm Employment by Sector Type of Business by County Annual Average Employment
<b>Economics</b>	County and Town Net Taxable Sales by Industry Town Retail Pull Factor Personal Income by County Income-source and Amount by Sector Sales by Sector Average Selling Price of Family Homes
<b>Telecommunications &amp; Information</b>	Fiber Optics Cable Map Library Size and Usage

---

Building on the work of economists such as Pulver and Shaffer as well as previous case studies by the Heartland Center, a series of check lists has been developed to serve as the model for exploring the viability and economic transition aspects of a community. These check lists represent a series of questions that can serve as guides for both data collection and analysis. The check lists are organized into topic areas of:

- Economics (Table 2a-2c)
- Politics (Table 3)
- Physical Aspects (Table 4)
- Social Institutions (Table 5)
- Leadership (Table 6)
- Economic Transition Characteristics (Table 7)

The complete check lists are featured as Tables 2 through 7.

## TABLES 2a - 2c ECONOMICS

The following questions were influenced by the writings of Glen Pulver and Ron Shaffer.

### TABLE 2a

---

#### Check List: Questions Related to Demand (markets for community outputs)

1. Is there evidence of a local development organization? What, if any, industrial recruitment efforts have been organized? Any results? Has the effort gone beyond industrial recruitment in any way?
  2. Are there any existing or planned local tax or financial incentives for location in the community?
  3. Is there an information program on advantages of location?
  4. Have any data collection efforts been tried to identify existing consumer and business customers?
  5. What type of efforts have been made to improve the appearance of the central business district?
  6. What amenities are provided to attract consumers? Later hours? Parking? Day care? Any special events and sales?
  7. Is there any coordinated advertising/marketing?
  8. What evidence of strategies to capture nonlocal consumers/tourists?
  9. Any history of a merchant association or other organized effort to coordinate merchants?
  10. Any history of a business visitation effort to increase knowledge of major employers?
-

**TABLE 2b**

---

**Check List: Questions Related to Supply  
(existing supplies of community resources such as workers, buildings, capital)**

1. Efforts to encourage and support new enterprise?
  2. Business counseling available?
  3. Incubator space?
  4. History of innovative small business lending?
  5. Training for labor force?
  6. Business directory or directory of resource for new entrepreneurs?
  7. Local research to identify marketing niches for new or expanded businesses?
  8. Evidence of dissemination of technology within the business community?
- 

**TABLE 2c**

---

**Check List: Questions Related to Economics/Institutional Improvement  
(local government, community systems)**

1. Any means to facilitate permit process or financing steps for entrepreneurs?
  2. Any connection to state and federal programs or resources?
  3. Any connections/use of congressional delegations?
  4. Strategic planning activity?
  5. SWOT (Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, Threats) analysis?
  6. Organized credible group planning for the future?
  7. Use of trend information sources?
  8. Collaborative planning among community service clubs?
  9. Contact between local government officials and business development groups?
  10. Apprenticeship or intern programs?
  11. Use of outside resources such as small business development centers, community colleges, state economic development agencies?
-

**TABLE 3**

---

**Check List: Questions Related to Politics  
(local government and leadership activities)**

1. Participation in state association for public officials?
  2. Training for elected and appointed officials?
  3. Length of stay in office?
  4. Difficulty in filling vacancies on boards and commissions?
  5. Recalls?
  6. Participation opportunities? Town Hall meetings? Surveys, newspaper coverage?
  7. Leadership training available?
  8. History of conflicts?
  9. Experimentation with new programs or resources?
  10. Success at grants competition? Example: Community Development Block Grants
- 

**TABLE 4**

---

**Check List: Questions Related to the Physical Environment  
(infrastructure and public services)**

1. What type of public housing is available? How is it managed?
  2. Street maintenance by contract or city employees? How efficient?
  3. Has there been any survey work in the town related to satisfaction with public services?
  4. What is the amount of the town's indebtedness? What is the bond rating?
  5. How adequate is the water system?
  6. How are landfill and solid waste disposal dealt with?
  7. What is the reported usage of the city library and other information resources?
  8. What is the reputation of local law enforcement?
-

**TABLE 5**

---

**Checklist: Questions Related to Social Institutions**

1. What health care facilities/services are available?
  2. Is there evidence of expansion or future planning among the health care providers?
  3. How many active service clubs exist? What community projects are managed by which clubs?
  4. Which community programs target youth? Senior citizens?
  5. How many religious denominations are represented? Largest?
  6. What news sources (daily, weekly) are used in the community?
  7. How stable is school enrollment? Staff and administrative turnover?
  8. How does the school compare to state test scores? Dropout/completion rates?
  9. Are there any recognized areas of excellence or innovation in the school program?
- 

**TABLE 6**

---

**Check List: Questions Related to Leadership**

1. In general, how representative are elected officials in terms of age, gender and race?
  2. Is there any evidence of recruitment of new leaders? Any program for training and skill development?
  3. Do community residents seem to view the decision-making process in the town as open and participative?
  4. Are women and minorities accepted in leadership positions?
  5. Is there a time and place where community leaders meet regularly on a formal or informal basis (at the cafe, for example)?
  6. Are there ready avenues for newcomers to become involved in the community?
  7. Is there a small group of decision makers who can insure success for or block community projects?
  8. Do community leaders seem to take responsibility for the future of the community? Is the general attitude positive or negative?
-

**TABLE 7**

---

**Check List: Questions Related to Economic Transition Characteristics**

1. What types of new business have developed?
  2. Do any new businesses target nonlocal markets?
  3. How is technology used in new and existing businesses?
  4. Have any home-based businesses developed? Have any expanded?
  5. What examples of shared services, cooperative arrangements or information networks among businesses exist?
  6. What is the nature and use of outside resources?
  7. What is the pattern of local investment and financial activity?
  8. To what degree does local self-knowledge influence planning for the future? Is there evidence of any data collection?
- 

Added to the range of background data available about communities, these check lists will provide a holistic but focused picture of a community that can then be analyzed against known factors of community viability such as the Heartland Center's *20 Clues to Community Survival* (see Appendix A). These check lists also form the basis for on-site interviews as well as guide the development of the community profile for the case study.

**Applying the Research Design/Model to Case Study Creation**

The general steps involved in using this model to create a community case study are:

1. Identification of communities for the initial pool of sites.
2. Collection of baseline information (see Table 1 for minimum topics).
3. Site selection.
4. Site visit and interviews (see Appendices B to H).
5. Analysis of results (see Tables 2 to 5 for check lists).
6. Development of a community profile (see Page 14 for example).

The model was pilot tested in Superior, Nebraska. The time period for the pilot test was three months.



# PILOT TEST: DEVELOPMENT OF A COMMUNITY CASE STUDY

## Phase One

### Initial Pool

The Kansas and Nebraska towns located in those counties identified as distressed by the Poppers' ("Buffalo Commons") study formed the initial pool. Population size was also used as a further screen to narrow the potential sites for the case study. 1990 Census data was used as a reference.

### Telephone Surveys

A telephone survey of positional leaders in these potential sites gathered information that was used to identify the most likely sites. Positional leaders included but were not limited to the following categories:

*newspaper editor or publisher*  
*school administrators*  
*chamber staff or board members*  
*development organization members*

*mayor, other elected officials*  
*city administrator*  
*business owners*  
*bankers*

Positional leaders were also asked for additional contacts in order to identify reputational leaders.

The telephone survey was developed around the paradigms of the "New Economy" such as civic leadership, use of technology in new or existing businesses, unusually wide market areas, use of outside resources, evidence of planning for the future, and community organizations that are dealing with change.

Analysis of the telephone survey results narrowed the choices of communities further. Additional information concerning economic information, population, telecommunication infrastructure, use of information resources, local investments, commuting patterns and migration patterns was also summarized.

### Community Profiles

Brief profiles of each final candidate community were developed and exhibits of quantitative data were created when possible. Those community profiles were then offered for review by the Center for the New West staff. CNW staff selected the community for the in-depth field study and community case study profile.

## Phase Two

### **Interviewer Training**

A training/work session was conducted with all interviewers prior to appointments in the community. A basic understanding of field research, the purposes of this study, expectations and roles were discussed. An orientation to the Field Journal and other support materials was also given.

The purpose of the training was to standardize the interviewers approach as much as possible. Format, sequence and note-taking were coordinated among the interviewers. In particular, the use of the Field Journal was extremely important to the next phase of the project.

### **Selection of Informants**

Based on the previous positional and reputational surveys done by telephone, a list of informants was developed. This list was further checked by a local person, such as the chamber staff, to insure that all the necessary informants were named. If the community was involved in a state agency program, the state agency staff was contacted for suggestions.

### **Logistics**

Travel arrangements were made by support staff. All interviewers spent at least one night in the community. Heartland Center for Leadership Development staff arranged for the interview appointments and then provided the interviewers with as much background information about the informants as possible. Whenever possible, interviews were done at the time and place that was most convenient for the informant.

### **Debriefing Session**

Interviewers participated in a debriefing session after all appointments were completed. Field Journals were reviewed on site and any necessary clarification was made by the interviewers.

## Phase Three

### **Analysis of Information**

Field Journals, records of telephone surveys, comments from service providers who assisted with community projects, newspapers, and other information gathered were reviewed and analyzed. In particular, anecdotal evidence concerning the paradigms of the "New Economy" was analyzed as was any quantitative information about the economic activities of the community.

### **Case Study Development**

A case study summary was written that incorporated both qualitative and quantitative information about the community. A draft version of the summary was reviewed by a local contact person in order to check for accuracy.

A format and style appropriate for publication in the news media was used. Special attention also was given to future funding sources for such case study research as an audience.

# **DEVELOPMENT OF A COMMUNITY CASE STUDY**

## **Phase One**

Initial Pool  
Telephone Surveys  
Preliminary Community Profiles

## **Phase Two**

Interviewer Training  
Selection of Informants  
Logistics  
Debriefing Session

## **Phase Three**

Analysis of Information  
Case Study Development

The Community Profile is contained later in this report. Appendices include the Community Selection Telephone Questionnaire, the On-Site Interview Questions, Schedule of Interviews, the names of all informants and background materials for interviewers.

### Analyzing Existing Case Studies

Another use of the check lists might be the analysis of existing case studies. In this case, the check lists would be used to identify information included in the case study and to identify missing dimensions and unanswered questions. Conclusions of an existing case study might also be tested against the check lists and the outline for community baseline data. A special worksheet for analysis has been developed for examining existing case studies in this manner. The worksheet follows as Table 6.

TABLE 6

---

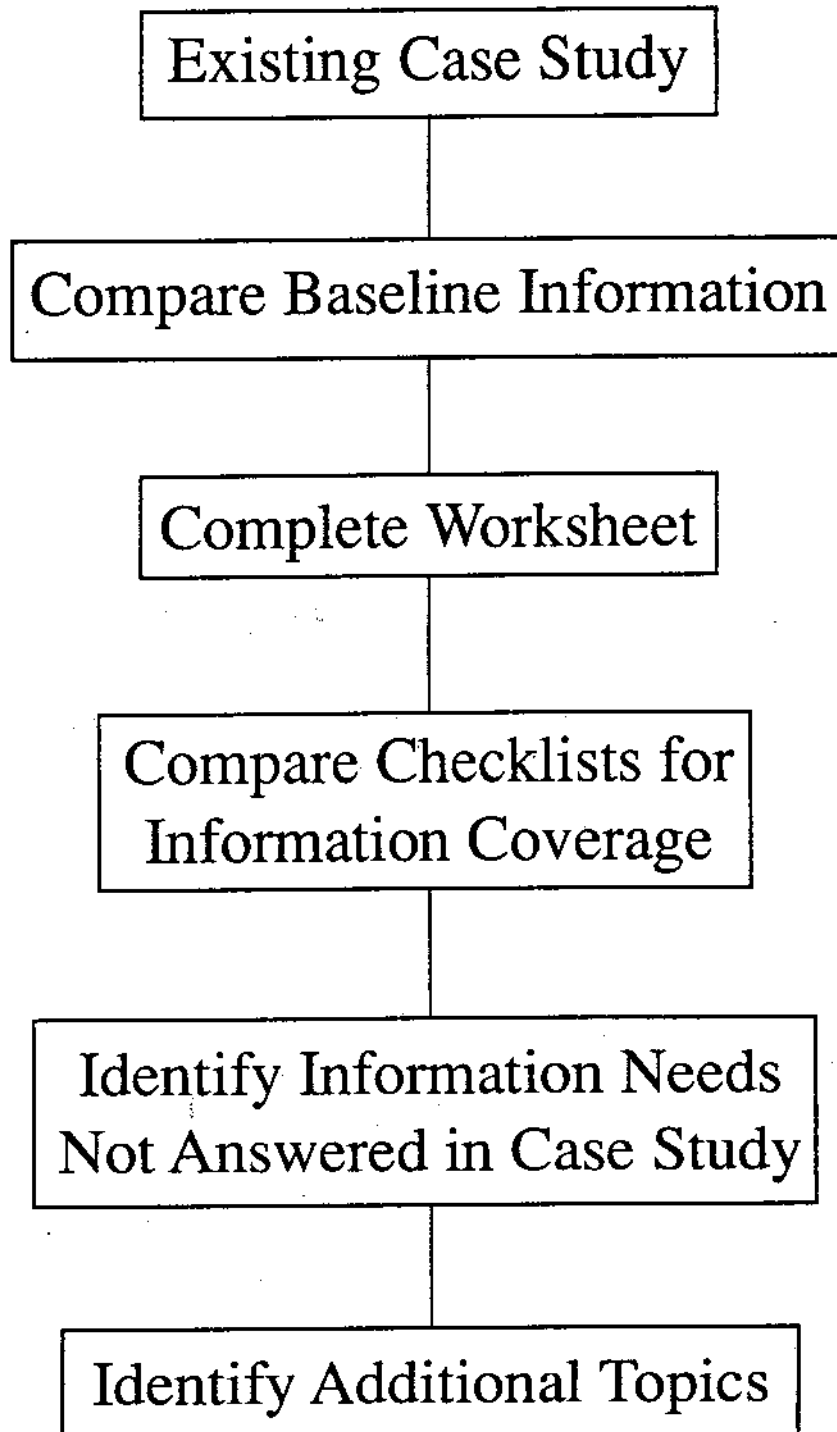
#### Analyzing A Case Study: a Worksheet

This worksheet is intended to help a reviewer summarize an existing case study. First the Community Baseline Information Table (Table 1) should be used as a comparison to identify information gaps.

By answering the questions and completing the worksheet, the reviewer should be able to make an informed judgment about the completeness of the case study in question and identify any issues raised by the information.

1. Is there a clear purpose for the case study? Is there a stated theme or focus for the research?  
Is it part of a larger research project?
  2. How was the community selected for study? Were specific selection criteria used?
  3. What was (were) the method(s) of data collection?
  4. What data sources are listed? Referring to the Community Baseline Information Table (Table 1), are these topics covered?
  5. Does the case study present predictions about the future of the community?
  6. Does the case study offer conclusions or recommendations?
  7. Which dimensions of the topics of Economics, Physical Aspects, Politics and Social Institutions are addressed? (Use Check Lists as a comparison). What additional information is included?
-

# ANALYZING A CASE STUDY



### Potential Survey Development

The check lists might also be used to develop a questionnaire for collecting information about a community either by telephone interview or mail. Such a survey should be considered as a supplement to a site visit and personal interviews or serve as a substitute for such visits if a large number of towns were to be studied with less depth.



Heartland Center for Leadership Development

## 20 clues to rural community survival

1. Evidence of community pride.
2. Emphasis on quality in business and community life.
3. Willingness to invest in the future.
4. Participatory approach to community decision-making.
5. Cooperative community spirit.
6. Realistic appraisal of future opportunities.
7. Awareness of competitive positioning.
8. Knowledge of the physical environment.
9. Active economic development program.
10. Deliberate transition of power to a younger generation of leaders.
11. Acceptance of women in leadership roles.
12. Strong belief in and support for education.
13. Problem-solving approach to providing health care.
14. Strong multi-generational family orientation.
15. Strong presence of traditional institutions that are integral to community life.
16. Attention to sound and well-maintained infrastructure.
17. Careful use of fiscal resources.
18. Sophisticated use of information resources.
19. Willingness to seek help from the outside.
20. Conviction that, in the long run, you have to do it yourself.

(c) 1987 Heartland Center for Leadership Development

**POSITIONAL LEADERS QUESTIONNAIRE**  
**for**  
**Case Study Site Selection**

APPENDIX B1

by the  
Heartland Center for Leadership Development  
for the  
Center for the New West

Name \_\_\_\_\_ Position \_\_\_\_\_

Address \_\_\_\_\_

Town \_\_\_\_\_ State \_\_\_\_\_ ZIP \_\_\_\_\_

Phone (\_\_\_\_) \_\_\_\_\_

Interviewer \_\_\_\_\_

Date \_\_\_\_\_

Tell me about how your town has changed in the past 10 years?

What are the most positive changes that you've observed?

What towns are located close to yours? Are there any cooperative arrangements with those communities--combined Chambers of Commerce, service clubs, economic development coalitions, tourism promotions? Tell me about that.

Who's making plans for the long term future of your community? What are they planning? How do they hope to accomplish that?

What's it like to do business in your town?

Are there any new businesses in town? What are they?



Any existing businesses that have expanded or changed? New technology?

APPENDIX B2

Do you know of any businesses that sell their products outside your community--through UPS or the mails or over the phone? Any individuals making/selling specialized products like that? What are they selling?

Does your community have a business directory? Tell me about it? Who organized it?

Does your community have any economic development programs? Do you have a written plan? Who coordinates/nurtures this plan?

Has your community been involved in the Main Street Program or START or any others? Tell me about that.

Do you know if there is a land use plan? If yes, can you tell me about how it was developed?

Tell me about building/new construction in your area?

Have there been any recent community improvement projects--park beautification, spruce up projects, recreation centers, libraries? Tell me about that.

If your community wanted to get something done, who would they turn to? Tell me about that group/person?

Is there anyone who can stop a project? Tell me about them.

Does your community have touch-tone phones? Do you have your own phone company? Cable company? Do you know if your school system has an interactive satellite system?

touch-tone phone  
cable

phone company  
satellite

Tell me about the library in your town. How often is it open? Can you easily get books from other libraries? Do you have a computer in the library?

Have there been any recent volunteer projects that your town is particularly proud of? Tell me about that.

What challenges does your town face? What solutions?

What keeps people there? What are your town's strengths?

What draws people to your town? Are there any specific attractions that draw people from outside the area? Stores, schools, shopping, entertainment, etc?

What are local people most proud of?

What do you want to see happening in your town ten years from now?

How will that be accomplished?

Anything else you can tell me that would help me to know your town better?

Who else should I talk to.



Heartland Center for Leadership Development

**A Community Case Study  
of Superior, Nebraska**

August 12-13, 1991

**FACT SHEET**

The Heartland Center for Leadership Development, a Nebraska-based research and training organization, has been working with a Denver "think tank," the Center for the New West, to identify successful communities. This activity is part of the Center for the New West's research on "The Great Plains In Transition."

**Goals and Methods**

The goals of the case study are to:

- \* describe the ways that a town might take advantage of new economic opportunities;
- \* explore the importance of leadership to community survival; and
- \* document the transformation of a Great Plains town into a new type of community for the future.

The interviewer teams are made up of staff from both the Heartland Center and the Center for the New West. With assistance from the Superior Chamber of Commerce, nearly 30 community leaders will be interviewed on August 12 and 13. Interviews will focus on the local economy, leadership and planning for the future.

**Final Product**

As a final product, a profile of the community will be developed. This profile will be a feature-style description of Superior highlighting the community's strengths. The profile will also draw lessons from Superior's experience for other communities and their leaders. This profile will be printed in the Heartland Center's publication, *Clues to Rural Community Survival*, which is distributed to small towns throughout North America. The profile will also be made available to the community for local use.

# SITE VISIT INTERVIEW SCHEDULE

APPENDIX D

## Monday - August 12, 1991

8:00 a.m.

Paul Hoefs  
Darwin Fritz  
Dave Autrey  
Steve Wright  
Dick Rempe

Edward D. Jones  
Mid-Am Dairymen  
Farmers State Insurance  
Security National Bank  
Jack & Jill

310 N. Central  
Chamber Office  
411 N. National  
355 N. Central  
207 W. 4th

10:00 a.m.

Addie Meyer  
Bill Blauvelt  
Vernon Johnson  
Marie Marshall  
Jack Stinson

Doll Fashions by Addie  
Superior Express  
Retired - Ambassador  
Librarian  
Ace Hardware Co.

139 E. 4th  
148 E. 3rd  
Chamber Office  
354 N. Commercial  
250 N. Central

2:00 p.m.

Rob Krause  
Mike Oglevie  
Deb Hansen  
Dick Elliott  
Robin Stauffer

Plumbing  
Hospital Administrator  
S.T.A.R.T. Program  
City Utilities Manager  
Ag-Rex, Manager

Chamber Office  
520 E. 10th  
Chamber Office  
135 W. 4th  
Hwy 8 East

4:00 p.m.

Dr. Judy Butler  
Tim Aldrup  
Herce Jean Schultz  
Larry McCord  
Bob Noren

Physician - Westside Health Svcs  
Designer/Wholesale  
Lampost Mall  
Ideal Market  
Retired - Econ. Dev. Council

254 W. 4th  
Chamber Office  
307 N. Central  
150 W. 4th  
429 N. Central

## Tuesday - August 13, 1991

8:00 a.m.

Tom Boeka  
Rex Kirchhoff  
Dr. Mike Moore  
Stan Sheets

Coop. Bus. Assoc.  
S.T.A.R.T. Program  
Animal Hospital  
Valley Bldg. Center

Hardy  
Chamber Office  
Hwy 8 East

10:00 a.m.

Sam Baird  
Roland Wages  
Dee Krotzinger  
Sue Trapp  
Karen Tjaks

Farmers State Bank  
Mayor  
Cottage Type Industries  
City Council Member  
Extension Office

411 N. National  
Chamber Office  
213 E. 3rd  
Chamber Office



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Heartland Center for Leadership Development

## INTERVIEWING TECHNIQUES

### Overview

Interviewing community residents for a case study follows a structure basic to most interview situations: listening, observing and reporting are the main elements of the interview.

The interview should follow these steps:

- \* Introduction
- \* Questioning, Listening, Observing and Recording
- \* Closing
- \* Debriefing

### Introduction

The interviewers should introduce themselves and the case study project to the informant. A fact sheet has been prepared for the team to leave with informants, but the purpose of the case study and general methods should be explained. The final product, the case study, will be made available to the community. It's important that informants understand that the information they offer will be used in a way that will protect their anonymity. If a quote is used, it will be attributed to "a community leader" or some other generic category, not a name or title. Also, the case study will be reviewed by a local contact person to check for accuracy.

## Questioning

The interviews should cover the topics identified on the Check List. It may be useful to refer to the Check List during the interview to make sure that all topics have been covered.

Topics include:

Quality of life/community strengths and weaknesses, local economy/economic transitions, social change/planning for the future, leadership/citizen participation.

However, it is possible that the order of topics may be different in each interview and the questions may also vary. Suggested questions for each topic are included as a resource, but the interviewer team should consider these questions as guidelines and not an inflexible script. Informants may offer comments that can be followed or lead to new questions that will provide valuable information. Interviewers will have to use their own judgment on the sequence and flow of the topics and questions.

Interviewer teams should agree on their role in questioning before meeting the informant. "Taking the lead" means that the team has agreed which one person will be the focus of the questioning while the other interviewer has greater responsibility for recording responses. Both interviewers should record, however, so that both perspectives will be present in the field notes.

It may make sense for the interviewer team to alternate the lead by alternating topics. Paying attention to cues and choosing the appropriate time for topic transition is important if this method is used. Alternating the lead in this way offers such advantages as keeping the team alert, providing a change of pace for everyone and balancing the work load.

## Listening

Listening is the most vital aspect of successful interviewing. After introductions and an initial question to introduce a topic, interviewers must focus on responses in order to understand the content and to ask follow-up questions.

Here are some reminders about developing listening skills.

1. **Make positive contact.** Maintain direct eye contact. Face the speaker and assume an open, relaxed position. Remember to smile and hold a pleasant, alert expression. Offering positive comments about the community also helps to establish rapport.
2. **Offer encouragement to the speaker.** By using "open-ended" questions (how... what... why...), the interviewer can avoid one syllable responses. Ask for examples ("Can you give me an example of..."; "Tell me more about..."; "Please explain...").
3. **Body language is important!** Nodding, smiling, offering sub-vocal comments such as "uh-huh" or one-word comments such as "Really!" will encourage the informant. If possible, lean forward in the chair to demonstrate your interest.
4. **Use paraphrasing to clarify meaning.** This listening skill is very useful to reflect back a meaning and check the interviewers' understanding with the informant. Examples include: "In other words..." or "It sounds like..." or "So you're saying..."



5. **Avoid explaining or theorizing.** Sometimes the greatest challenge for an interviewer is to be silent. Don't rush to fill in silence even if the moment feels somewhat awkward. Many informants will need a moment to consider a question and formulate a reply. Interviewers should be ready to reframe a question or clarify a topic but must concentrate on listening rather than talking.

### Observing

An interviewer's observations are important to the development of a case study profile that truly reflects the community. In this case, observation includes the physical surroundings and people's behaviors as well as the interactions and relationships among community residents. It's appropriate for interviewers to write their observations in their field journals and, perhaps on occasion, comment or frame a question based on their observations. It's better to include an observation in the field journal rather than try to determine its importance.

### Recording

Notebooks will be provided for each interviewer team. As mentioned earlier, both interviewers should record during the interview. Whoever is **not** taking the lead in questioning should take main responsibility for recording. Responses can be recorded with words or phrases plus an occasional notation about the questions or topics.

The field journal format includes a wide margin for summary observations and comments. This format is useful for recording exact quotations or for adding information after the interview when the team debriefs the interview together.

What follows is an example of an interview entry from a field journal of this type.

INFORMANT: N. Nelson

INTERVIEWER: V. Luther

DATE: 2-28-90

## Notes

changes in local economy -  
 many franchise operations fold  
 ex: farm implements, car dealer

## New-Businesses:

flourist 800\*  
 crafts - catalogue sales  
 bakery now has 5 employees  
 auto body repair  
 - regional market  
 - known for quality

Entrepreneurs hang out together

↑  
 - cafe at 3 pm daily  
 - 'young turks'

use DED programs a lot  
 com. college mktg class  
 chamber might sponsor  
 some training

## Comments &amp; Quotes

"By 1985, our CBD  
 was pared down to  
 businesses that could  
 survive through good  
 management."

telemarketing?

evidence of a  
 network?

## Closing

Closure is also an important part of the interview. About 45-60 minutes is scheduled for each encounter, although that time may vary. Remembering that the informant is essentially volunteering his/her time should help keep the time spent at a reasonable amount. Both interviewers and informants will also feel some fatigue in an intensive interview, particularly at the end of a fully scheduled day.

Closing comments should include a thank you and a reminder that the interview will contribute to a community profile as an end product. It's helpful to refer to planned follow-up with the informant such as, "We'll be in touch with the Chamber of Commerce as the case study is developed." Finally, it may be appropriate to remind the informant that an individual name won't be used, but some comments or opinions may be.

Informants may be curious about how long the team will be in town, the schedule of events or who else will be interviewed. All information is open and interviewers should avoid giving the impression of secrecy or being evasive in any way. If social invitations are extended, interviewers can refuse politely by simply saying that the project team schedule has to take priority.

## Debriefing

Interviews will be scheduled to allow 30-60 minute intervals. This time can be used by the interviewer team to discuss the interview. Comments and questions can be added to the field notes at this time.

Since analysis of field notes will be completed by Heartland Center staff, it's important that notes be legible and coherent. The debriefing period is the best time to make sure information has been correctly recorded.

After all interviews have been completed, a general debriefing session will be held with all interviewers.

## CHECK LIST OF CRITICAL TOPICS

Each interviewer should collect information about each of these topics.

- \* Quality of Life
- \* Community Strengths & Weaknesses
- \* Local Economy & Economic Transitions
- \* Social Change
- \* Planning for the Future
- \* Leadership
- \* Citizen Participation

## TOPICS AND SUGGESTED QUESTIONS

### Quality of Life/Community Strengths and Weaknesses

What is it that people like about living here?

How would you describe the quality of life in this community? What are some examples?

What do you see as the strengths of this community? Weaknesses?

What are some of the sources of pride for the people who live in this community?

What's this town known for? What's the image of this town to outsiders?

When people from other towns visit, what do they come for?

## Local Economy and Economic Transition

What kind of changes have you seen in the economy in the last three years?

What connections do you see between the local economy and that of the area?

What are your economic strengths? Weaknesses?

What economic development activities in the community do you know of?

Are there any outside resources used for economic development? (Outside the community?)

Has any building or construction taken place in the last three to five years? Homes, public facilities?

What new businesses do you know about?

What future opportunities do you see for the town?

How do people invest in this community? Money, time, ideas?

## Leadership and Citizen Participation

How would you describe the role the community's leaders have played in its survival?

How do leaders get citizens involved in community decision making?

Where do ideas for new community projects or activities come from?

How do these projects get carried out?

If you wanted to get something done in this town, who would you need behind you?

Who could block changes?

In what ways does your community work with other towns in the area?

How does your community use state government resources such as state agencies and programs?  
County or regional programs?

How do new leaders emerge? Get leadership skills?

## Future Planning and Social Change

How has lifestyle here changed over the last ten years?

Is there a group of community leaders that thinks, talks about or plans for the future?

What kind of things is the community doing to prepare for the future?

If you could do anything you wanted to improve your community, what would you do?

Can you describe this community the way you think it should be in ten years?

Do other people in the community share that vision of the future?

What advice would you give to the leaders of a community like yours to help them survive in hard times?

What do you think your community can teach other small towns?



*Quality of Life  
Community Strengths & Weaknesses*

INFORMANT:

INTERVIEWER:

DATE:

Notes

Comments & Quotes

*Local Economy &  
Economic Transition*

INFORMANT:

INTERVIEWER:

DATE:

Notes

Comments & Quotes

INFORMANT:

*Social Change &  
Future Planning*

INTERVIEWER:

DATE:

Notes

Comments & Quotes

*Leadership &  
Citizen Participation*

INFORMANT:

INTERVIEWER:

DATE:

Notes

Comments & Quotes



## Great Plains Special Studies and Papers

The following reports and working papers are available upon request from the Center for the New West:

- | #                  | <u>Title or Topic</u>  |
|--------------------|--|
| 91-701             | Murphy, Colleen. <i>Survey of Successful Communities</i> . Denver: Center for the New West. January 1991.  |
| 91-702             | Quantic, Cathy. <i>The Great Plains, Canada and Mexico: Policy Issues in Rural Development and the Free Trade Agreement</i> . Denver: Center for the New West. August 1991.  |
| 91-703             | Shepard, John C. <i>Leadership Through Partnerships: The National Trust's Main Street Program as a Community Economic Development Tool</i> . Denver: Center for the New West. November 1991; and in <i>Urban Design and Preservation Quarterly</i> , Spring 1992.                                |
| 91-704             | Heartland Center for Leadership Development. <i>A Case Study of Superior, Nebraska</i> . Denver: Center for the New West. November 1991.   |
| 91-705             | Giannetti, Claudia. <i>The New Role of Librarians and Libraries in Economic Development</i> . Denver: Center for the New West. December 1991; <i>The Burlington Record</i> , January 30, 1992; and <i>The Fort Morgan Times</i> , January 27, 1992.  |
| 91-706 &<br>92-707 | Murphy, Colleen, Louis D. Higgs and John C. Shepard. <i>Survey of the Future of the Plains</i> . Denver: Center for the New West. January 1992.  |
| 92-708             | Murphy, Colleen, John C. Shepard and Louis D. Higgs. <i>A Case Study of Brush, Colorado</i> . Denver: Center for the New West. May 1992.   |
| 92-709             | Drabenstott, Mark and Tim R. Smith. <i>The Changing Great Plains Economy: New Directions for Economic Policy</i> . Federal Reserve Bank of Kansas City. March 20, 1992.  |
| 92-710             | Shepard, John C., Colleen Boggs Murphy, Louis D. Higgs and Philip M. Burgess. <i>A New Vision of the Heartland: The Great Plains in Transition</i> , A report to The Ford Foundation and the Aspen Institute, Denver: Center for the New West, March 1992.                                       |
| 92-711             | Higgs, Louis D. and Claudia Giannetti. <i>The Economic Development Strategies of the Great Plains States</i> . Denver: Center for the New West. June 1992.   |
| 92-712             | Shepard, John C. <i>Redefining "Place": Community and Viability in the New Economy</i> . Denver: Center for the New West. Forthcoming Summer 1992. (Master's Thesis, University of Colorado at Denver).  |
| 92-713             | Shepard, John C., Matthew Muehlbauer, Louis D. Higgs and Colleen Murphy. <i>Measuring Distress: Economic Indicators and the Great Plains</i> . A report to the Economic Development Administration of the U.S. Department of Commerce, Denver: Center for the New West, Forthcoming Summer 1992. |