

Adapt and Win: The Kansas Story

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Gracie Garcia is standing next to a 360-gallon livestock tank, grinning with pride over the robust tomato, watermelon, and pepper plants cascading down its gleaming sides. “I started these from seeds,” she tells me. “I’m pretty happy with how these plants look since I never really gardened before.” Not only is this Gracie’s first foray into fruit and vegetable production, it’s also her first time as a garden “watchdog.” As a neighborhood resident, she lives directly across the street from the Colby, Kansas, Copeland Park Community Garden whose inaugural year this is, and takes a special interest in its success. In addition to Gracie’s “tank garden,” there are at least 20 other similar containers, as well as several much smaller, low-to-the-ground children’s beds, most of which are, as of this first week in July, well-tended and soon to be brimming with bounty.

Like all community gardens, this one has a creation story grounded in its location. The garden sits on a quarter-acre, formerly underutilized parkland in Colby, a town of about 5,500 people that serves as the county seat of Thomas County. Colby is the largest city in the vast nine-county, northwest Kansas region that covers 9,000 square miles and is home to only 30,000 people. Almost all these counties are designated “frontier counties” by dint of a population density that is less than 6 people per square mile. By comparison, my former home state of Connecticut has a population density of 533 people per square, making room for 3.2 million people inside a snug land mass of 6,000 square miles.

When it comes to food, a short drive outside of Colby plunges you immediately into a sea of corn and wheat, which no matter your politics or food system values speaks volumes about America’s agricultural might. You’ll find an abundance of these commodity farm products that, after many tortured stages of processing will eventually find their way to grocery store shelves, but you won’t find anything growing that takes a shorter route to your stomach, e.g fruits and vegetables. Chances are also pretty good that you won’t even find the grocery shelves. With the exception of a handful of small towns like Colby, most of northwestern Kansas is a food desert, and when there are stores, they are usually pretty darn small. As Misty Jimerson, the coordinator of the Western Prairie Food, Farm, and Community Alliance (“Alliance”) puts it, “We’re excited if one of our stores can get milk that’s not past its expiration date.” It is due to

these food system realities that the Copeland Community Garden stands out like a shiny diamond on an over-sized, lopsided crown.

There's the necessity, for sure, to bring fresh produce to areas where its availability is low and health concerns high. But need alone is not a reliable precursor to change. Without many people raising their voices, the public policies that can respond to this need may never make it out of the idea stage. In western Kansas, as in many other rural regions of the nation, "policy" is sometimes a four-letter word, smacking of too much government and a problem-solving approach that is too top-down. However, it was people's voices and some savvy institutions that engaged the wheels of local government, making the Copeland Community Garden the love child of public and private sector interactions. Rural communities may not openly embrace public policy as a remedy for society's problems, but they do employ relationship building, which, after all, is the basis of politics and policymaking. As Misty was to put it later, "life-long connections really matter," and policy can easily grow out of those connections.

"We went to the Colby town manager with an idea for more community gardens," said Travis Rickford, the Executive Director of LiveWell Northwest Kansas and a member of the Alliance. Since Colby had a lot of underutilized parkland within its boundaries, the manager was all in favor of giving over a small portion of land for the garden. That was followed by what might best be described as a barn-raising style of community organizing that led to the City clearing the land and hauling in truckloads of soil; the Thomas County Coalition, the Thomas County Health Department, and the Western Prairie Resource Conservation and Development District (RC&D) kicking in money and other assistance; private contractors giving a helping hand, and a public zoo donating the composted zoo manure that the plants thrived on.

While there are many ways to start a garden – and countless other food projects and initiatives as well – the story of the Copeland Community Garden not only illustrates how the Alliance works, it also defines a style befitting rural America. Tina Khan, who is with the Kansas affiliate of the American Heart Association, refers to this as "adaptive leadership," a way of maneuvering through your immediate world that allows you to work with the reality that presents itself. As she explains it, "you adapt to and utilize who and what is there, working from the individual to the system." Giving me an illustration, Tina says, "it's easier and more productive to not make a big deal about 'policy.' People already have contacts in government so they simply use them to *just do it*." Reminding me initially of the old organizer adage, "start where the people are at," I sensed a rural-inspired corollary: "start where the people are at, and don't try to move faster than they do."

For those of us whose modus operandi is to critique and often attack the dominant food system, the adaptive leadership model of change might seem frustrating, if not a tacit acceptance of the status quo. But as I was to learn from the Alliance and the many people associated with it, working with numerous people across the far-flung northwest Kansas landscape, spotting needs through surveys and research, and staying close to institutions and public officials, can be an effective recipe for change.

Adaptive behavior may also be a necessary means of survival when extreme conservatives control the levers of power. Misty Lechner (not to be confused with the single “s” Misty), Deputy Advocacy Advisor for the Kansas branch of the American Heart Association, worked in the Kansas Health Department under Governor Kathleen Sebelius (she became President Obama’s Secretary of Health and Human Services and one of the architects of the ACA) when Kansas made a robust foray into the world of diet, health, fitness, and policy. It was also a time when a number of local food policy councils were getting off the ground. But when the decidedly anti-government Governor Sam Brownback came into office, a good deal of the Health Department’s health and fitness work went out the window. Misty said that, “Whenever we’d propose some food and beverage policy, it was referred to as ‘Michelle Obama stuff, and we’re not doing that’.” No matter. She was able to move into the American Heart Association, where she’s been able to assist in organizing 17 food policy councils that are now serving 43 of Kansas’ 105 counties.

Fortunately, the engagement by the public sector in health and rural issues was matched by a similar private sector commitment. The Kansas Health Foundation supported the development of food policy councils because of their potential to address health issues as well as bring communities together. A parallel interest in the decline of rural grocery stores emerged as well, this time in the form of the Kansas State University Center for Engagement and Community Development’s Rural Grocery Initiative. According to the Center, there are 200 grocery stores in Kansas towns with fewer than 2,000 people. In Northwest Kansas, there are only 14 grocery stores, 3 of which are corporate chains and big box stores.

David Procter, the Center’s Director has said that, “Small town grocery stores stand as a bulwark against the ever-rising number of rural Americans living in food deserts. These food businesses are a vital element of the local food system, providing residents with access to produce, dairy, grains, and meats. They are important to the local economy, creating jobs, and generating tax revenue. These stores are community hubs, gathering places where social capital is built and maintained.” While the timing and responses of political, philanthropic, and university engagement were not always in perfect sync, these institutions have made democratic, community-informed problem solving a hallmark of Kansas life.

The Ups and Downs of Rurality

Anyone who just focuses on the numbers is likely to ask: “Will the last person leaving the county please turn out the lights.” In the Alliance’s nine-county region, three counties had three times more population in 1950 than they do today, while five had two times more, and only one has stayed even. According to US News and World Report, Kansas is losing 25-29-year-olds faster than any other state.

But don’t plan a funeral for Kansas anytime soon. A 2018 *New Food Economy* article (“the article heard round the state” according to one anonymous source) tellingly titled “Rural Kansas is dying. I drove 1,800 miles to find out why (4/26/18),” written by ex-Kansan, Corie Brown,

shook folks to the bone. With statements like “the thing about rural Kansas: No one lives there, not anymore,” and quoting one former Kansas State academic who said, “Kansans are complacent. They accept depopulation,” Brown made few friends and created enough backlash that this reporter found himself promising his interviewees in advance that he was not going to write that kind of piece.

Articles like that, as well as rural-oriented, “ain’t it awful!” data that is easy to find do little justice to the lives of real people, and only serve to reinforce negative stereotypes. In the words of rural America’s leading spokesperson, Wendell Berry, “there are active prejudices against farmers, country people, the country, small-town people and small towns. This at least begins the description of a large cultural problem.” It’s part of the reason that older farmers encourage their heirs to leave farming, and why young people (and others) leave rural America. Sensing that the rest of the United States looks askance at them, rural people have come to feel that no one cares, which of course provides the nation’s fear- and hate-mongers with fertile ground to till. When I asked Democratic Congresswoman Xochitl Torres Small, who won New Mexico’s traditionally Republican 2nd District in 2018 – one of the country’s most rural – how she appeals to her largely conservative constituents, she said, “I just listen to them because they say ‘no one wants to listen to me’. It’s not just a statement, it’s a plea.”

The work of the Alliance and the numerous acts of innovation and risk-taking I witnessed fly in the face of both rural and Kansas naysayers. Like all stereotypes, non-rural people will assume that all rural people are alike and can be counted on to always act in a predictable fashion. These stereotypes crumbled immediately in Northwestern Kansas where I experienced a half-joking rejection of how things might be done in eastern Kansas. “Don’t tell us how they do things in Douglas County!” I was playfully scolded, referring to the mixed rural/metro eastern area that also contains Lawrence, home of the University of Kansas and the state’s longest operating food policy council (2009). Likewise, don’t count on rural America to always tow the Republican party-line. My Johns Hopkins colleague, Christine Grillo wrote in a 2016 blog how predominantly rural and agricultural Oklahoma voted 65 percent for Donald Trump, but, “That same day, 60 percent of Oklahoma voters opposed an amendment typically associated with the Republican agenda—the so-called ‘right to farm’,” in essence protecting environmental regulations pertaining to agriculture and ranching. Look closely, and you’ll see that every pea in the pod is different from the others.

There’s a Lot Going On

While good food projects and businesses are not as abundant as they are in metro areas, they draw your attention like a tall sunflower in an empty field. The same can be said for non-food acts of innovation, both big and small. Wind turbine companies are paying landowners, usually farmers, handsome land-lease fees to build and operate thousands of towers spinning 150-foot blades across the horizon. They are churning the prairie’s steady breezes into clean energy for places like “we-ain’t-ever-gonna-stop-growing” Denver.

Looking for non-chain lodging to rest my weary head for my several days in Kansas, I found exactly one Airbnb listing for the Colby area. It went by the decidedly “this is not Kansas, Toto” name of the “Hippie Chic Oasis” and was built, decorated, and operated by Benjamin Jurek, 32. It sits on his parent’s 90-acre farmstead, which is a good eight-mile, zig-zag country road ride south of Interstate 70. While the exterior of his freestanding house is functional if not forgettable, the interior will gleefully take anyone over 60-years old back to their college dorm days. Painted tie-dye wall patterns, rainbow ceilings, and flower-powered trim, a spacious loft with a prairie view and, yes, a waterbed, are not hallucinations. An extensively outfitted kitchen and a spacious Euro-contemporary bathroom propel, in my estimation, this “crib” to the top of the Airbnb charts. No matter what trip you’ve been on, the stay here will make it a good one.

Examples of innovation and entrepreneurship like these may not be immediately obvious to the casual passerby – 30,000 people spread out across 9,000 square miles give you lots of room to hide – but young folks like Ben are reinventing the places where they grew up, and more importantly, giving them a reason to stay. Let’s call it adaptive entrepreneurship.

Governance

As one of the state’s 17 councils, the Western Prairie Food, Farm, and Community Alliance covers the nine-county region, which makes it the largest regional food policy council by area in the country. [Note: I will use the generic term “food policy council” even though its use is not common in Kansas or in many other predominantly rural states]. To cover that much ground and to be responsive to such an enormous territory, the Alliance has devised a governance structure that is akin to a mini food system legislature. According to Misty Jimerson, the Alliance’s membership is drawn from those nine counties – two voting members from each county, one of which is appointed by the county’s duly-elected commission and one by each County Advisory Team (“CAT”). The CAT is made up of any number of local food system stakeholders. In this way, equal involvement by the public and private sectors is assured. Misty told me that “this kind of representation is good for the Alliance because it secures the regular attention and support of each county’s government and residents.” All of this and other governing guidelines are codified in the Alliance’s own set of by-laws.

This strategy is built on the simple recognition that there aren’t enough institutions, agencies, or non-profits in this part of Kansas to do all the work that needs to be done. Hence, about 20 percent of Misty’s time with the Thomas County Health Department is dedicated to the Alliance as its coordinator. The Western Prairie RC&D acts as the Alliance’s fiscal agent and backbone organization. RC&Ds may be losing ground in parts of rural America, but the one in Northwest Kansas plays a robust role. Its mission statement and recent activities make it obvious why the RC&D is a natural fit for the Alliance: “To be the vehicle to establish an environment of cooperation that will promote economic growth, stability, and enhanced quality of life...” The WPRC&D’s portfolio of projects include community gardens, healthy living activities, and local food promotion. In the spirit of adaptive leadership, the Alliance’s structure

uses the institutional capacity that exists in its region, or as Misty put it, “We got to band together to survive.”

The participation of other organizations and agencies augment the work and scope of the Alliance. They include LiveWell Northwest Kansas which recently reshaped its prevention mission to take a stronger systemic approach that emphasizes access to healthy food and early childhood development. Travis Rickford, LiveWell’s Executive Director, who was active in developing the Copeland Community Garden, makes it clear that their work, and the reason they are a part of the Alliance, is because of the primacy of partnerships. “You feel an undercurrent of stress in these communities,” he acknowledged. “We don’t have the tax base to invest in infrastructure like schools, and our population is declining, so we rely on connections and strong partnerships to make change.”

Another important Alliance partner is the Kansas State University Research and Extension SNAP-Ed program, which comes in the form of JoEllyn “Jo” Argabright, a KSU SNAP-Ed regional director. In states like Kansas, which may lag far-right of the political center, food stamps (currently known as SNAP) can sometimes be as popular as wheat rust. But despite the public’s occasionally jaundiced eye, a 2019 USDA report documented a higher rate of SNAP utilization in rural areas than in non-rural areas. The report also notes that for every \$22,000 in SNAP purchases in rural stores, one job is created, an economic impact that is twice as high as it is for similar purchases in urban areas. The Nebraska-based Center for Rural Affairs emphasizes the importance of SNAP dollars in rural communities because they “are spent immediately in local grocery stores and retailers, helping keep these community assets open for all residents.” Given that nationwide, non-metro (rural) median income is about 25 percent lower than metro (urban/suburban) income, SNAP benefits are a critical resource in rural America.

Jo says that part of her task is “to make the healthy choice the easy choice.” To that end, she and her Alliance and K-State partners have developed the “Simply Produce” program, which is designed to make fresh fruits and vegetables easily accessible and affordable. It’s a pre-order, pre-pay program that gives the buyer 15 pounds of produce for \$15 once a week from a regular grocery store. Currently, it operates at only one store in Northwest Kansas (Atwood), but K-State recently received a grant to expand Simply Produce to 48 stores in the larger 26-county western Kansas region that includes the Northwest’s nine counties.

Adapting to a declining school age population and shrinking school budgets, public schools have trimmed some of their programs including “Home-Econ,” that is, how to cook. Noting with a smile that “we are resourceful,” Jo says that they have been able to convert a former high school agricultural classroom into a teaching kitchen, using it to instruct students and SNAP-Ed participants in a variety of food preparation skills.

But Jo and other members of the Alliance recognize that programs, even when applied flexibly, aren’t enough. “It’s not true that all we have to do is educate people. We know a variety of approaches are necessary,” she says. As the Alliance’s members see farms get bigger

and fewer, and fall ever deeper into the commodity agriculture trap, there's an acknowledgement that the consolidation of farming across the prairie has hurt not only communities but also a sense of community. "Towns are smaller, some of our educational systems are broken, and our towns are at least 30 miles apart," Travis remarked, reinforcing the fact that low population density also means isolation. He added that "farmer debt is getting bigger and is often inherited by the children." According to Jo, the financial stresses of commodity producers are also responsible for a growing number of mental health issues. Travis sums up the challenges facing the region's agriculture and communities with a bold statement: *"All those living in under-resourced rural America suffer from inequity."*

Against this backdrop, the Alliance and a growing number of other publicly interested organizations are opening doors to more policy-based solutions, even when baby steps are all you can take. "We always have to use a different language," Travis says, "We can't invoke the need for more 'rules and regulations' because they are viewed as 'government interference.' Sometimes we just have to present it as clearly as 'we can't feed the world if we can't feed ourselves'."

The job of keeping everyone's eye on the ball and providing for a modicum of coordination falls to the Alliance. In a tried-and-true food policy council fashion, they took the pulse of the region's citizens in 2017 with a community food assessment. Using a World Café format that enables participants to identify and then winnow down topics, the assessment was implemented in each of the eight counties (the Alliance's ninth county didn't join until 2018) and included 138 individual stakeholders. Indicative of the important role that foundations play in rural Kansas, the assessment was strongly supported by the Sunflower Foundation, which has a major stake in the state's overall health environment.

The assessment's findings confirmed that most of Northwest Kansas is a food desert, which in rural areas means people living more than 10 miles from a grocery store. Generally, the participants wanted the Alliance to focus on improving access to healthy food, particularly locally produced, and to provide additional assistance to seniors. More particularly, they wanted additional farm acreage devoted to the production of "specialty crops" (e.g. fruits and vegetables), a goal they'd hope to achieve through food safety certifications, food production education, and market development activities, including more farmers' markets. Healthy food education, accepting SNAP benefits at more retail food outlets, and the promotion of a food hub also were identified as high priority needs.

How does all of this play out in practice? Government interference, rules, and regulations may be the bugaboo of Kansas, but ironically, in a place with an undercurrent of anti-government bias, state government has promulgated an abnormal number of straight-jacketing policies that work against a more vibrant and fair food system. Of the 15 states that retain some form of a food tax, Kansas's 5.3 percent rate (reduced in 2019 to 2.5 percent) was one of the highest. Considered one of the most regressive forms of taxation, a food tax hits the lower income and elderly shopper the hardest. It even gets assessed on special healthy eating

incentive programs like Simply Produce. I was told that the Kansas food tax also serves as an economic drain on the state's economy since anyone living within driving distance of the bordering non-food tax states, Colorado and Nebraska, will often travel to them to buy their groceries.

Discussions among Alliance members, including some farmers, indicated that red tape generated by the state was a deterrent to direct farm sales. Ron and Marlene Erickson, an elderly, semi-retired farm couple ("Every August I say I'm gonna quit farming, but then the seed catalog shows up," Ron said during a group discussion at the Mojo Cafe) are one of the few vegetable growers in their county. They enjoy selling at the Atwood Farmers' Market, but claim that the regulations and related paperwork are too much to sell to grocery stores.

In one Kansas county that's outside the Alliance's region, a food pantry operating out of a school wanted to establish a mobile pantry to reach people in more remote areas. They were so stymied by various permitting requirements that the organizers almost gave up until they received technical assistance from Kolia Souza, a K-State organizer. "Getting approval forced them to go through various bureaucracies which sharpened their policy skills and empowered them at the same time," Kolia told me. "This was a group that really leaned into it, and they finally made it happen."

Innovators and Returning Citizens Are Making a Difference

But there's perhaps a more subtle force at work in Northwest Kansas, one that may also be slowly finding traction across much of rural America. An abiding appreciation for the virtues that rural life affords those who can do without the big city buzz may be drawing and retaining a new class of entrepreneurial pioneers. They include young families who want to raise their children in small towns, as well as life-long residents whose vision of community salvation rests on innovation—not just serving the status quo. Since much of this innovation is food and farm related, the Alliance has a stake in spotlighting and nurturing new projects that not only build food security but also strengthen community.

Almost missing our turn, Misty Jimerson took a sudden right off state Route 36 into a small speck of a town called McDonald. Cruising briefly down the main drag, we passed boarded-up store fronts, many sporting "Vote Trump" graffiti, and saw few people or cars before we parked at the McDonald Grocery. Reopened five years ago by Eileen and Brad Porubsky, the store is a breath of fresh air in a town that's watched its population dwindle from 425 in 1950 to 162 today. While only about 2,000 square feet in size, the store is fully stocked with perishables including fresh produce – delivered all the way from Kansas City – dairy, packaged goods, and a deli and lunch counter that churns out great sandwiches all the time and homemade donuts on Friday morning. According to Eileen, they serve 40 to 70 lunches every day and 150 during harvest season, which was just beginning during my July visit.

Responding to depopulation, the school district of Rawlins County, where McDonald is located, was forced to merge with neighboring Cheyenne County's school district, creating the "Cheylin District." But when the Porubskys and their six children moved here from Topeka, things started to look up. Not only did the store's new owners provide enough raw talent for the school's basketball team, other signs of economic life began to return to McDonald. Just three years ago, a long-empty hotel across the street from the grocery reopened as the six-room Bison B&B. And just down the road in the other direction, the Porubskys will open an eight-bed "care home," a kind of nursing home, that will create five jobs.

"We're passionate about this!" exclaimed Eileen, speaking of her store and what they hope to accomplish in McDonald. Her energy is palpable and, with her husband Brad, they seem capable of recharging this once moribund village. Though the McDonald Grocery preceded the formation of the Alliance by a year or two, the Alliance keeps close tabs on the store's progress and takes every opportunity to spotlight it. "It's certainly a model we'd like to see replicated elsewhere in our region," Misty said.

When you're hungry in rural Kansas and surrounded by a sea of corn and wheat, the Rhyme of the Ancient Mariner comes to mind: "Water, water everywhere, but not a drop to drink." That is until you get to the town of St. Francis (pop. 1,294), located a stone's throw from the Colorado border and home to the café and restaurant, Fresh 7. A lovely little food oasis in a sweet little town, Fresh 7 was originally trying to operate a food truck featuring locally produced food. But its plans ran into a buzz saw of local regulations that forced them to actually renovate a storefront and open as a fixed-site restaurant. What to do with the food truck? No problem – just park it inside and make it the kitchen and order counter!

On the day I visited, the café's seating area is being used for what it's intended – the flagrant enjoyment of good local food and lively community conversation. On this particular day, the conversation is between me and a dozen or more members of the Alliance and their Cheyenne County Advisory Team. Helen Dobbs from the Cheyenne Development Corporation is telling us how they constructed "grocery carts" for seniors that are actually little gardening units. Candy Douthit from the Cheyenne County Hospital informs us that they received a health equity grant from the Kansas Health Foundation that will be used to improve food access among lower income residents with farmers' markets and community gardens. She makes it clear that places like Wal-Mart are, in her opinion, an "economic loss" because they take more than they give and don't build community, punctuating her point with the quote of the day: "People around here are longin' for belongin'!" Later, she proudly ticks off three "policy changes:" 1) the local school cafeteria increased the number of healthy food options; 2) the hospital installed healthy landscaping (e.g. edible gardens); and 3) installed a cooler for local food.

The litany of achievements could go on and on, and it does, with pride and annotations like, "I feel strongly about food justice," "we've made tremendous progress!" "food tunnels (various coverings to extend growing seasons) and farmers' markets are near and dear to my heart,"

and “access to healthy food is my passion.” Maybe even more telling are their reasons for belonging to the Alliance. Their answers suggest the value of working together for a common cause – one that everyone knows is challenging to achieve but certainly worth fighting for. They said: “I want a better quality of life,” “I want people to come here!” “I want my children to stay here!” “We need to work regionally and to share resources,” and “I want to use food to engage community.”

What is so blatantly apparent across Northwest Kansas is how essential relationships are to the process of refashioning communities and food systems, and the Alliance gives people a table around which to do just that. “We have to come together because of low population,” said Sandy Rodgers, a member of the Alliance’s Sherman County CAT and the president of the Western Prairie RC&D. She and other members acknowledge that getting local government behind you is part of the relationship building process, something that the Alliance has fostered by requiring each county to appoint a member. Taking a regional approach as well as drawing on lots of those relationships was credited, for instance, with reducing the food tax from 5.3 percent to 2.5 percent this year.

Small dabs of community glue adhere local food system parts to one another while also building people’s capacity to help themselves. The Sunflower Foundation is using the Western Prairie RC&D to distribute food-related grants to all nine counties that make up the Alliance. One “seed” grant went to a Sherman County school to build a greenhouse that, among other things, made the school’s principal a very enthusiastic partner of the Alliance. Sandy noted that many of the groups who apply for funds had never written a grant before. “Writing one of these little grants is good training for them to one day get bigger ones.”

But not all food policy work and food system innovations are small scale. Allan Townsend, a Sherman County Alliance member, took me to the 21st Century Bean Company’s packing plant in Goodland for a tour. Expecting to see the equivalent of a mom and pop, garage-scale operation, I was pleasantly surprised to find a 30,000 square foot facility that employs more than 30 people. The 21st Century Bean packs and ships 11 varieties of dried beans that are all produced by their 27 farmer/owners, most of whom farm in Kansas, although a few are located in nearby states. “We packed and shipped 40 million pounds of beans in 2018,” Allan tells our group. Helping us to imagine what that looks like, he adds that 998 tractor-trailer loads of beans pulled out of their facilities (they have another one in nearby Sharon Springs) last year.

As my favorite pre-adolescent rhyme goes, “Beans, beans, good for the heart, the more you eat the more you....” But in this case, there are more benefits than good health and gastric relief. Bean production diversifies larger scale agriculture and offers sustainable relief to Midwest farm soils that are heavily planted in corn and wheat. Diversity’s benefits extend as well to the community since the facility’s 30-plus employees are mostly Latinx, and is otherwise a large workforce for a single business in a rural community where there are few large employers. Though the wages and benefits surpass much of what else is available in the area, there is also substantial evidence of employee satisfaction and motivation based on 21st

Century Bean’s astoundingly low 3 percent turnover rate – about one person per year. Hard work is rewarded in the form of bonuses, which in one case was \$124,000 divided between 12 workers who fulfilled one demanding contract on time. While working conditions are a little noisy and sometimes chaotic, a sign in the employee lounge says, “This plant has worked 1,752 days without a lost time accident.” Pretty good, it seems, considering the amount of fast-moving machinery, cranking conveyor belts, and steady forklift traffic.

One more interesting feature of 21st Century deserves note, and interestingly it’s one that connects to public policy. Nearly half of all their bean packing contracts are with the USDA commodity program, whose end users are the nation’s 200 Feeding America food banks. Staring at a wall map of the U.S. I see pins stuck in scores of cities whose food banks, many of which I have visited, are the recipients of the heartland’s agrarian prowess. In all of these connections there is an imaginary thread starting with 27 farmers that leads to a farmer-owned business that continues to a mostly Latinx staff that flows to 200 food banks across the nation that ends by feeding millions of lower income families – and the food is paid for by our tax dollars. Sounds like a win, win, win!

Conclusions

Without a doubt, rural Kansas, like the rest of rural America, faces serious challenges, especially when it comes to very low-density population and shifting demographics. But news of its death is not only premature but decidedly unhelpful, as is the assumption that “if you’ve seen one rural area, you’ve seen them all!” Neatly covering any place in stereotyped wrapping paper and affixing it with a generic bow conceals its richness, diversity, and the individualism of its people.

Though they are called everything but, there are 17 food policy councils across Kansas, a remarkable number for a medium-sized state whose politics sometimes sway right and left like a drunken cowboy. Using the concept of adaptive leadership, rural councils in particular have found a way to turn what might be perceived as the disadvantages of too-few people forced to take on too many serious problems into an advantage. The power of relationships can turn intimacy into action; it can convert those who are naturally “policy shy” into actors for change.

Clearly, good intentions are always enhanced by the presence of others who share the same concerns. The Western Prairie Food, Farm, and Community Alliance has brought together those from around the vast reaches of Northwestern Kansas to identify and define their common concerns, and they work in ways to address them that are uniquely rural. They have developed a governance structure that maximizes both public and private sector engagement that efficiently brings together a range of their food system’s stakeholders. And in a fashion that is also adaptive, the Alliance does not hold preconceived notions about who may or may not participate. For example, large-scale growers of corn and wheat (and beans) are just as welcome as anyone else.

Critical to their success, as it is to perhaps any entity or interest that embraces change, progress, and prosperity in under-resourced areas, are institutions whose expertise, scale, and stability are not only helpful but often necessary. It would be hard to imagine anything of substance happening in places like rural Kansas without the broad shoulders of foundations like Sunflower, Kansas Health, or the American Heart Association, and likewise, K-State University Research and Extension pushing, side-by-side with local groups on the ground.

Having said all that, and having been impressed beyond my wildest dreams by the creativity, leadership, and innovation I witnessed across Northwest Kansas, there is still a big, fat policy hole that can't be filled by concerned citizens and their allies alone. Something more is needed, starting with a bigger, more sensitive ear that will hear what people have to say, and not exploit their anxieties for individual political gain. A bigger and better targeted set of national policies are also needed, ones that will strengthen rural schools and rebuild the community infrastructure that can serve as the springboard for growth and prosperity. Given the value of rural communities' food and farm economies, additional investment is needed to build more sustainable and diversified forms of food production as it is to turn small-town main streets into thriving hot-beds of good food and drink. And of course, this must include easy and affordable access to healthy food outlets. No place can lay claim to being the breadbasket of the world until it can healthfully and affordably feed its own people.

Food policy councils in Kansas are not only a vital, democratic force that add equity and value to their local food systems, they are a key component in strengthening regional economies and revitalizing rural life.