

Ten Ways to Improve Small Towns

By Jack Schultz

CEO, Agracel, Inc., and Founder, Boomtown Institute

It's now been five years since I published *Boomtown USA* and got the opportunity to travel around this great country of ours sharing my message of great things going on in towns all over the U.S.A. During that time, I've had the chance to tour over 400 towns in 44 states and have seen some really incredible sights. With this being my last year of doing talks, I wanted to share with you those things that I would do in every town if I had a magic wand to be able to do so.

Top Ten Things I'd Do in Every Town

Community Foundation – A Community Foundation allows a community—whether it is a single town, county, or even a region—to marshal small donations and funds



into the efficiency of a large foundation, altering the fabric of that community for the long term. Indiana has been the leader in setting these up in every one of the state's counties, because of the leadership of the Lilly Foundation.

Brain Bank – Many of our small towns have seen a tremendous brain drain of their best and brightest. However, that drain could be converted into a tremendous asset, and several towns have started to cultivate those ex-residents into ambassadors for their communities. North Dakota is doing it in a statewide initiative.

Entrepreneurial Education – The new paradigm in economic development is to cultivate your own entrepreneurs. Just as the best high school sports teams start to develop their talent in grade school, those towns that want to be part of the new economy are developing entrepreneurial educational initiatives in their high schools and grade schools. Generation E Institute in Battle Creek, Michigan, is the best that I've seen.

Young Professional Organizations – Gen X and Gen Y need to be nurtured. They are the leaders of the future, and those leadership skills need to be developed now. The best I've seen are YPIowa in Iowa and YBNext in my hometown of Effingham, Illinois.

Arts – Quality-of-life issues are going to be more important in the decision of where to live and develop a career. Baby boomers went to where the jobs were. Gen X and Y young people are more focused upon quality-of-life for that decision. All arts are becoming more important for them in



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that decision. Make it easy for them to choose your town by emphasizing your art assets. Paducah, Kentucky, has done it best.

Tourism – Find the inexpensive ways to promote visits to your town. Use videos on your cable system, motel keys with information, and very inexpensive e-zines to let people know why they should come, visit, and stay.

Downtowns – They are going through resurgence with the upstairs being fixed up into apartments and condos. Having people living in the downtown area encourages more restaurants, bars, coffee shops, and so on. That in turn encourages more to live downtown, and the cycle continues upward. Oxford, Mississippi, is the best I've seen.

Mentoring – Two models stick out for me. One that I saw in Carroll, Iowa, has developed a mentoring program for college students, pairing them up with local jobs and CEOs during the summer. The other is aimed toward at-risk grade schoolers, putting local volunteers in one-on-one mentoring. We're up to 130 mentors in Effingham.

Downtown Signs – You can't have enough signs that show visitors how to get to your downtown. If they can't find it, how are they going to shop there? Jackson, Michigan, has the best I've seen. From every direction, signs route visitors to the downtown area.

Angel Investor Network – Local banks can help to provide most of the start-up funds for new businesses, but towns should develop an angel investor network that can provide the equity to help get the new entrepreneurs into operation. ★

Jack Schultz is the founder and CEO of Agracel, Inc., a firm that specializes in industrial development in small towns. His work led him to wonder about the roots of small-town health and prosperity. That curiosity, coupled with some research, resulted in 2004 in a popular book, Boomtown USA: The 7½ Keys to Big Success in Small Towns. In it, Schultz attempts to answer a perennial question: What separates the thriving towns from the struggling ones? Jack established Boomtown Institute to better share his continuous research and sought-after knowledge. The Institute's mission is "To provoke innovative thinking, encourage leadership and foster investment in communities across the U.S.A." Jack says, "Vision is the difference between a ghost town and a Boomtown!" Jack inspires communities to construct their own vision deliberately, not waiting on the inevitable to happen.



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