

The Rural Shrink-Smart Project in Iowa

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NSF Smart & Connected Communities Grants, #1736718 & #1952007

Overcoming the Rural Data Deficit to Improve Quality of Life and Community Services in Smart & Connected Small Communities

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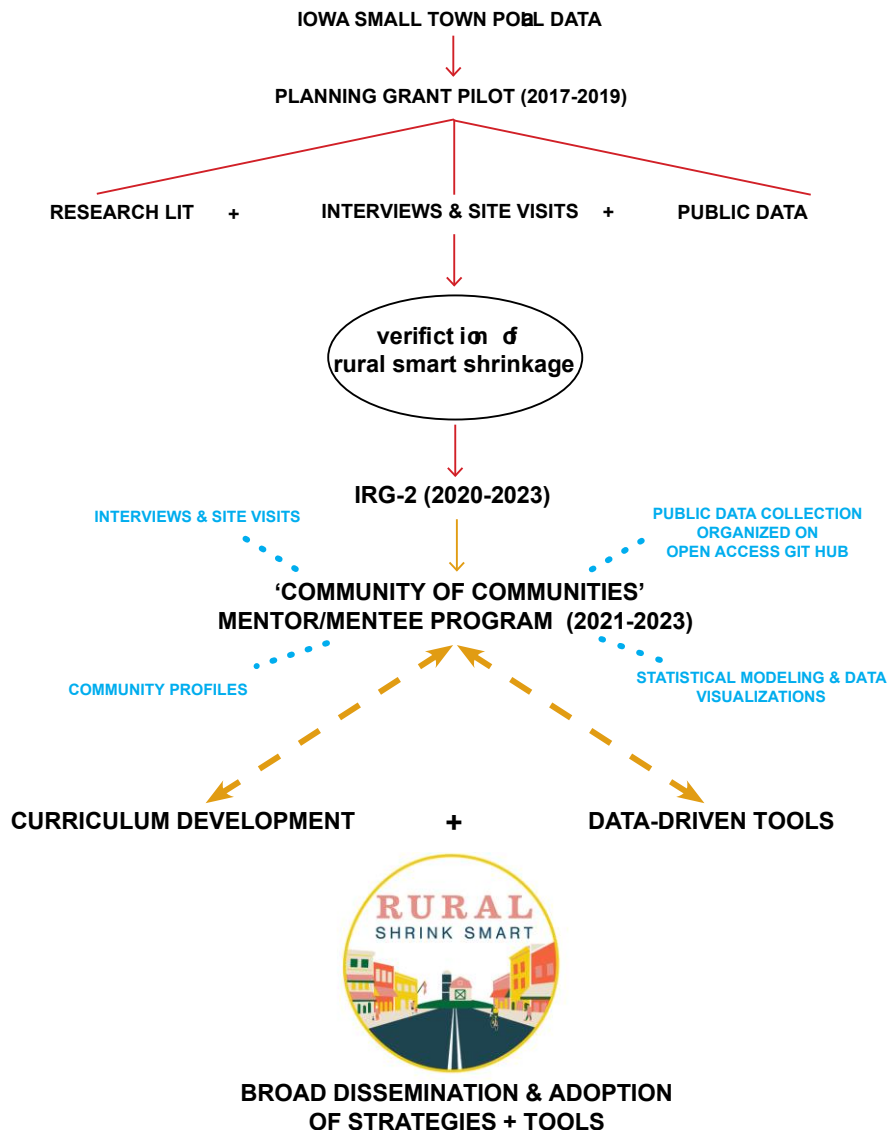
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Outline

- What is the rural shrink-smart project?
- Introducing the main idea
- Key parts of the research, community engagement
- Making it relevant for rural communities across the U.S.



This project proposes to develop *educational resources* and *data-driven tools* to help these communities to **shrink smart**, which is the process of adapting to population loss while also protecting quality of life and community services.

We are working with the Iowa League of Cities, Iowa Council of Governments (COG's) and centers such as NCRCRD so that our resources and tools can be shared broadly to the public.

Goal is to introduce the new idea to small communities.

Elma, Iowa

- Small town in Northeast Iowa
- Population 505 (2020); 546 (2010)
- Shrinking Community
- Improving QoL
- Splash Pad
- Medical Clinic
- Fundraisers
- Grants
- Dedicated group of volunteers
- Donors



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New paradigms:

We have an explicit goal to move away from growth as the predominant framework for discussing community stabilization and improvement, both in terms of population and also economics.

Our research tells us that a focus on improving quality of life (QoL) for residents is the best option to stabilize populations.

Economic benefits may or may not follow.

New paradigms:

We propose that the shrinkage of rural populations in states such as Iowa cannot be fixed in most places because these towns grew to serve a 19th-century agricultural economy.

Communities should accept and manage the shrinkage.

We are interested to know how communities respond and adapt to the changes and to learn from those who are doing better than expected.

Recommendations to become ‘smarter’ while shrinking:

You can lose population, but still thrive!

- Population loss is a *process* that needs to be managed.
- Shrinking towns can still have a high quality of life.
- QOL is partly within your control.

Economic development as a typical response!

- Poor likelihood of success. Expensive.
- You might do everything right, but the odds of desired outcomes is low.
- You cannot control national and global economic trends.

Shrinking smartly does **NOT** preclude future growth!

- High QOL better positions your town among 1,000s of others.
- Keeping current residents is a first priority.

The Rural Shrink-Smart Project in Iowa

- Research
- Educational Outreach
- Community Engagement
- Data Science
- Shrink-Smart as a New approach
- Emphasis on
 - Shrinking places
 - Smart communities
 - Quality of Life (QoL)

Iowa

- Population of 3.19 million (2020)
- 4.7% increase since 2010 (U.S. growth rate is 7.6%)
- Minority population growth a significant factor
- 941 cities
- 99 Counties
- 333 School districts
- 551 – Special districts
- Largest city – 215,000
- Smallest City – 14
- Less than 500: 500 cities



Small towns in Iowa

- In **rural places**, shrinkage has already been experienced as:
- Declining population
- Dated infrastructure, amenities
- Economic stagnancy – low wages, long commutes
- Loss of retail stores
- Loss of most medical services (not universal)
- Fiscal stress
- Leadership challenges

- *Can Qol still be protected and how?*



Iowa Small Town Poll

<https://smalltowns.soc.iastate.edu/>

- Quality of life assessment
- Iowa Small Town Poll – Iowa State University since 1994
- David Peters – ISU, Sociology
- Local patronage patterns (Church, Recreation/Entertainment, Shopping, Healthcare)
- Government services (Fire, Parks, ERS, Water, Garbage, Public Schools, Govt. Services, Streets, Police)
- Local Services and Facilities (Child care, Senior Citizen programs, Adequate Housing, Youth programs, Jobs, Medical services, shopping facilities)
- Social environment (Social qualities – safe, friendly, trusting, supportive, tolerant, well-kept, open to new ideas)
- Social ties (everybody knows everybody)
- Sense of community (coming together to solve problems and support each other – how much, over time)
- Community attachment (Feel at home vs. Sorry to leave)
- Community involvement (percentage of folks participating in important aspect of community)

Measuring Quality of Life

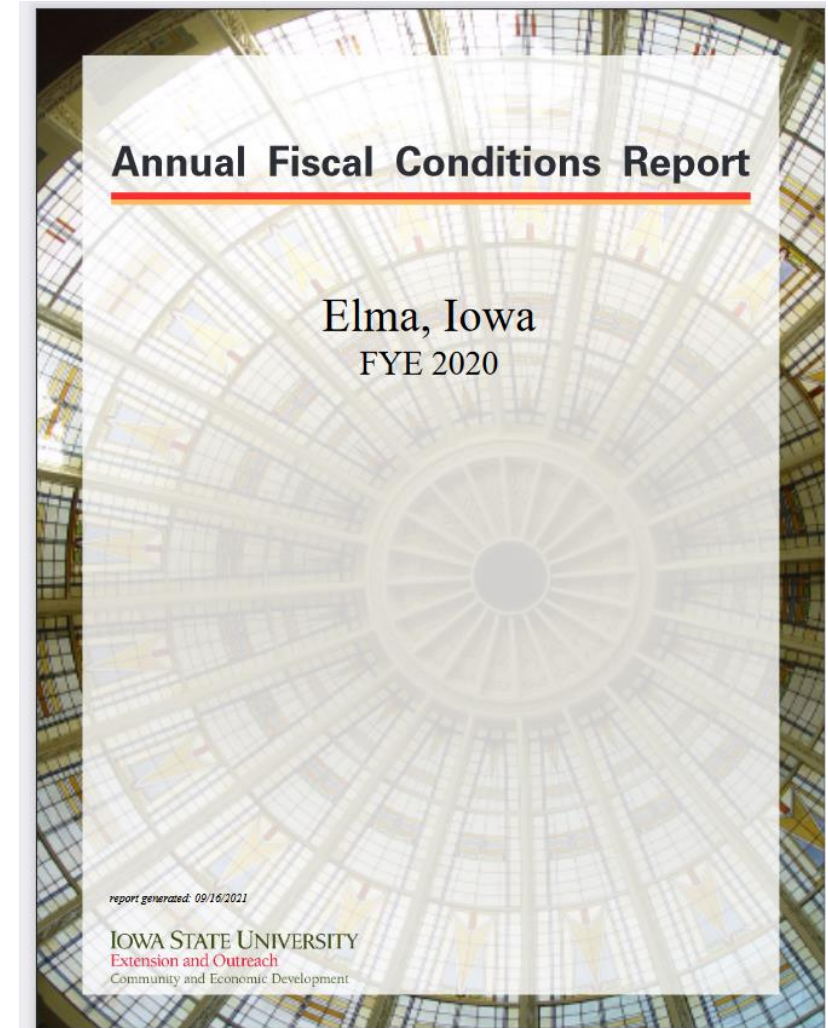
- Survey of 99 small towns
- Changes in population and changes in QoL measures
- The QoL composite index for each city is defined as a simple average of the mean responses to each of the following 7 categories –
 - Local jobs,
 - Medical services,
 - Public schools,
 - Housing,
 - Local government services,
 - Childcare services,
 - Senior services.

Role of Data

- The Rural Shrink-Smart Project relies on data
- Data science enhancing understanding of places, issues, trends, comparison with peers.
- Engagement process become more meaningful and interesting
- Assisting small rural communities to use public data
- Using technology, social media, smart devices to generate additional data on local level.
- Advancements in data gathering continue to evolve in a positive direction

Data

- Public Finance Data
- Major sources of revenue over time
- Spending patterns across categories over time
- Peer comparison on per capita basis
- Property tax levy rates
- Property valuation trends
- Capital improvement projects – specific
- Iowa Government Finance Initiative
- <https://www.extension.iastate.edu/igfi/>
- Biswa Das, Program lead, IGFI



Examples of projects that have worked in some of the towns we studied:

Community support for services.

- New **daycare center** in a former school building.
- New **medical clinic** built in collaboration with a local hospital system.
- Working with the **local library** to develop programming for kids and after-school options.

Philanthropy and community organizations.

- Active **community organizations** that collaborate on and sometimes replace programming that had been funded by the town – such as music nights, films in the park, sports leagues, improvements to recreation facilities like playgrounds and ballfields.
- Using **private dollars as match dollars** for grant applications – often foundations will ask for a local match to receive a new grant and the private organizations can provide this.
- Assisting the city manager or city clerk with **grant applications** by identifying needs and grant opportunities.
- Keeping updated information about activities on **social media** like Facebook.

Towns: Sac City, Elma, Bancroft, Corning, Mt. Ayr, Everly

What can small communities do?

- Begin to consider of shrink-smart as an alternate approach (mindset)
- Economic development need not be the only priority
- Engage residents more through community events/issues/priorities
- Building a positive community identity – perception matters!!
- Getting to understand how folks perceive the QoL is important.
- Mentoring new leaders – for the future.
- Effective role of city officials – engage with community
- Cultivating active participation in civic life – young and old
- League and Institutions of Higher Learning are often willing partners.

Observations

- Data helps tell a story, only so far.
- Interactions with cities matter. Engaging cities broadens understanding with specifics.
- Stories matter!! Social media can be very effectively used for community benefit!
- Community led efforts, not local govt.
- Well kept and safe
- University extension – capacity to assist - engage
- League of Municipalities, County Association, Council of Governments can be key partners and collaborators – provide the platform for sharing.
- Virtual interactions have opened up lot of possibilities for such interactions
- Smart-shrink project creates opportunities that can be adopted across the nation

<https://ruralshrinksmart.org/>

<https://smalltowns.soc.iastate.edu/>

<https://www.extension.iastate.edu/igfi/>

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