

Small-town success comes from positive people and things

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ND News Cooperative

Like many young rural people, broadcast journalist Cory Hepola left his small hometown of Perham, Minn., looking for bigger city success. He landed in Fargo and then bounced around the country with broadcasting gigs in Montana, New York and Texas.

An out-of-the-blue cold call in 2019 brought him back home to Otter Tail County to develop a series of tourism videos focused on local communities. Called "Rural By Choice," it won an Emmy award for "Outstanding Lifestyle Series."

By then, he was hooked and moved back for good.

"I think what really captured the audience's attention was that so often our rural communities are portrayed as dead, dying, there's nothing there for you," Hepola said. "I didn't think it was honestly reflecting the opportunity and the innovation and the beauty and the connectedness that's happening there."

The loss of a school, a post office, a grocery or a child care center often makes headlines because of how important these institutions are to maintaining a smaller community.

Beyond that, however, the slow burning success stories are often missed.

It's harder to capture how rural communities are increasingly attracting younger people, Hepola said, and how many who choose to stay or relocate rural are searching for something those towns often have: a strong work-life balance.

Enter Hepola's new project - "My Town."

The first season of "My Town" is currently premiering on YouTube and features seven flourishing towns across four states in the Upper Midwest, including Rugby.

The episode on Rugby, "The Side of North Dakota You've Never Seen," aired Dec. 2. It features the successful Heartland Bison Ranch, downtown fashion store Main Street Boutique, which also offers cooking and wine classes, and the Heart of America Medical Center's new \$62 million facility which held its grand opening at the end of August.

Positive people power
Rugby is the perfect

example of small-town success, Hepola said. There, he found passionate, energetic leaders who were focused on everything the town does have, not what it doesn't have.

Accentuating the positive instead of being mired in the negative is important for growth, according to those involved in development.

"Rural communities are bombarded with negative messaging, so it makes them feel like they are helpless, when, in fact, they hold all the power," said Megan Langley, executive director of rural development nonprofit StrengthenND.

"Some are very much so thriving," she said. "They just may not be meeting typical indicators of success that we see in larger communities, meaning, thriving looks differently depending on the context of your community."

StrengthenND is currently in phase two of a research project on how hope can be a motivator for rural communities. Langley said the group's findings indicate that overall most are hopeful about their communities and it is their friends and neighbors working to improve the quality of life for all who make them feel hopeful.

This fits with the second aspect Hepola noticed in the communities he's visited: prioritizing getting things done together as a community.

"It cannot be siloed off," Hepola said of individual efforts to strengthen smaller communities. "All of them need to be working together. Those are the successful communities."

The second season of "My Town" will expand coverage to South Dakota and Nebraska, and will also include new episodes on two rural communities in North Dakota. Hepola expects those will be announced by mid-January.

Numerous studies in recent years show since the end of the COVID-19 pandemic, younger adults are moving to rural areas at higher rates than have been seen since the 1970s, largely because of the work-life balance those communities can provide.

That work-life balance is something towns should be proud of and advertise, Hepola said.

"But you have to raise your hand," he

said. "You can't sit back anymore and just wait for people to find you, because they won't find you."

Another important aspect is forward thinking and strategic planning, he said, looking out 10 years ahead instead of just patching things up as you go. That means focusing on housing and other local amenities to attract and keep people in a town.

Several of Hepola's recent episodes have also focused on how some of these smaller towns are attracting newcomers from across the country and around the world.

More specifically, episodes on Willmar, Minn., and Iowa Lakes, Iowa, highlight how those communities are welcoming immigrants from abroad.

"We go to these small towns in Iowa and they've opened their arms, and it's incredibly diverse, and the same thing with Willmar," Hepola said.

This inclusion doesn't come without challenges, Hepola said. It helps if people connect the dots by recalling their own immigrant heritages in these towns and how their ancestors were also once newcomers, he added.

"Trying to recognize that this town's history is based on people coming to this country for a better life is a positive thing, and all these small towns are looking to grow, and these businesses are looking for people to come and work, and when people come in, we should be having those open arms," he said.

The things they need

On the infrastructure side - schools, child care, health care, housing - others have been looking at what creates success as well.

North Dakota State University (NDSU) department of architecture student Sydney Seamands recently crafted her master's degree thesis around understanding how to save declining communities in the state.

During that process, she identified five core areas crucial to success: the availability of child care services, the availability of community and cultural amenities, the development of vibrant downtowns, access to single and multi-family housing, and access to educational opportunities.

While Seamands looked at Richardton, Garrison, Velva, Mayville and Rugby, she eventually honed in on Velva as the most promising community for implementing a basic rural revitalization strategy.

Velva's proximity to Minot means access to larger health care facilities, she said, and having a historic main street and other existing infrastructure are focal points for building on its positive aspects.

It's not about completely reinventing a town, she said, but determining how the existing strengths can be supplemented to attract new residents to keep it viable in the long run.

"Younger families aren't going to come if there isn't a school, or a place where they can bring their kids," Seamands said. "Young professionals aren't going to come if they can't approach a job. It's just about how to attract more people."

On a personal level, Seamands has small-town connections to Hettinger, and though now residing in Bismarck, she was trying to figure out whether a small town would be a fit for her after graduation.

Lack of professional advancement opportunities is possibly the biggest challenge for some communities in attracting a more youthful cohort, she said.

"The affordability aspect would really entice a lot of younger people. There just isn't any opportunity for them to grow professionally," she said of some communities.

Dr. Ganapathy Mahalingam, a professor at NDSU's architecture school and Seamands' thesis advisor, said the goal was not to select a particular town, but to come up with a strategy that could be applied to a variety of towns looking for development templates.

"Velva was just the case in point for how to illustrate the strategy," Mahalingam said.

The North Dakota News Cooperative is a non-profit news organization providing reliable and independent reporting on issues and events that impact the lives of North Dakotans. The organization increases the public's access to quality journalism and advances news literacy across the state. For more information about NDNC or to make a charitable contribution, please visit newscoopnd.org.

LEGALS >>

From Pg. 3

by Liz Hallen is up for a new election. Council Member Parrill moved to appoint Brad Guthrie to this open position, second by Council Member Ebert, and by unanimous vote; motion carried. ARMORY GYM SOCCER USE: A request from Daniel Abe was reviewed for permission to utilize the gym for a soccer club practice. Practices are planned for Sunday evenings after archery class. The practices would be from December through April. The club gives a donation to the city for the use. Council Member Ebert moved to approve the soccer club to use the gym, second by Council Member Burwick, and by unanimous vote; motion carried. 2025 BEER AND LIQUOR LICENSES: Council Member Parrill moved to approve the 5 applications for 2025 licenses submitted from the following establishments: Kennedy's, Kum and Go (Maverick), The Gutter, the Pastime Bar, and the American Legion, second by Council Member Ebert, and by unanimous vote; motion carried.

SHANNON HEWSON: with Brosz Engineering met with the Council to discuss a couple of topics. Updates on BNSF were given. A plan is being drawn up by BNSF to design a plan and they will again present in person to go forward. BNSF has hired HDR as their engineer going forward. Discussion was had between the Council Member and Commissioner Laufer on the proposed plan. Discussion was had on the plan, Mr. Hewson discussed his thoughts were they were hoping to build a road on both the North and South side of the tracks. Mr. Hewson discussed the city-wide infrastructure going forward. It was decided to have Council Member Parrill and Mr. Hewson start the conversations and then later the plan would be to open the plan to a committee.

BILLS: Council Member Parrill moved to pay the following bills including the loader tires from NW Tire, second by Council Member Gaylord, and by unani-

mous vote; motion carried. #16849 Westen Edge Realty Trust Account \$1,000.00; #16850 James Lindquist \$369.40; #16851 Randy Burwick \$277.05; #16852 Carl Ebert \$277.05; #16853 Michele Gaylord \$277.05; #16854 David Parrill \$277.05; #16855 Trish Schalesky \$2,000.00; #16856 Cooperative Legal Services PLLC \$275.00; #16857 Adams County Treasurer \$2,765.00; #16858 Northwest Tire Inc. \$8,279.80; #16859 Strand Tax \$543.75; #16860 City of Hettinger \$84.19; #16861 Consolidated Telcom \$167.56; #16862 Dakota Dust-Tex, Inc \$67.00; #16863 Drolc Electric \$596.44; #16864 Hillyard, Inc \$277.45; #16865 Northern Fire and Safety \$91.10; #16866 RJ Locksmithing \$25.00; #16867 Hettinger Park District \$2,628.42; #16868 Dakota Buttes Visitors Council \$562.27; #16869 Dakota Buttes Historical Society \$562.27; #16870 GS Publishing \$396.20; #16871 Service Printers \$710.00; #16872 Laufer Vermeer \$53.27; #16873 Dakota West Inspection Services \$532.05; #16874 GW Trucking, LLC \$1,050.00; #16875 Southwest Water Authority \$14,838.18; #16876 Verizon Wireless \$82.55; #16877 U.S. Postal Service \$285.00; #16878 ND Dept of Health \$50.00; #16879 ND One Call \$6.00; #16880 Adams County Treasurer \$12,708.33; #16881 Adams County Treasurer \$2,587.50; #16882 Adams County Treasurer \$3,602.18; #16883 Brosz Engineering Inc \$4,017.50; #16884 B & C Plumbing & Heating Inc \$709.15; #16885 Montana Dakota Utilities \$4,283.15; #16886 Rocket Express Delivery LLC \$55.00 ADJOURN: Council Member Gaylord moved to adjourn the meeting. The motion was seconded by Council Member Burwick, Mayor Lindquist declared the meeting adjourned at 9:34 am. James Lindquist, Mayor Attest: Krista Faller, City Auditor

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