



# Entrepreneurs as Community Solutions

By Don Macke

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Too often we feel that there are just too many challenges facing our communities. Issues such as affordable housing, childcare, workforce, and broadband can seem unsolvable. Yet across America communities have found solutions and within these solutions are entrepreneurs rooted in business, government, and nonprofits. Energizing entrepreneurs to tackle these issues can turn the issues from insurmountable challenges into opportunities for progress.

## Background and Introduction

In our work with e2, we make the case that entrepreneur-focused community economic development is possibly the **best** strategy for both community-building and growing a diverse and resilient economy. Entrepreneurs create and grow (with our help) destination pubs like Scratchtown Brewing in Ord, Nebraska; unique gift stores like Something Special by Marilyn in Atkinson, Nebraska; and growth ventures like Allo Communications in Imperial, Nebraska. But entrepreneurs rooted in government, nonprofits, and for-profit businesses are also solutions for our communities in addressing healthcare access, housing for young families, and better broadband. In this paper, we explore **Entrepreneurs as Community Solutions** for major challenges and opportunities pressing our communities.

**Entrepreneurs as Community Solutions** is organized into the following sections:

- ✓ Entrepreneurs Defined
- ✓ Why? The Case for Entrepreneurs as Community Solutions
- ✓ What? Community Challenges and Opportunities
- ✓ How? Entrepreneurial Assets
- ✓ How? Stories
- ✓ Conclusion – Embrace Peer Learning

Before we dig deeper into the concept of **Entrepreneurs as Community Solutions**, we broaden the definition and perception of entrepreneurs.

When the word **entrepreneur** is uttered, we know from experience that everyone in the room has their own perception of *who is an entrepreneur*. For some, it is the mom-and-pop main street business. For others, it is Bill Gates who created Microsoft. Still others think only of high-growth technology-based entrepreneurs. When we consider entrepreneurs as community solutions, we need to broaden our definition of who is an entrepreneur.

## Entrepreneurs Defined

Figure 1 provides a quick definition of entrepreneurs important to the context of this paper.

**Figure 1. A Community's Three Kinds of Entrepreneurs**

Businesses	Nonprofits	Government
We all recognize the association between entrepreneurs and for-profit businesses. Businesses can be entrepreneurial and part of community solutions strategies.	America's nonprofit sector is growing, and it can be very innovative and entrepreneurial. Today nonprofits are typically part of the solution mix.	Some may view the government as non-entrepreneurial. But from our country's founding, the government has been innovative and foundational to meeting community needs.

For a moment, put aside any preconceived notions and consider how public and private entrepreneurship can empower innovative and **right-sized** solutions to your community's pressing needs. For a community of 500 in the Rocky Mountain West that has lost its hospital, reinvesting in basic healthcare access is critical to the future of this community. Creating a community health clinic with medical, dental, vision, and rehab services will likely require all three community sectors. Based on real rural stories, consider how this challenging but necessary deal comes together:

- ✓ Private healthcare providers are willing to schedule visiting healthcare professionals but are unwilling to invest in a building and equipment.
- ✓ The city has a vacant building and agrees to modify the building to meet the needs of visiting healthcare professionals but does not have the funds to invest in the required equipment and furniture.
- ✓ A local community foundation is willing to lease-purchase the necessary equipment and furnishings.
- ✓ Another nonprofit in the community offers to market the services and even provide ground transportation to a regional healthcare center for specialty services.

All these players are willing to do their part to make this clinic and its services possible. Without this innovative, entrepreneurial, and collaborative solution this community would go without local healthcare services and face one more step toward decline.

The next section focuses on the case for entrepreneurs as community solutions, and **why** entrepreneurs are a critical part of community solutions.

Thriving and vibrant communities are **can-do** communities. They have the vision and capacity to address their challenges and optimize their opportunities. These are asset-based communities willing to embrace innovative solutions. Engaging entrepreneurial energy from all three sectors of our communities can empower more robust and optimal solutions that, in turn, grow the community where we want to live, work, play, and create.

## Why? The Case for Entrepreneurs as Community Solutions

America has a crisis. The crisis is rooted in accessible and affordable high-quality early childhood education and childcare. If you are a parent of an infant needing care, good luck. First, there may be no infant slots available in your neighborhood let alone the community. Second, if slots are available, you may not be sure of the quality of the caregivers. Is this a safe place, let alone one that embraces science-based early childhood education? Finally, what is the cost, and can you afford it?



The Valley Child Development Center, Red Cloud, Nebraska

In rural America today we have very high workforce participation rates including caregivers, particularly mothers. At the same time, we have a workforce crisis with more jobs than workers. Safe, available, and affordable childcare is foundational to our economies and families. Providing high-quality early childhood education within that safe, available, and affordable environment is also important. Our future generations require childcare that optimizes rapid learning and development when kids are younger. In Colorado, state policy creates and supports

community-centered solutions. In rural Nebraska, the [Nebraska Community Foundation](#) and many of its affiliate communities have found innovative ways to provide childcare that focuses on high-quality early childhood education.

### Nebraska Community Foundation Stories on Early Childhood Education Centers

Here are a few **videos**:

Shickley: <https://vimeo.com/manage/videos/556234751>

Red Cloud: <https://vimeo.com/manage/videos/454398353>

Also Red Cloud: <https://vimeo.com/manage/videos/322831800>

Boone County: <https://vimeo.com/manage/videos/662979682>

Collection of **articles**:

<https://www.nebcommfound.org/news/shickley-big-little-town-good-reasons/>

<https://www.nebcommfound.org/news/lets-talk-about-the-kids/>

<https://www.nebcommfound.org/news/hometown-market-brings-couple-back-home/>

<https://www.nebcommfound.org/news/sidney-community-donor-advised-fund-invests-184000-in-local-childcare-providers/>

<https://www.nebcommfound.org/news/more-childcare-exist-because-of-abundance-thinking/>

<https://www.nebcommfound.org/news/increased-childcare-options-a-need-for-local-families-and-businesses/>  
<https://www.nebcommfound.org/news/grant-boosts-childcare-options-in-oneill/>  
<https://www.nebcommfound.org/news/shickley-serves-as-wealth-transfer-success-story/>  
<https://www.nebcommfound.org/news/cultivating-red-clouds-philanthropic-spirit/>  
<https://www.nebcommfound.org/news/boone-county-invests-in-its-future/>  
<https://www.nebcommfound.org/news/jeff-yost-early-childhood-development-programs-challenging->

We share this focus on childcare to illustrate the complexity of addressing community challenges like housing, healthcare, arts, childcare, and the list can go on and on. Energizing entrepreneurial talent including for-profit businesses, nonprofit organizations, governmental agencies (including education and healthcare), and outside resource partners is proving to be the way we can address these huge community issues as well as mobilize quickly and effectively to capture development opportunities.

### **Entrepreneurial behavior can empower community solutions.**

The next stop focuses on the question of **what** our community's challenges and opportunities are.

Whether it is my childhood home of Mullen, Nebraska, with a 2020 population of just 472 residents, or my current home of Lincoln, Nebraska, with a 2020 population of nearly 300,000 residents, both communities must provide solutions to a wide range of resident needs and wants from housing to vibrant main streets to robust broadband. Too often we expect just one part of our community to provide solutions, whether it be a private business, a nonprofit, or government. In reality, we need innovative and entrepreneurial multi-party solutions.

## What? Community Challenges and Opportunities

Figure 2 provides a listing of the most common community needs and wants that can be addressed through innovative and entrepreneurial multi-party solutions.

**Figure 2. Community Challenges and Opportunities Summarized**

<b>Housing</b>	<b>Childcare</b>	<b>Essentials</b>
The right housing and affordability is a building issue for most communities. Providing appropriate and right-priced housing is foundational to community prosperity.	Younger families may spend as much on childcare services as on housing. Access to high-quality and affordable early childhood education and care is very important to families with children.	Whether in old, urban neighborhoods, or rural communities, access to essentials like a grocery store, hardware store, and other essentials are core to a high quality of life.
<b>Amenities</b>	<b>Arts and Humanities</b>	<b>Recreation</b>
A local gas station or grocery is essential. But most communities also desire amenities like a great café, coffee shop, or gallery, enhancing community quality of life.	Access to the arts and humanities can stimulate creativity, build community, and contribute to the quality of life. This part of the community often requires all three sectors entrepreneurially engaged.	Recreational amenities from walkable paths to biking trails to local YMCAs are foundational to health and wellbeing and key to a more complete quality of life. Recreation for all requires innovation.
<b>Broadband</b>	<b>Main Streets</b>	<b>Healthcare</b>
Like clean water, access to high-speed, reliable, and affordable broadband and cellular services is foundational for any community and its residents.	For many communities, our downtowns or main streets are our living rooms. Entrepreneurs from all three sectors can optimize main street renewal.	Access to basic healthcare services is essential for any community. In under-served healthcare markets, entrepreneurial solutions are often necessary to make things work.
<b>Community Centers</b>	<b>Public Lands</b>	<b>Ecosystem Resources</b>
We need places to gather, meet, celebrate, and mourn. Community gathering places, whether a coffee shop or civic center, are key assets for any community.	In the West especially, public lands are often a big part of a region's assets. Management and use of public lands require innovation and all sectors involved.	Building relevant entrepreneurial ecosystems often require innovative and collaborative game plans to energize area entrepreneurs.

The entrepreneurial assets and attributes embedded in successful entrepreneurial behavior and culture provide the **how** of addressing challenges and opportunities in a community.

In today's environment, easy and simple solutions to our needs and wants are rare. Chances are good if our community is facing challenges like housing or childcare, our current systems are not fully up to the challenge. Overcoming the fear that we cannot solve these issues like providing universal high-speed and quality broadband is foundational to successful communities. Entrepreneurs are high performers with respect to problem-solving. It is one of their core traits.

## How? Entrepreneurial Assets

Figure 3 provides an overview of the primary assets associated with a capable entrepreneurial mindset and behavior. There are more entrepreneurial attributes, but we believe these six are the most powerful within the content of community solutions.

**Figure 3. An Entrepreneur's Assets**

<b>Visioning What is Possible</b> We are hard-pressed to create what we cannot envision. The ability to think of creative solutions is core to successful entrepreneurship and community problem-solving.	<b>Networking</b> We may not have the money, expertise, or connections, but when we energize our networks, we can find the right resource at the right time and at the right cost.
<b>Team Building</b> Solving big problems requires team efforts. Our ability to engage our community and outside partners is central to mobilizing the right stuff that builds houses and expands broadband.	<b>Resource Mobilizing</b> Major challenges and opportunities require resources in the form of investment, skill players (think builders with housing), and other resources. Resource mobilization is why successful entrepreneurs succeed.
<b>Packaging</b> Making a great cake requires all the right ingredients, but if the community lacks a capable baker, that great cake will never be made. A successful community needs people (packagers) who can put the entire deal together.	<b>Innovating</b> Times change and old solutions may no longer work. In the past we expected the local builder to meet all our housing needs. Today, we must innovate rooted in other communities' solutions to craft strategies that work for our community.

The next section also addresses **how** entrepreneurs can address community challenges through the lens of real-life stories from rural communities and regions.

We can discuss community solutions in abstract and academic ways that are helpful. But for most rural communities learning from other communities which are curating real solutions can motivate, empower, and inform customized community solutions that make sense and will work. Gathering and sharing stories, including actual visits to other communities, can make the difference between frustration and progress.

## How? Stories

**Solution stories** can be powerful. Talking with **solution communities** can be even better. Visiting solutions communities that match the issues your community is working on can be transformative. All of these stories involve entrepreneurial solutions and often public, nonprofit, and private sector collaborative initiatives.



Rehabbed home in Stuart, Nebraska

**Affordable and Appropriate Housing Solutions.** In the 1980s the rural community of Stuart, Nebraska, (2020 population of 569) was concerned that population loss would force it to close its local K-12 public school. The community decided to invest in rehabbing existing and building new housing to become a family-friendly community. More than 30 years later Stuart is still building and rehabbing housing and it still has its school system.

Hastings (2020 population of 25,152), located in south-central Nebraska, is a regional hub city. It has committed to downtown revitalization involving the repurposing of its 1900s building stock including a range from affordable to high-end housing on the upper floors of downtown buildings. Hastings has energized developers, investors, the city, the downtown association, and the building trades to make this transformation possible. Hastings is also supporting in-fill and new mixed-use housing subdivisions.



Downtown Hastings, Nebraska, today



Proposed Hotel Garber, Red Cloud, Nebraska

**Downtown Renewal Solutions.** American main streets or downtowns have been and continue to be hubs in our communities. While the role of downtowns has changed over the last 50 years, they continue to represent important assets for both rural and urban communities. Downtown renewal is often a priority development area for many rural communities. Red Cloud, Nebraska, (2020 population of 859) is home to the Willa Cather Foundation and Center. This rural community is capitalizing on its heritage tourism assets to also

revitalize its historic downtown. A unique and vacant downtown building is being used to create the boutique Hotel Garber. Local government, private investors, the Cather Foundation, others in the community, and outside Cather supporters are making this critical new downtown asset a reality.



Hanna Grimes Marketplace, Keene, New Hampshire

In historic Keene, New Hampshire, (2020 population of 23,047 and founded in 1753) downtown vibrancy is a priority. The Hanna Grimes Marketplace and entrepreneurship center is an activity center and anchor in Keene's downtown. The annual Radically Rural Conference hosted by Hanna Grimes and Keene always focuses on innovative downtown renewal solutions. *To learn more about innovative and entrepreneurial solutions to downtown revitalization check out [Main Street America](#).*

**Early Childhood Education Centers Solutions.** American families are struggling. Most middle-class families have seen no real income growth since the 1970s. To make ends meet every adult is working to sustain a life and lifestyle. For families with young children, childcare is a huge cost and issue. Finding high-quality early childhood education childcare is even a greater challenge. Communities across America are crafting innovative public and private solutions. Based on research we did during the Bakken Oil Boom in North Dakota we curated research and a [white paper](#) focusing on the best state childcare policies. Colorado in our opinion is a leader and its [Office of Early Childhood](#) is core to this community-centered approach to ensuring affordable and high-quality childcare.

The [Nebraska Community Foundation](#) and its rural community-affiliated funds are leaders in creating solutions to community-centered early childhood care. A growing list of communities in rural Nebraska are innovating and creating childcare solutions rooted in a commitment to child development. The following is a piece from Jeff Yost, CEO, and President of the Nebraska Community Foundation, focusing on this topic.

#### **Jeff Yost: The Momentum Behind a Movement<sup>1</sup>**

During one of the most unpredictable years in recent history, Greater Nebraskans refused to give up. We rolled up our sleeves, wiped our brows and continued our march toward a brighter tomorrow in 2020, and we're carrying our momentum into 2021.

Our upward trajectory is apparent in five communities where volunteers recently raised a combined \$3.75 million to pursue hometown dreams. By the end of 2020, Nebraska Community Foundation affiliated funds in Howells, Columbus, Imperial, Keith County, and Stuart had each met a \$500,000 fundraising goal. Their success means each will receive a \$250,000 match for a grand total of \$750,000. That money goes straight into their affiliated fund's unrestricted community endowment – a savings account that grows forever and provides perpetual annual payout which offers volunteers opportunities to award locally-controlled grants for community betterment.

Thirteen communities took part in this effort – we call it Building Community Capacity – between 2012 and 2020, including McCook, Nebraska City, Norfolk, Shickley, Brown County, Pender-Thurston, Plattsmouth, Valley County, Columbus, Stuart, Imperial, Howells, and Keith County. Campaigns began by investigating the roots of their community assets. Inspired by an inclusive rural development philosophy, volunteers dove deep into what makes their hometowns unique. These endowments were built by local volunteers inviting friends and neighbors to build community together.

This was about more than money. What people might see from outside – financial capital, success, growth – is only the tip of the iceberg. To reach that point, volunteers build relationships, strategize, and plan their next steps behind the scenes. These community leaders turned the spotlight on improving community confidence

and advancing a culture where everyone's input matters – essential work that is hard to quantify. To achieve lasting, transformational change, leaders built genuine relationships with their neighbors and championed giving by everyone in the community, whether through dollars, talent, time, or creativity.

Shickley, population 341, now has an unrestricted community endowment of \$2.3 million, and 12 donors are planning to benefit Shickley through their estate plan. "It was very important to our community," said Shickley's Richard Walter. "It gave us a big boost. Of course, the \$750,000 infusion of cash to our unrestricted endowment was important, but the most important outcome was the interaction with the other communities. The exchange of ideas, and the creation of new friendships were transformational." We anticipated community leaders would gain a new understanding of opportunities in their hometowns. Volunteers exceeded expectations. All told, these communities raised upwards of \$9 million for their unrestricted endowments. They are among the 80 NCF affiliated funds with an unrestricted endowment – 46 of which have an annual payout of more than \$10,000. Altogether, these unrestricted endowments total more than \$60 million – a substantial increase from \$12 million in 2012. We are seeing a tremendous increase in newcomers, stayers, and returners, thanks in part to efforts like Building Community Capacity. Unrestricted community endowments allow volunteers to go the extra mile and magnetize their hometowns through bolstering projects and programs that would have otherwise been out of reach. When people see the transformational capacity of these funds, they are drawn to become part of successful communities.

"We know we can finally really Turn Up the Dream Switch," said Leanne Maxwell, chair of the Brown County Community Foundation Fund, a Round 2 participant. "Instead of only being able to consider the traditional grants, we can now really believe in much bigger grant possibilities. We know we can collaborate with other individuals and organizations to work toward and complete projects that were once unattainable. For instance, a new childcare center hopefully will someday be a reality, not just a dream." Brown County now has an unrestricted endowment of \$1.6 million.

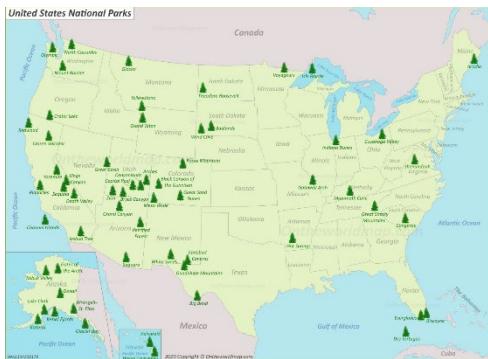
Grants from these unrestricted endowments are creating change that may otherwise not occur. Some examples include affordable housing development in Keith County, early childhood development in Boone County, non-traditional scholarships in Nebraska City, K-12 curriculum enhancement in Shickley, entrepreneurship and small business development in Valley County, youth engagement in Norfolk, and leadership development in Brown County.

Building Community Capacity is just one indicator of the momentum building. NCF affiliated funds now benefit 272 hometowns in 83 Nebraska counties. Twenty NCF affiliated funds received gifts of at least \$100,000 between July and December. In the past 10 years, assets in the NCF network have tripled, and now total \$211 million. At least \$30 million is being reinvested in Nebraska hometowns every year.

For years Nebraska Community Foundation's network of volunteers gathered in community centers and assembly rooms, putting their heads together to foster a mindset of abundance. They identified collective strengths and then drafted blueprints to harness them. Their passion for their hometowns inspired. Soon, their friends, family, and neighbors joined the movement, too. When regular people realize they can affect change in their communities, anything is possible. The future is bright, and we're going to go further, faster, together.

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<sup>1</sup>Yost, Jeff. *The Momentum Behind a Movement*. [www.nebcommfound.org](http://www.nebcommfound.org). February 3, 2021.



Map of U.S. National Parks

**Public Lands Solutions.** Public lands are a big part of the American landscape. Public lands are particularly important in the American West. For example, in Idaho public lands account for a remarkable 62% of all lands.<sup>2</sup> Public lands are managed by local, state, and federal government agencies. Federal lands are managed by the National Park Service, Forest Service (U.S. Department of Agriculture), the Bureau of Land Management, and other federal agencies. Central to much of rural migration is the attraction to live close to public lands and the recreational and aesthetic amenities offered by these landscapes.

Preserving and using public lands is challenging. Views are polarized on how public lands should be managed. Despite these conflicts, there are examples of public land solutions rooted in innovative and collaborative solutions. U.S. Senator Mike Crapo of Idaho has mediated public land solutions ensuring the preservation, environmental quality, and public access and use. Northeastern Arizona is home to another story of entrepreneurial collaboration involving forest service lands and timber resources. Following devastating mega forest fires, this part of Arizona worked to revitalize both the forest and the timber industry. A value chain of timber-related activities evolved, from wood-waste electricity generation to high-value laminated beam manufacturing, pellets for stoves, bedding for horses, mulch, and allied activities like logging, sawmills, and trucking.



Forest vista near Show Low, Arizona

**Arts and Humanities Solutions.** In Ord, Nebraska, fostering the arts and humanities is a community-building process as well as an amazing amenity for residents within a multi-county rural region. Like most small towns, Ord had a traditional movie theater on the courthouse square. It closed and eventually was re-created into [The Golden Husk](#) operated as a community meeting place, arts, and humanities venue, and point of community pride. The Golden Husk is an innovative solution taking a failure and turning it into a diverse asset. The Golden Husk is active, scheduling both area and national entertainment. It partners with area artists, musicians, and schools to provide enrichment and educational opportunities. *Check out the [Ord e-Learning Resource](#) to learn more about Ord and its 50-year transition from crisis and decline to progress and prosperity.*



<sup>2</sup> Congressional Research Service. *Federal Land Ownership: Overview and Data*. Feb. 21. 2020.

**Broadband Solutions.** During the Great Depression, the Roosevelt Administration enacted the ***Rural Electrification Act of 1936***. While access to electricity was common by the 1930s in most cities and towns in the United States, rural America was not served by investor-owned companies. This act of Congress created a public/private partnership where rural areas, villages, and towns could band together to create legal cooperatives and access technical and financial support from the U.S. Rural Electrification Administration. The [Ozarks Electric Cooperative](#) was created in 1938 bringing power to this very rural and impoverished region. In 2016 the Ozarks Electric Cooperative created and guaranteed a subsidiary called [OzarksGo](#) to provide broadband services. The following media release announced the new program.

### OzarksGo – An Entrepreneurial Broadband Solution<sup>3</sup>

Fayetteville, Ark. – Ozarks Electric Cooperative today announced the creation of OzarksGo, LLC, a 100% owned telecommunications subsidiary offering high-speed Internet, television, and telephone services to subscribers in northwest Arkansas and northeast Oklahoma.

OzarksGo will offer subscribers access to all-fiber gigabit Internet, reaching speeds of up to one gigabit per second download and upload, with no data limits or restrictions. Premium television and telephone services will be available as well. Randy Klindt has been named general manager of OzarksGo, and will oversee operations, including construction and ongoing management of the business. “The formation of this subsidiary is incredibly exciting for all of us,” said Mitchell Johnson, president/CEO of Ozarks Electric. “I believe we are in a unique position to continue fulfilling our purpose, offering members access to tools, like high-speed Internet, that can truly empower them to improve the quality of their lives.” Johnson continued, “In addition, I am thrilled that Randy will be leading this project. His unprecedented success in the telecommunications field speaks for itself.”

Over his 20-year career, Klindt has amassed a great wealth of knowledge and experience in the telecommunications industry, most recently serving as general manager of Co-Mo Connect, a subsidiary of Co-Mo Electric Cooperative, in Tipton, Missouri. Under Klindt’s leadership, Co-Mo Connect launched the first gigabit residential service in rural America in 2014 and has become the standard of rural fiber optic builds. It was also the nation’s first privately funded cooperative telecommunications initiative to serve every one of its members, with more than 14,000 current subscribers. “For far too long, this area has been plagued with either a lack of true broadband availability or lack of reliable and affordable service. This project will bring real broadband to some area residents and businesses for the first time, as well as introduce real competition in speed, reliability, and price to a region held captive by large national carriers,” said Klindt.

Klindt continued, “I am extremely excited for this opportunity. Not only will the Internet we provide be the fastest available anywhere in the world, it will be delivered with the Ozarks Electric tradition of reliability, affordability, and excellent service.” Members are encouraged to visit OzarksGo’s website at [www.ozarksgo.net](http://www.ozarksgo.net) for further updates. More details will be announced at a later date.

Ozarks Electric, incorporated in 1938, is a member-owned electric cooperative, serving more than 70,000 meters across nine counties in Northwest Arkansas and Northeast Oklahoma. For more information about Ozarks Electric, visit the cooperative’s website at [www.ozarksecc.com](http://www.ozarksecc.com).

<sup>3</sup> Ozarks Electric Cooperative. *Press Release*. April 19, 2016.

Other innovative and entrepreneurial solutions provide broadband in underserved communities. Validated solutions include [Allo Communications](#), [Consolidated Telephone Company](#), and a large number of municipal broadband initiatives. Allo and Consolidated are unique in that they are for-profit

telephony service providers operating in very challenging low-density rural markets. They demonstrate that for-profit companies can provide affordable and cutting-edge speed and quality, undermining the general perceptions that low-density and challenging landscapes cannot be served without massive government subsidies.

**Parks and Recreation Solutions.** Access to parks and recreational services are foundational to the quality of life and attractiveness of communities. Federal, state, and local governments including cities, counties, and special districts (e.g., Natural Resource Districts in Nebraska) historically are the developers of these resources on behalf of their residents and taxpayers. Increasingly, public-private-governmental partnerships are building and operating indoor swimming pools used for physical therapy, YMCAs and programs, walkable communities, and walking/biking trails.



YMCA, McCook, Nebraska



Nebraska's Cowboy Trail

Federal transportation policy provides enhancement funding that can be used to build recreational trails for hiking and biking. These funds require a local match and have empowered the dramatic development of thousands of miles of recreational trails. During the 1990s the State of Nebraska worked with the Chicago and North Western Railroad, adjacent landowners, and area communities to convert this rail bed into one of America's

longest recreational trails running 321 miles from Norfolk in the east to Chadron in the west, creating a unique destination.

**Community Facilities Solutions.** In rural America community facilities where residents can gather for a meeting, conference, wedding reception, or hold a prom dance are so important to quality of life. Communities, particularly in rural America, are very creative in building and supporting these kinds of community facilities. Three examples illustrate three solutions to providing community facilities.



Holthus Convention Center, York, Nebraska

The first solution is York, (2020 population of 7,825) Nebraska's **Holthus Convention Center**. This is a traditional rural community solution involving philanthropic and municipal engagement. Named for a prominent and charitable local banking family, this facility is cutting edge and widely used for both large and small events. It is also home to higher education offerings, professional training, and other area needs. City and endowment support ensures maintenance.

The second solution is purely private – the **Bieroc Café and Sehnert's Bakery** in McCook, Nebraska. A great local eatery is a huge asset in any community. The Bieroc Café celebrates ancestry on the bricks in downtown McCook. This is a gathering space and entertainment venue. For those traveling to the region, it is a destination and a center of activities during major community events.



Bieroc Café, McCook, Nebraska



Paul Younes, Kearney,  
Nebraska

Our final community facilities solution is the **Younes** complex in Kearney, Nebraska. Younes Hospitality operates 15 hotels in Nebraska including the Younes Conference Center in Kearney. Paul was born in Haifa, Israel, and came to the United States in 1972. He attended the University of Nebraska at Kearney where he earned a Bachelor of Science in business administration degree. While attending the university he started at the very bottom of the hospitality industry, working in restaurant kitchens. In time he thrived in the hospitality industry, creating Younes Hospitality, Inc. The Younes complex – complete with hotels, food service, and conference facilities – is one of Nebraska's primary convention and conference centers, drawing visitors from a large multi-state region to Kearney. These developments were primarily private sector driven with municipal support through tax increment financing. Central to Kearney's success in both growing a vibrant community life and a more diversified economy has been its support of entrepreneurs like Younes and then their giveback to the community.

The conclusion of this paper focuses on embracing peer engagement and learning as a pathway to solving community challenges.

Over the past 40-plus years, our team at e2 has had the opportunity to travel extensively throughout North America. These travels have exposed us to remarkable innovation on the part of communities, from the most rural to the largest. Over these years we have come to believe that somewhere there are relevant strategies, tactics, and solutions that can inspire, empower, and inform solutions for other communities. Our greatest regret is that too many communities, particularly rural communities, work in isolation because these solution communities and their stories are not available or accessed.

## Conclusion – Embrace Peer Learning

America is polarized with too much mudslinging. We are often divided nationally and at the state level with respect to the size and role of governments, the role, and missions of nonprofits, and even the merits of for-profit businesses. The local or community level typically experiences less gridlock and provides ample evidence of workable solutions. This is happening in my current hometown of Lincoln, Nebraska, (2020 population of 291,082) and my high school hometown of Ogallala, Nebraska, (2020 population of 4,527).



Assurity Life Insurance Company Corporate Headquarters along Antelope Creek, Lincoln, Nebraska

Communities across America are solving problems and exploiting opportunities. Often these solutions include innovative and entrepreneurial solutions requiring for-profit, nonprofit, and governmental partners. In my current hometown of Lincoln, Nebraska, the City of Lincoln partnered with the University of Nebraska to create a linear green space anchored by Antelope Creek (once buried). This development reduced the 500-year flood plain, creating space for corporate and university development on the western bank and housing rehab and new housing development on the eastern bordering lands. Federal, state, city, private, and nonprofit players, and funds collaborated to make this possible.

When we embrace peer learning we can discover how other communities create solutions and optimize opportunities through these innovative and entrepreneurial partnerships.

## How e2 Can Help



**e2 Entrepreneurial Ecosystems** helps communities increase prosperity through entrepreneur-focused economic development and ecosystem building. Led by [Don Macke](#), e2 has a national team of practitioners who bring research, coaching, incubation, market intelligence, and other expertise to this work.

## What We Do

- ✓ **Analytics.** e2 helps communities and regions understand their entrepreneurial potential through research and data. [Explore](#) some of our research tools and reports.
- ✓ **e2 University (e2U)** is our online platform for sharing more than 1,000 guides, papers, stories, tools, and resources with communities wanting a deep dive into eEcosystem building. [Learn](#) more about e2U resources.
- ✓ **Mentoring.** We mentor and coach practitioners seeking to pursue entrepreneur-led development. We provide advice and support for building eEcosystem strategies that work and invite practitioners to join our [National e2 Practitioners Network](#).
- ✓ **Fostering the eMovement.** We support the national entrepreneurship movement along with our partners including the **Federal Reserve Bank of Kansas City**, **SourceLink**, **Edward Lowe Foundation**, **Kauffman Foundation**, and **NetWork Kansas**. We are a founding member of **Start Us Up: America's New Business Plan**, a coalition dedicated to strengthening entrepreneurship across America. Together, we continue to advance the foundational ideas of building entrepreneurial ecosystems and entrepreneurship-led economic development.

## Contact Us

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