

Valley County Success Story

Valley County Nebraska is a perfect example of extraordinary success in a rural community. For the past 6 years, Valley County has been working on many economic development projects and the hard work is paying off. From the recruitment of *Timberline Total Solutions*, a telemarketing company, to the attraction of *Val-E Ethanol*, a 45-million gallon ethanol plant, Valley County is a shining example of rural development.

Background

Like many other rural areas, Valley County suffered a significant decline in population, losing 10% of its residents from 1990 to 2000. Its aging population and outmigration of youth were serious concerns to the economic future of the community. So, in 2000, the Valley County Economic Development (ED) Board was formed, comprised of representatives from the County, City of Ord, the Ord Area Chamber of Commerce, and Greater Loup Valleys Activities.

The ED Board recruited a young Director, a 1995 graduate of Ord High School, to become the executive director of the Ord Chamber of Commerce and Valley County Economic Development. Bethanne Kuntz and her husband were both from Ord, and wanted to move back to the community.

Business Recruitment and Development

In 2001, residents of Ord passed a 1% city sales tax to help fund economic development. Since that time, fourteen loans have been approved, totaling \$658,157, creating 46 new jobs and retaining 31 positions. A re-use fund was set up, the Loup Valley Investment Club was formed, and tax increment financing was also put in place.

A telemarketing company, *Timberline Total Solutions*, was successfully recruited in 2002. From 2002 – 2005, TTS paid more than \$4.7 million in total payroll. Each year since it has opened, college students return and reunite with the community. In the summer of 2005, twenty high school and college students were employed.

Also in 2002, Valley County became the pilot site for a new program called HomeTown Competitiveness, or HTC. It is a rural economic development program that focuses on communities of 5,000 residents or less. It is a joint venture of the Nebraska Community Foundation, the Heartland Center for Leadership Development, the Center for Rural Entrepreneurship, and the Center for Rural Affairs that offers planning for communities built on leadership, philanthropy, entrepreneurship and youth. In January 2006 a partnership was formed with Loup Valleys Rural Public Power District to share information about the HTC program in their service area. Individual presentations were given to each of the county and village boards as well as quarterly workshops offered on HTC.

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An ethanol plant was successfully recruited in 2005. Val-E Ethanol, currently under construction, is a 45-million gallon ethanol production facility that will employ 35 FTEs paying over \$1.4 million in annual salaries. In the spring and summer of 2006, Trotter's Truck & Tire, Trotter's Whoa & Go Convenience Store, and Arby's restaurant opened creating over 50 new jobs. Within the last year, two new banks opened in Ord.

The County created a Business Park north of Ord called the Mortensen Industrial Park. The county provides leases to new or expanding businesses at a rate of \$1/acre per year for up to 99 years. In 2004, Cornerstone Manufacturing and Agland Electric opened their doors at this location. This summer, Kokes Welding and Premier Pump and Well will also be building on this site.

In July 2004, Valley County received a \$50,000 RBEG grant. This money was used to hire a Business Development Coordinator to provide technical assistance to new and existing businesses. An Internal Resource Team, comprised of local attorneys, accountants, financial advisors, computer support providers, marketing experts, and insurance representatives was formed. Members of this team have agreed to meet with business owners for up to 1 hour, free of charge, to assist with professional issues.

The Economic Development Office started a Job Service for both employees and employers. In addition to offering daily referrals, a Job Fair was held in May 2006. Eleven businesses participated.

North Loup alum, Terry Keown, returned to Valley County from Prescott, Arizona four separate times to teach the EDGE class, present a Business Boot Camp, offer classes at the Job Fair, and be a guest speaker at Arcadia, North Loup, and Ord schools.

Downtown Revitalization

All four local banks in Ord have partnered to offer a low interest loan program up to \$25,000 per business for storefront improvements. In addition, a \$25,000 CDBG planning grant was awarded in 2003 to develop a plan for replacing streets, sidewalks, gutters, curbs and lighting in downtown Ord. In 2005 the property owners in the Business Improvement District approved paying for the sidewalk cost, with only four of the 62 opposing. On May 9, 2006 the City of Ord voters passed a ½ cent sales tax to pay for the general obligation portion of the project at a passage rate of 82%. A \$250,000 CDBG grant was approved in July 2006 to help with utility improvements and a \$500,000 Transportation Enhancement grant has been applied for to cover 80% of the lighting expense and engineering.

Leadership

Leadership Quest, an 8-month leadership program, was the first program that evolved from HTC. It was created in 2002 in an attempt to create a group of young leaders. Eighty-seven individuals have now completed this program, many now serving in various leadership capacities.

Philanthropy

Philanthropy is strong in Valley County. In 2001, John and Alyce Wozab donated \$1.2 million to the County. Since then, \$336,839 has been distributed to the health care system, fire and rescue, economic development, churches, and many other organizations throughout the area. A "Founders Club" was formed in 2005. Members pay \$1,000 to join and the interest is used to fund HTC activities. There are 65 members to date.

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Youth

During the 2004/2005 school year, St. Mary's 5-8th grade students participated in an entrepreneurship program. They created 31 businesses that sold over 1000 products and generated over \$4,000 in sales. The students were able to keep the profits. The following year, the 6th grade Girl Scouts created a Food Mix business, packaging herb, cheese spread, dip and biscuit mixes. They also wrote a business plan, designed business cards and labels, and recorded individual radio ads. Over \$450 in sales was generated. This summer, a 4-H leader is working with five of her members on a special entrepreneurship project. These 4-H'ers are creating a landscaping business and have presented a proposal to the Senior Center. The project will be showcased at the County and State Fairs in 2006.

In an attempt to encourage and attract people to move back to the community, information on business opportunities, incentives, and economic development news will be sent to graduates of Valley County schools. A database of names, addresses, and e-mail addresses is being compiled. A \$17,000 BECA grant was received to help develop this program.

Increase in Retail Sales, Personal Income, & Per Capita Income

From 2000 to 2004, retail sales in Valley County increased 20% compared to the state average of 16.2%. From 2000 to 2003, personal income increased by 20.9% in Valley County, compared to 10.8% statewide. In addition, during that same time period, per capita income in Valley County increased by 21.9% versus the 9.2% state average.

Quality of Life

Trail Development: The City of Ord was awarded funding from the Nebraska Department of Roads Transportation and Enhancement Program in the amount of \$231,649. These funds were used for the construction of a pedestrian-bicycle trail that provides access from Aule's Lake and Bussell Park to the Lower Loup Natural Resources District Arboretum. The trail system consists of approximately 5,000 feet of concrete surfacing. The trail is fully lighted and several benches have been installed for pedestrians. Construction was complete in 2004.

Aule's Pond Renovation: In 2002, the City of Ord also received a grant from the CLEAR Program (Community Lake Enhancement and Restoration) in the amount of \$270,170. These grant funds were used to restore Aule's Pond located in Bussell Park. This project included sediment removal and deepening the lake up to 12 feet in some areas, installing a lake liner, rip-rap and vegetation mat around the lake, installation of an aeration system and fountain, boulders and gravel for fish habitat, installation of a lake level control, lake vegetation, and stocking of the lake with fish habitat. The construction phase of the project has been completed, and the engineers have completed a lake management plan.

Grants Received

Grants in the amount of \$835,730 have been awarded to Valley County. This includes a \$25,000 Planning Grant for the Downtown Project, \$50,000 USDA RBEG grant for technical assistance, a \$399,890 housing rehab grant, \$75,000 Kellogg Grant for Valley County HomeTown Competitiveness, \$10,970 in Worker Training Grants, a \$17,000 BECA Grant for youth attraction, and most recently a \$250,000 CDBG grant for street paving, sanitary sewers, water mains, and storm sewer inlets. In addition, they have an additional \$748,000 in grants pending.

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Population Increase in Valley County

Many rural areas are experiencing a decrease in their population. Valley County lost 10% from 1990 to 2000. However, due to economic development efforts Valley County, has 3% more households than in 2001.

Awards and Publications

Valley County has appeared in many articles over the past two years. *USA Today* featured Valley County in an article on rural development efforts in Nebraska headlined: "Hometown competitiveness drives new rural development strategy." The *New York Times* had an article entitled, "In Ord, Neb., the Latest Success is 20 New Residents." In November, the W.K. Kellogg Foundation featured Valley County's HTC program on its website, annual report and video. "Ord in the Spotlight" was an article that appeared in the *Omaha World Herald* late last year. "Ord—a 'can do' community" article was featured in the *Nebraska Municipal Power Pool* newsletter. In February 2006, *The Grand Island Independent* printed an article entitled "'Good life' getting better in Valley County." KHAS TV in Hastings showcased the Kellogg Foundation grant and Valley County HTC success in a special feature on May 18, 2006.

In March, 2005 Ord received the Governor's *Showcase Community Award*. In November of that same year, Ord was the first community in Nebraska to receive "*Economic Development Certified Community*" status from Nebraska Diplomats and Nebraska Department of Economic Development.

As you can see many dynamic changes are taking place in Valley County. We are proud of the developments and are working diligently to continue this success.

Questions & More Information

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