

# The Forces Shaping Our Communities

by Joseph E. Coates

Planners have an intrinsic interest in the future. Yet many planners, in developing long-range comprehensive plans, have failed to take into account some of the powerful forces shaping our communities. I want to briefly discuss several key trends which are affecting thousands of towns, cities and counties across the country.

1. *Rural America is in crisis.* From the Central Plains at the Canadian border down through north Texas and sweeping up to the East through Appalachia, hundreds and hundreds of communities are losing population. In many of these areas, if a bright young person gets a high school diploma or graduates from the local college, his or her next move is out. The shrinkage is due in large measure to the changing structure of agriculture. Today, only 2.5 percent of all workers are inside the farm gate. A second factor is the decline in light manufacturing, largely as a result of effective competition from Japanese and European products.

The economic base of small communities must be identified. There are a half-dozen kinds of small communities that are most likely to thrive. These include: area trade centers, county government seats, retirement communities, suburbs of larger cities, college or university towns, communities that provide recreational opportunities drawing visitors, and those places that are the site of resource-related businesses, such as mines. Communities that do not fall into one of these categories will face an increasingly difficult future.

2. *Information technology holds the promise of being the single most important new development in revitalizing rural America.* As traditional occupational bases shrink, it will become increasingly important for smaller communities to be electronically tied into metropolitan and global business centers. The "information highway" can bring jobs to thousands of communities

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which would otherwise wither and die. Local planners need to focus attention on ensuring that their community can take advantage of this. Adequate telecommunications capabilities (such as having fiber optics linkages) are just as important a part of a modern community's basic infrastructure as are roads, water, and sewer systems — and planning for telecommunications should be just as much of a priority. Consider the profoundly positive effect on Sioux Falls, South Dakota, of becoming a national data processing center for Visa cards. This would have been impossible if that City had not focused attention on developing a strong telecommunications infrastructure.

3. *Within metropolitan areas, new growth hubs are continuing to emerge.* Center cities are increasingly being surrounded by dense hubs of commercial and office activity. These hubs (or "polynuclear" or "edge" cities as some have called them) generally have all of the functions of the center city except for the cultural and governmental activities. This is leading to changes in transportation and work patterns, and business locations. Communities that are outside the center city must plan not only in relation to the older center city, but with these newer hubs in mind.

4. *The globalization of the American economy offers opportunities for many communi-*

*ties.* While much attention in recent years has been on the threats posed by foreign competition, planners should seek to position their communities to take advantage of the opportunities that a more global economy provides. Communities are increasingly competing to host foreign manufacturers and businesses. Foreign manufacturers, not surprisingly, seek a qualified, educated, and trainable workforce. Local planners can help ensure that their community is an attractive competitor for the location of one of these firms by, in particular, seeking to strengthen local educational facilities, from elementary and high school levels right through community college.

## SOME CLOSING THOUGHTS:

Communities which are thriving today also tend to be those which pay attention to environmental and cultural amenities. Air and water quality are important not just to a community's physical health, but to its economic health as well. Cultural amenities are also important in drawing new business to a town. Finally, as our nation continues to become more racially diverse — 25 percent of the population is not of European stock — communities, if they are to be economically successful, must roll out the welcome mat in a way that is truly appealing to Asians, Hispanics, and Blacks, who should be important assets to America's communities. ♦

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