A Can-Do Community.
The City of Atwood and Rawlins County is a story of a can-do community demonstrating that it cannot only survive in this difficult region, but also thrive. Like others in rural Kansas, this community has been on a quest for solutions leading to renewed prosperity. This search illustrates the dedication of leaders and their hard work to ensure the future of the community they love to call home. ‘Hometown’ has a special meaning in Rawlins County as it does elsewhere, but it also serves as motivation to seek strategies and make development happen.

Measuring the impacts of any economic development strategy is hard. Determining actual cause and effect is always a challenge. There are so many factors that can enable or undermine development efforts. So the following analysis must be viewed with this caution in mind. With that said, we are convinced there is “cause and effect” going on in Rawlins County with respect to its development efforts. The following analysis and illustrations tell a powerful story of Rawlins County and its efforts to change the trend lines for the better.

Aerial view of Lake Atwood and the community of Atwood. Atwood, established 1880, is the County seat of Rawlins County, with the population of approximately 1,200. Atwood is nestled in the historic and picturesque Beaver Creek Valley at the intersection of KS Highway 25 and US Highway 36.
Bending the Trend Lines.

Rawlins County does not want to be held up as a shining star to which other Great Plains communities should compare themselves. However, this community is special in that it has persevered in its search for development solutions. It has evolved a game plan that is already proving it is capable of bending the historically downward-sloping trend lines towards the positive. Just a handful of communities like this exist in the Great Plains. As Rawlins County continues to ensure its future, we would do well to learn from its mistakes and successes as we continue to seek prosperity in the 21st Century.

A Community to Learn From.

A hallmark of Rawlins County’s success is rooted in its never-ending development efforts. Our study of this community only goes back so far, but 1992 is perhaps an important date in the life of this community began a strategic planning process with help from Kansas State University. Through a new group called the Atwood Economic Development Committee, strategic planning updates were completed in 1993, 1996, 1998, 1999 and 2002. According to the Heartland Center for Leadership Development and its widely recognized Clues to Community Survival, communities that strategically plan and envision their future fare better in the long run. Rawlins County has been involved in strategic planning for a long time, which undoubtedly had an impact on its efforts with KHPI.

Quality of Life and Economic Development

A key insight that has become culture in Rawlins County is the connection between quality of life (community development) and expanding economic opportunities (economic development). It is clear that this community has aggressively invested in both community and economic development.

Community Visioning and Strategic Planning.

One of Rawlins County’s keys to success is its willingness and even enthusiasm to look to other communities for ideas. In Nebraska, a new and innovative development approach called HomeTown Competitiveness or HTC was taking shape in 2003 to 2005. With support from the W.K. Kellogg Foundation and others, HTC was proving its potential in communities like Ord and Valley County, Nebraska. Dawn Hampton, Rhonda Argabright and Cathy Domsch of northwest Kansas attended the first Ord HTC Field Day. What they learned from Ord and other HTC communities inspired them and gave them hope. They went back home bringing renewed energy into the on-going swimming pool project and started the ACE Foundation.
Actively Learning from Other Communities.

In the summer of 2005, Rawlins County leaders organized to deploy the lessons they had learned from their HTC experiences. They endorsed the hiring of returning native Chris Sramek as the county’s newest economic development director. The community then joined up with a new initiative called Ogallala Commons. This included communities from west Texas to Wyoming; it proved to be a rich learning ground focused on an HTC-like system of sustainable development.

A Community to Learn From.

Rawlins County embraced the importance of local leadership, sound and well-funded development organizations, community philanthropy, youth engagement, attraction and entrepreneurship, entrepreneurship as the primary economic development strategy and the important connection between creating local economic opportunities and the critical need for people attraction.

Rawlins County made mistakes, momentum was lost at times and there were conflicts and heartbreak. Sometimes there were feelings that despite their efforts they would never make a real difference. Drought and national economic recessions compounded already challenging conditions, but through all this, the community continued to search, explore and act.

It Begins With Youth.

In a survey conducted in Fall 2008, 52% of teens reported that they could picture themselves living in the Atwood area in the future. This shocked adults in the community. It meant that their children were not gone for good when they graduated from high school. If only they could make Rawlins County a viable option both for having a career and raising a family their youth could be enticed to return.

Linked Recruitment

In Rawlins County, when a position opens up or a business needs transitioning, the business doesn’t just place an ad in the newspaper, it calls the Chamber of Commerce or the Economic Development office. These groups stay in close contact with alumni and others who, if presented the opportunity, would like to return home.

The trick is “know your youth when they graduate, stay in touch through college and then follow their careers,” says Rawlins County Economic Development board member John Buck.

Atwood does this through alumni banquets, letters, an e-mail database, Facebook and the Rawlins County website.

However, all this would hardly be effective if young people didn’t see Atwood as an attractive place to live. Thus it all starts with community investment. Young people hear that Rawlins County is a good place to go back to – and they do.
Rawlins County’s first entrepreneurship fair, or e-fair, grew out of work with Ogallala Commons. 40% of the youth entrepreneurship fair participants are back in the area, and several have started their own businesses. Each year groups from as far as two hours away participate in the e-fair and only once has the winner been a resident of Atwood. However, seven sustained local northwest Kansas businesses have sprung out of these e-ship fairs. 2012 marked the 8th annual fair and it has come to be a regional event.

High school leadership organizations provide a ready-made avenue for teaching youth about professional development and entrepreneurship success. In Rawlins County, the local FFA chapter plays this vital role. “Today, I think half our school participates in FFA.” These youth have already made their own contribution to Atwood’s development. They designed, fundraised and built a Frisbee golf course around Lake Atwood, mentored by Sarah Goss. The course opened for play in Spring, 2011.

Community Philanthropy.

Funding community development projects can sometimes be the most bewildering part of the process. However, sustained funding is the only way to ensure sustained development.

According to a study by Wichita State University, in 2004 Rawlins County households had a net worth of $534 million. WSU estimated that between 2004 and 2020, approximately $63 million in accumulated wealth would be available for transfer to the next generation. Rawlins County’s HTC steering team has set a goal to capture 20% of this wealth transfer by 2020, which would mean $12.6 million for local community foundations. If these foundations’ endowments had a payout of only 5% at this level, the community would receive $630,000 each year for community betterment and economic development.

One reason so many rural communities are challenged and struggling is because they have a tradition of grossly underfunding their own development efforts. Rawlins County seems to have recognized the benefits of community giveback. With two endowment funds and a family trust in existence by the late 1990s, current community philanthropy efforts have focused on promoting synergy between these groups as well as encouraging patterns of necessary giveback among patrons.
Atwood’s oldest endowment, Second Century, began in the early 1980s with a focus on traditional development avenues such as community attractiveness and board-designated development efforts. The ACE Foundation was established on the premise of donor-restricted, project-based funds. Its first and most important project was securing the assets needed to build the Atwood swimming pool.

Since 1987, the Obert Family Trust has given $3.5 million dollars to many community organizations, every church, each park and the Jayhawk Theatre. $350,000 has been given in college scholarships and loans to graduates of Atwood and Rawlins County High School.

Rawlins County’s philanthropic organizations work particularly well because of a habit of matching funds with community organizations to complete funding on projects. The Atwood Lions, Atwood Ambassador, Atwood Rotary, Masons and the Rawlins County Sportsman Association raise approximated $100,000 annually that many times is matched with monies from the foundations. Current asset levels in the two local foundations and the Obert Trust are $5-6 million.

**Leveraging Outside Resources.**

Rawlins County and Atwood have embraced a diverse range of community development strategies in the same way they have engaged in learning through networking with other communities. They have partnered with programs through the Kansas Department of Commerce, the Kansas Health Foundation (both leadership & philanthropy), NetWork Kansas, Kansas State University and Cooperative Extension, HTC, Ogallala Commons and the list goes on.

**HomeTown Prosperity & Kansas Entrepreneurial Communities Initiative.**

Rawlins County was among the first three Kansas HomeTown Prosperity communities. Rawlins County was already a leader in using the HTC framework and process. But engaging in KHPI was an opportunity to renew and energize efforts. When the Kansas Entrepreneurial Communities Initiative (KECI) came along, Rawlins County was more than ready to jump on board. This community was already a Network Kansas E-Community and was committed to growing its economy by growing area entrepreneurs. Rawlins County was a partner in an innovative project funded by USDA Rural Development in Kansas along with Chase County in Nebraska. This project began to explore how to employ business coaching and advanced strategies related to youth engagement, attraction and entrepreneurship.

**The Value of ‘HomeTown’**

*Rooted in this value is a hope that a community can be established that will be attractive to at least some of the children and grandchildren of current residents. This is a community that is capable of meeting the core needs of its residents, including allowing elders to remain because of sound health care and other necessary services.*
Rawlins County is not Denver, Wichita or even Hays, but it is a place with a unique small town quality of life that makes it an attractive place to live. The following is a partial chronology of community developments projects undertaken by the community:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Project/Investment</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1997</td>
<td>Pool project begins.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1999</td>
<td>Begin renovations of city water tanks and transmission lines.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2003</td>
<td>Atwood Beautification Committee forms, begins adding new lampposts, benches, planters, trash receptacles and trees.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2003</td>
<td>Rawlins County Health Center receives a stimulus Community Development Block Grant of $400,000 which contributes greatly to the construction of the front entrance and admission areas of the facility. A $7 million loan from USDA provides funding for the overall facility expansion and renovation. Project to be completed late 2011.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2008</td>
<td>The “Garden Project,” a community beautification/life skills teaching project is begun.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2009</td>
<td>Dental clinic brought to Atwood after three years of effort.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2010</td>
<td>Construction begins on a new music room addition at Rawlins County High School.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2010</td>
<td>Movie theater renovated digital projector / 3D system.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2010</td>
<td>“Atwood Boulevard” and other miscellaneous downtown beautification projects commence.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2010</td>
<td>Disc golf course built around Lake Atwood spearheaded by Atwood FFA.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2010</td>
<td>Outdoor Wildlife Learning Site committee reorganized and began renovations of trees, shrubs and nature trails.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2011</td>
<td>Pool project completed at a cost of $1.3 million dollars.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2012</td>
<td>The 60-year-old Rawlins County Health Center completed a $1.2 million renovation and expansion including new cardiac rehab and physical therapy department, new patient parking, front entrance, admissions area, patient wing, etc..</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
How Sound is the Future of Rawlins County?

It is still too early to be definitive, but indications are real and strong that Rawlins County is succeeding in bending its trend lines towards the positive. It is on the doorstep of joining a select group of rural communities in the Great Plains that can make this claim. So let’s review the emerging evidence of positive systemic change in Rawlins County.

*Figure 1 displays net migration for Rawlins County, Kansas. Migrations relates to those people moving into and out of Rawlins County on a permanent basis. This data is provided by IRS records based on the home address of tax filers.*

![Figure 1 – Net Migration, Rawlins County, Kansas](chart)

*Trends in Growing a More Prosperous Economy?*

For a rural community like Rawlins County, key components of its economy are “nonfarm proprietorships.” These are typically locally owned, smaller businesses with a family owner and a few employees. These kinds of businesses make up the mainstay of rural economies in the Great Plains. The U.S. Bureau of Economic Analysis has been tracking these businesses since 1969 and so we can get a “long” view of what has been happening to this segment of Rawlins County’s economy.

The Non-Farm Proprietorships chart (Fig. 2) for Rawlins County tracks two trend lines: changing personal income realized by these businesses and the job creation associated with them. We tend to focus more on the income trend line because it is measuring real changes in personal income (adjusted for inflation). The jobs trend line gives us a less accurate picture of what is going on as it measures jobs not workers. The trend in multiple job holding tends to make this trend line look more positive than it really is.
Rawlins County has a very unique set of trend lines. Between 1969 and the early 1990s, personal income generated by these businesses declined from around $11 million to around $6 million. During the 1990s, personal income increased moderately rising from about $6 to $9 million or by one-third – real progress in growing a more prosperous economy.

But beginning in 2000 and continuing until the Great Recession began taking its toll, personal income generated by these businesses in Rawlins County took off, rising to about $21 million or by 133%. This is remarkable and there are only a few counties in the Great Plains with this kind of growth. So this pattern is very unique and sets Rawlins County apart.

Incomes have moderated in the last four years but are still at record high levels. Part of this remarkable improvement is related to lessening drought, better commodity prices and increased farm related spending. But these changes have occurred in counties like Rawlins all across the Great Plains and we have not seen this level of improvement in these other places. So what accounts for these changes? We believe it is the combined development strategies of people attraction and entrepreneurship. Young adults returning to the community are creating an increase in business activity. Conversely, improving entrepreneurial ventures are creating more job opportunities for those wanting to come to Rawlins County. This cycle of development progress is resulting in improved economic opportunity and growth.
Restoring Positive Population Growth.

There is no question that Rawlins County and Atwood have earned an “A” for effort and commitment. But the question remains, has all this work made a real difference in the future of this community anchored in the hard environment and economy of the Great Plains?

The second piece of compelling evidence that Rawlins County and its development efforts are generating real change is migration patterns. Looking at the decade of the 2000s, Rawlins County has a typical pattern for Great Plains places – for every new birth there are two deaths and net migration is negative. Declining natural growth and loss of residents to out-migration creates chronic and severe depopulation. This has been the pattern for decades. But something began to change in this decade. Employing very reliable migration data from the U.S. Internal Revenue Service beginning in 2004, we see net-migration beginning to improve. Simply put, more people were moving into the County than leaving.

The most recent and official Census figures are now available for Rawlins County and they confirm the trends indicated by the IRS data. The rate of population decline moderated in 2008-2009 and then turned positive between 2009 and 2010 (Fig. 3). For the first time since the 1930s Census, Rawlins County grew in population. While the rate of improvement is small at just 94 net gain in residents, this data confirm what the migration information was suggesting – Rawlins County was making real

Fig. 3 – Contemporary Population of Rawlins County, Nebraska
progress in stabilizing its depopulation. From a development standpoint, this is huge and very few places in the Great Plains can make this claim. The next chart (Fig. 4) illustrates the longer-term trend line in Rawlins County’s population illustrating a slowdown in population decline beginning in the 2000s and tipping positive in 2010.

The challenge of winning the demographic war is huge in rural America and particularly the region in which much of rural Kansas is found. But the story becomes even more interesting and encouraging when we consider what it means for the demographic structure of Rawlins County.

Fig. 4 – Historical Population of Rawlins County, Kansas


Fighting for Local Schools.

The chart on the next page (Fig. 5) tracks school enrollment for USD 105, which serves Rawlins County. Between 2000-2001 and 2007-2008, school year enrollment plunged, dropping by about 34 percent. But beginning with the 2007-2008 school year, enrollment has stabilized and picked up a bit. This trend line indicates that more younger families with children are taking root in Rawlins County. The IRS migration data also supports this conclusion. Higher rates of young family attraction and retention are foundational to slowing and reversing historic depopulation and economic decline.
Figures 6 and 7 on the following page provide very interesting and exciting insight into the demographic turn around occurring in Rawlins County. Figure 6 provides the overall enrollment trend for the public school grades Kindergarten through 6th grade. What this graph highlights is a possible leading indicator of population turn-around with more young families staying and coming to Rawlins County strengthening the demographic future of this community. Total elementary school enrollment was 186 in 2000-2001 and then fell consistently until the 2006-2007 school year. This reflects the longer-term depopulation trend impacting Rawlins County. Over this six year period elementary school enrollment dropped by 20 percent! However, in 2006-2007 enrollment stabilized at 148 indicating a possible turn around. In 2009-2010, enrollment began to grow again rising to 167 this year (2012-2013) representing a 13% increase in three years! As community leader and school board member Chris Sramek observed… “Our Kindergarten and first grade classes are growing again.” Over the last three years, the combined enrollment of Kindergarten and 1st grade rose from 39 to 59 representing a 51% increase. Figure 7 provides a compositional trend analysis by elementary school grade from 2000 through 2013.

![Fig. 5 – Rawlins County, Kansas USD 105 School Enrollment](image-url)
Fig. 6 – Total Yearly Enrollment for K-6 in Rawlins County, Kansas

Fig. 7 – Yearly Enrollment by Grade in Rawlins County, Kansas
The Path to Prosperity Remains Steep.

Not all is rosy. There are indicators suggesting Rawlins County still has significant development challenges to meet in order to ensure its future. However, in today’s global economy, no community can sit back and assume its future will be prosperous. Even the largest communities with significant capacity and resources must aggressively explore and support their on-going development. The key for Rawlins County is that it continues to work hard, work smart and invest in its future through development. Continued commitment will enable Rawlins County to deepen its progress and continue to bend its trend lines towards the positive.

The Important Role of Coaching

We believe that a fundamental key to Rawlins County’s success were two types of coaching...

Community Coaching

&

Business Coaching

Playing these roles were local Chris Sramek and outsider Leon Atwell. Our evaluation of Rawlins County clearly supports the view that coaching has been essential to helping this community stay the course with its evolving strategies which has resulted in bottom line impacts such as population stabilization and growth.

Chris Sramek

There are numerous leaders and community builders in Rawlins County and Atwood that are making the difference. Chris is one of them. Chris has a regional business called Decision Weather based in this area. Chris is also a very engaged civic leader and served as the local economic developer during a critical period in the community’s turnaround. Between 2005 and 2013, Chris served as a school board member. Chris has served as a business coach and a community coach. He is a soft leader that fosters community dialogue. He effectively uses information to stimulate learning and support smart decision making, and he works hard (with many others) to ensure progress is sustained. In our experience, sustaining effort is huge. Many communities get off to a hot start and make real progress, but a few years in, they seem to lose momentum and commitment. Investment in the strategy is often not sustained and progress is undermined. Rawlins County is not picture perfect in this regard. Community leaders have had to work hard and constantly to sustain commitment and ensure resources for strategic actions and programs. But overall, for the past decade, they have managed this challenge better than many communities. Sustained development is yielding results because of this commitment.
Leon Atwell
Leon Atwell grew up in Western Kansas, was educated at Kansas State University and moved away to Houston, Texas to live and work the corporate life. By choice, Leon and his wife returned to rural Kansas to live, work and raise a family. Leon employed his skills to become one of Kansas’ most effective and talented community and business coaches. We believe Leon is among the most seasoned coaches in all of rural America. Through a series of projects over the past decade, Leon has had the opportunity to work with Atwood and Rawlins County. His primary role has been as a community coach helping area leaders vision, set goals, action plan and implement strategies. Leon has been there when things are going well and there when things have gone into the ditch. Leon and Chris have a powerful relationship helping each other more effectively work with other community leaders and stakeholders. Coaching is all about listening carefully, helping sort out information and, ultimately, making good decisions. The coach does not and should not have the ultimate answers, but the coach can help leaders like Chris deal with the challenges of being a “change maker.” Change is hard for many people. It creates uncertainty, and in places where there has been chronic depopulation, there is fear that change could actually make things worse. A coach with an outside perspective, like Leon, has the benefit of a broader set of experiences with multiple communities. They have seen communities that are further along and often understand where the sand traps are that need to be avoided. This perspective can help communities understand change and manage their fears of the risks better. At the end of the day, the coach can help leaders gain confidence that they are on the right road, and if they sustain effort, they can make desired progress. Leon has played this role in Rawlins County and multiple other communities.
“Female leadership in this whole process has doubled the past 10 years,” said KHPI Site Coordinator Chris Sramek. “Take Atwood FFA for example. Twenty years ago it was completely male dominated. Now it’s 50/50 if not more females.” Atwood is full of strong female leadership including the former mayor, city council members, the economic development director and the director of the chamber of commerce. Richard Wood’s book, “Survival of Rural America,” suggests there is a common scene in small rural towns like Atwood: children walking home from school. A sense of safety, security, and community are one of small-town rural America’s strongest assets. Sramek says, “Places like Atwood are ideal communities for women, and particularly single mothers, due to low housing costs, good schools, safety and security, and a close sense of community.” Women want a safe place to raise their families, and will go to great lengths to find a job for themselves or a spouse or even start their own business to make it happen. Sramek is of the opinion that the “can-do” attitude and people attraction development really kicked into high gear with mothers who just wanted to have a place to take their babies to swim. He said, “I think it’s safe to say that because of the swimming pool project, a larger number and more diverse group of people became committed to investing time and money into community betterment.”
The Center for Rural Entrepreneurship’s mission is to help community leaders build a prosperous future by supporting and empowering business, social and civic entrepreneurs. With our roots and hearts in rural America, we help communities of all sizes and interests by bringing empowering research, community engagement and strategy development to you through our many Solution Areas. Our Solution Area Teams empower communities to discover their own answers to the challenges and opportunities they face:

- **Community Development Philanthropy:** Providing research and community engagement strategies that help communities build philanthropic capacity and create development resources now and in the future.

- **Youth Engagement:** Providing tools and a framework for communities to engage young people now and to bring them home in the future.

- **Measurement Research Policy:** Providing the tools to help communities define development goals, measure success and improve outcomes.

- **Entrepreneurial Communities:** Providing a roadmap for communities to design and deliver entrepreneur-focused economic development strategies that work.

To learn more about us, go to [www.energizingentrepreneurs.org](http://www.energizingentrepreneurs.org).

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