

## Rural Communities Have Unique Post-COVID Opportunities

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Declining rural populations have been making the news for decades. Nearly 35 percent of the rural counties within the United States have experienced prolonged and significant population loss (Johnson & Lichter, 2019).

But just because some rural areas are declining does not mean that all areas are declining or are destined to decline. Rural population gains are often seen in 1) high amenity counties that support both tourism and early retiree relocation; 2) in counties that are located just beyond metropolitan borders; and 3) in a wide variety of rural areas with more culturally diverse racial and ethnic minorities. (Johnson, 2012).

Added to these national trends is the 2020 large-scale experiment of remote work that developed because of the pandemic. The implications of remote work on a larger societal scale are still unknown for rural areas but the possibilities of living and working anywhere are intriguing.

All these changes are opening new opportunities for the recruitment of potential community members. Specifically, communities are looking at ways to promote aspects of their rural quality of life to people who may be looking to relocate to a new place.

Quality of life can mean different things to different people. Current community members may not be able to see the community assets through the eyes of a potential newcomer. If you cannot see what a potential new community member identifies as a benefit to living there, then it becomes impossible to communicate those benefits to potential newcomers.

In the business world the term “marketing” is used to explain the varied ways a business connects a product or service to a customer. Typically, it incorporates the 4 “P’s: 1) product, 2) price, 3) place and 4) promotion. If you are wanting to market *a community*, a slightly different approach is needed. In community marketing the “P’s” can be reimagined as: 1) people; 2) product; 3) position and promotion; and 4) put it into practice.

### **1<sup>st</sup> - People**

It is important to understand the connection people have with the community. As a type of market research, it is vital to identify and appreciate what new residents want as they think about relocation, the type of experience current newcomers is having now and what the community potentially has to offer them.

## 2<sup>nd</sup> - Product: The Community

This is the time to take a hard, objective look at the benefits of living in the community.

## 3<sup>rd</sup> - Position & Promotion

There are always ways to create a more welcoming place. It is critical that actions reach out to new groups that represent a variety of potential newcomers, even reaching out to groups of people that might have been overlooked in the past. Once identified, then find creative and effective ways to promote and publicize the community as a great place to live, work and play for all.

## 4<sup>th</sup> - Put into Practice

Finally, it is time to take action to strengthen what the community has as assets, create what is needed and then promote the community as a relocation destination site. This becomes a package of actions that connect to each other.

For rural communities wanting to double down on their efforts to recruit and retain new community members, the community marketing “Ps” listed above is an asset-based launching pad for a productive community discussion that can lead to action. With the changes we have seen in 2020, this realistic “can do” approach is worth taking a second look at as rural areas strive to grow their communities.

## References

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