



Strategies

for Sustainable Small Town and Rural Development

It is necessary for citizens and their leaders to be actively engaged in shaping the destiny of their communities. Often, simple, yet powerful actions are all that are necessary to start the momentum in a community toward a new and more promising future. Consumers Energy asked leading experts from around the country the strategies they recommend for individual communities.

"We want our future to be our choice and not something that happens to us."

– A small-town resident

Consumers Energy



Luther Snow, author of *The Organization of Hope: A Workbook for Rural Asset-Based Community Development* and *The Power of Asset Mapping*. Luther also is the creator and facilitator of the concept of *Quick and Simple Asset Mapping*.

Q. What's the significance of community "assets"?

Community assets are things we care about, such as individual talents; associations and networks; institutions; physical assets; and economic assets. Sometimes we take these things for granted. Sometimes we are told our assets don't count. Sometimes we don't see the assets right under our noses. It's easy to get caught up in our needs, thinking about what we don't have. But, the pioneers of Asset-Based Community Development (ABCD), John McKnight and Jody Kretzmann, demonstrated that communities are successful when we focus on the "half-full cup," rather than the "half-empty cup." When we recognize our community assets, gifts and strengths, rather than our needs and deficiencies, we are empowered to act on these assets together to get things done.

Q: What is Asset Mapping?

Asset Mapping is not a system or a method, but a way of thinking and acting that reminds us of the assets all around us and the success we have when we work with these assets together to get things done as part of a larger community. The process I call Quick and Simple Asset Mapping Experience helps groups understand, create and take asset-based action for positive community benefit.

Q: Does Asset Mapping "work" in rural communities?

Yes, Asset Mapping is very much rooted in a rural tradition and mindset.

Rural communities are familiar with "asset thinking," because we have always had to "use what we've got, to get what we want." What else are we going to do? No one is going to do it for us. And we can't use what we haven't got! We have to build rural community ourselves, from what we have. That's why there is such a strong rural tradition of thriftiness and innovation. To a great extent, asset thinking is already here.

We build on an “open-sum” basis, “my gain is your gain is our gain.”

Every aspect of rural community is shaped by our ability to recognize assets and connect with each other. Our businesses and economy, for example, are developed when we encourage diverse entrepreneurs to grow locally appropriate enterprises. At the same time, young people, workers and businesses want to stay and engage here when we invest in our quality of life and make sure no one falls between the cracks. It all

multiplies in a kind of “snowball effect” of asset thinking and action over time.

Q: *What are some assets and strengths in rural communities that are sometimes overlooked?*

Rural people have been told “no” so often we’ve sometimes come to believe it ourselves. We’ve been told that rural communities are “obsolete.” Add that

to the real hard times and painful changes many rural communities have experienced, and it’s not surprising we sometimes put ourselves down too, and even lose hope.

But in every rural place I’ve visited, I’ve met people who really care about their community and the rural quality of life. We want to make a living so we can live and invest and prosper here. That’s the first and most important rural asset.

Dig a little deeper and you see that rural communities have a special ability to “network” across distance. Rural means spread out. Because we are spread out, we have learned two things: how to be independent, and how to be interdependent. In everything we do, from our sports teams to our schools, from grain silos to mutual insurance companies, from our congregations to our utility companies, we take advantage of local resources, flexibility and innovation, and then we connect across distance to get things done as part of a larger network.

If you think about it, this rural skill at networking across distance is exactly what is called for in a global economy. This is why I believe rural communities are well suited to support entrepreneurship, new manufacturing networks, new food markets and new networks for culture, recreation and tourism. No, things aren’t the same today as they were before. But we have real skills and knowledge that are in demand in a global economy. We’re not obsolete. We’re on the leading edge!

Q: *You say that when we recognize our assets, we shift away from worrying about “Us and Them” and toward acting as “All of Us.” Why?*

When we build on our assets, we recognize that the value of our own assets depends on connecting them with others. I may have some wood, for example, and you may have carpentry skills, but it is only by connecting these assets that we can build something. Although our assets may be different, we both depend on our connections in a wider community to get things done.

In rural communities, we discover that we cannot afford to waste any of our assets. Every individual has something valuable to contribute, and everyone gains from participating in the larger network. That’s true sustainability.

Think of the heated basketball rivalry between two small towns. The need-based way of looking at this is we need to win. It's "fixed-sum," that is, it's win or lose, us or them. But the asset-based way of looking at this is open-sum, win/win/win. The teams are networked across distance as part of a league, and many people will travel for miles to get to these games. The outcome of the game is important, briefly, but if we didn't have a league, we couldn't play at all. The towns are part of something bigger, and they all contribute to make that bigger thing (the league) possible. My gain is your gain is our gain. It's not "us and them." It's "all of us."

*Rural communities aren't obsolete ...
they're on the cutting edge.*

Q: How does a community do Asset Mapping?

In a way, you are already doing Asset Mapping. Whenever and wherever you have had success in your community, it's because people have recognized assets and used them in mutually beneficial relationships to take positive action.

But we do fall into traps of need-thinking and fixed-sum perspective, don't we? Communities can build on successes, and get past obstacles and traps, by going through an intentional Asset Mapping process together.

A trained facilitator can help a community see assets that are overlooked and help build positive relationships and actions to strengthen the ongoing community dynamic. Yet Quick and Simple Asset Mapping is quick and simple enough to be facilitated by dedicated volunteer leaders, and this will help get your community moving toward a better understanding of your assets and relationships and actions. The process is described in detail in the book *The Power of Asset Mapping* and includes three steps:

1. **Recognizing Our Assets.** Responding to a series of "sparking" questions from the facilitator or leaders, participants write down community assets on sheets of paper. We focus on what we have, and we are reminded of the abundance of assets all around us. The easy and obvious assets are listed early, but the facilitators can cause these assets to multiply by having participants think thoroughly about the full range of assets in the community.
2. **Connecting the Dots.** Small groups of participants brainstorm actions that we can take by connecting our existing assets in new ways. We see new opportunities and the value of our relationships with each other. As with the assets,



there are some obvious actions, but facilitators can expand these by having participants pursue a range of action verbs that stimulate thought and new ways to look at relationships between assets.

3. **Voting with Our Feet.** The actions are posted, and participants “vote” for any action that they feel inspired to explore and pursue. We see further connections between these actions with the idea that “your efforts will strengthen mine,” and “mine will strengthen hers.” Facilitators help participants see that all people and interests benefit from the wider community.

*Rural means spread out.
Because we're spread out,
we have learned two things:
how to be independent, and
how to be interdependent.*

This Quick and Simple Asset Mapping Experience works as a kind of instant, positive, action planning process for participants. But the real outcome of the exercise is a community dynamic that sustains us over time. It strengthens and builds on the “open-sum” way of thinking and acting, and on the idea that “my gain is your gain is our gain.”

A more formal Asset Mapping session with an experienced facilitator can occur either initially, as a kind of a “jump start” and inspiration, or as a follow-up from a volunteered experience, as a “roll up our sleeves” action and strategy session. Trained facilitators are available. I provide such facilitation and training (luthersnow@hotmail.com), or other like-minded facilitators are available, including Lisa Hadden (haddenl@aol.com), who is located in Michigan.

Consider the value of asset mapping for your community. And, remember, keep looking at the half-full cup!

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Additional Resources:

- *The Organization of Hope: A Workbook for Rural Asset-Based Community Development* by Luther Snow (available from the Asset-Based Community Development Institute)
- *The Power of Asset Mapping* by Luther Snow (available from The Alban Institute or online booksellers)
- Luther Snow's Web site – <http://home.earthlink.net/~lutherksnow/> or search “Luther Snow”



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