

Expert shares recipes for small-town revitalization

TIM KELLER — For the Comet | Posted: Wednesday, March 11, 2015 5:00 pm

RATON – Michigan sociologist Dr. David J. Ivan has devoted his career to studying small communities in decline, with an emphasis on determining the differences between those that rebound and those that don't. He's visited more than 300 such communities in 20 U.S. states over the past 15 years. Monday night, he came to Raton.

In an 80-minute presentation at Raton Convention Center called "Can Small Towns Be Cool?" Ivan gave his recipes for success to a rapt crowd of about 100 community activists and leaders. Sprinkled among them were a few others from surrounding communities including Cimarron and Trinidad. Among the themes that emerged throughout the evening, Ivan emphasized the importance of focusing on the future, not trying to return to "the golden days of the past," because those days aren't coming back.

Successful communities don't focus on what they've lost, but on what they have. "Create a picture of what you want to be," Ivan said. "People tend to move in the direction of the conversations they hear. If all they hear is people tearing down, they'll think that way. But if they hear talk of building, growth, and creative solutions, they'll move that way."

He acknowledged that every small community suffers its CAVE people—Citizens Against Virtually Everything—that drag everything down. Nothing works until the community navigates around, or ignores, the naysayers.

Revitalization requires a commitment to entrepreneurial development, which requires a town that promotes change and growth. "We have to celebrate everyone's successes," Ivan said. "We have to not pull people down, but help prop them up. Build on local talents and strong social networks."

Throughout the presentation, Ivan shared photos and success stories from many of the small communities he's watched rebound. Ord, Nebraska, was a ranching town of 1200 mostly aging people. Its youth had left for the cities in droves. Ord established a community foundation, that asked citizens to bequeath small percentages from their estates, among various fundraising strategies. Used for projects to grow Ord by assisting and attracting people, the seed fund currently has close to \$12 million. Its population has grown to 2,000.



Dr. David J. Ivan offered answers to the query "Can Small Towns Be Cool?" during a presentation of the same name he gave at the Raton Convention Center Monday (March 9).

Other towns have seen success with active internship programs, student loan forgiveness programs for youth who stay, homebuyers' assistance programs, and myriad other programs that attract and engage youth.

Ivan showed a lively promotional video for Dubuque, Iowa, that gave a strong sense of youth and diversity. "Dubuque is not really like that," Ivan said. "In the 1980s, Dubuque led the Midwest in unemployment but it's successfully building toward its vision of the future. And it's working."

Dynamic schools are critical. Ivan cited one school superintendent that attends all of the region's economic development conferences. Giving kids rich experiences is a powerful factor in getting young people to come back to start their own careers and families. One community asked its third graders what they wanted. They wanted a climbing wall. The town built a climbing wall. Years later, the kids said that made a profound impact on their commitment to their town.

Instead of posting "No Skateboarding" signs, build kids a skatepark. One town put its young people on billboards and banners promoting the town, giving the kids a sense of belonging. "Give youth positive memories and they'll be more likely to return," Ivan said. "Create dynamic, unforgettable programs. The old narrative is 'There's nothing here for you.' The new narrative is 'We need and want you to come home and raise your own family here. Come help us re-grow our town.'"

Ivan encouraged capitalizing on a community's uniqueness. He contrasted photos that resembled Raton's own Clayton Highway—sometimes called Motel Row or Fast Food Alley, that looks like thousands of other such strips in America—with revitalized communities' downtown districts that resembled Raton's own Downtown Historic District.

He stressed authenticity. "Be true to your community, not contrived. Build on your heritage. Start small to build confidence, then build upon your successes.

"Online resources are critical," Ivan said. "Many people do their researches after businesses are closed. They may be planning a vacation or business trip, or even a move to the area. A good website will make the difference in which town they visit or do business with.

"In communities that have changed, it hasn't usually been the city government that's been driving the bus, it's been the people of the communities and their organizations. The real change happens through volunteers."

City government does play a role, though. In this case, it was the City of Raton that sponsored Dr. Ivan's visit and presentation, with co-sponsors Colfax County, MCMC, and Raton's Holiday Inn Express. Raton City Manager Scott Berry introduced Dr. Ivan, saying, "We'd like to make tonight's event be our first annual economic summit. We plan to do this every year."

In conversations throughout the big room following the presentation, there was a palpable sense that the night might signal a turning point, a historic moment in a community's history, a turning toward the

future.