

# How Can A Dying Town Recover? With a Recovery Center

Scott Winton · October 14, 2020

For about 25 years, two to three times a year, I would make an eight-hour drive across a part of Texas. The drive covered many miles and went through many cities of various sizes. Each trip would show that the larger cities were growing and the small towns were shrinking.

Years later, I visited one of those small towns and saw extensive decline, which, research showed, had been occurring for decades, with the town now having almost 50% fewer people than in the 1960s. But eight years earlier, a small [addiction recovery center](#) had opened in a 1930s motor court. The residents of the center voluntarily sign on for a one-year, no-cost, faith-based recovery program. In exchange, they perform labor services for residents and businesses of the town. The recovery center receives payment for the services.



Image source: [Flickr user Nicolas Henderson](#)

I am a recovering alcoholic and I understood what the men had experienced to be willing to commit to this program. They had reached a bottom and would die if they did not change. Joining the recovery center is their last hope for a sober future. I recalled the momentum I experienced towards a premature death, and an analogy was formed that the recovery for a town can be similar to the recovery of an addict.

A shrinking town and an addict both experience a [momentum of decline](#). Though their paths to that condition are completely unrelated, the processes of recovering from the momentum are the same, an internal transformation. It takes a willingness to change what they are doing, and it takes a support structure with tools to stay on the path of recovery.

It is possible that a program of recovery for a town can be structured to emulate successful addiction recovery programs. It is even possible that a town and a recovery center can develop shared programs of recovery which allow the recovering addict to rebuild their life with new skills and experiences gained while helping the town recover. Sponsorship of a recovery center can become the catalyst for change in the town.

With that belief, I pursued an education in community planning to be better equipped to help small towns who wanted to alter their momentum. I learned that during the period these small towns were declining, other small towns with similar economic and locational challenges did not decline. There was obviously a difference in how each town dealt with the forces causing the decline. I also learned that most best practices are hit-and-miss in achieving economic revitalization.

I had hopes of integrating recovery centers into many small towns with a shared program of recovery for the town and the recovery center patients. This could be for any population needing a residential care rehabilitation program such as substance abusers, PTSD war veterans, or battered spouses. But I realized most towns would not take the path of inviting a group of addicts or unstable war veterans into their town and would want to consider many other options before resorting to that method of [economic revitalization](#).

So if the town will not sponsor a recovery center, and if best practices are hit and miss, what can the town do to change their momentum? They can develop their own program of recovery and create the experience of their own internal transformation. That transformation involves looking at themselves, the town, and the world differently.

The focus for systemic change needs to be on:

- **Creating an environment that nurtures self-improvement for every resident of town**, with the understanding that communities and economies are [built by the participants](#) building their life and livelihood in the community.
- **Learning to work together**. This involves putting aside selfish interests, perceptions of others, and additional mental models that may limit their ability to [accurately see the world](#) and properly react to it.
- **Having a shared purpose** that allows the individual's pursuits and growth to be integrated into the larger purpose of revitalizing the town. That purpose needs to be value-based, as values dictate our beliefs, which cause our actions.

- **Accepting that there is an interconnectedness between everything.** As such, we need to have a respect for the earth and respect for people. And we need to be willing to invest a surplus back into the earth and people. These are the ethics we test our intended actions against. The interconnectedness allows us to use systems thinking and leveraged actions resulting in multi-layered benefits.

This means the residents need to get control of their future and start combating the forces that will otherwise destroy the town. For example, the town could:

- Remodel themselves in their physical form and in their governmental and educational practices.
- Form investment groups that fix up the old buildings, fund new business start-ups, and build new buildings and housing alternatives.
- Clean up vacant lots, remove buildings that are beyond repair, and develop rain gardens along the streets to create a tree-shaded environment.
- Integrate passion identification and livelihood conversion into their education and economic systems for all residents.
- Produce high-quality, greenhouse-grown, organic food that is sold to the cities to bring outside money into town.
- Create affordable lifestyle opportunities by making car-free living a viable option.
- Identify assets and methods to capitalize on them.
- Make the town into a place that is a distinct alternative to urban living, without sacrificing access to products, services, and comforts.

Some towns have the capacity to do this, some do not. And those who lack the ability to pull it together can take the approach of last resort by sponsoring a recovery center. The patients would be a source of manpower and direction, but, more importantly, they would bring a sense of hope to the community. Hope is usually all the patient in recovery has—and hope is contagious. Every small town was founded with an abundance of hope, but, for some, hope died or moved to the city. A recovery center can bring hope back to the community.

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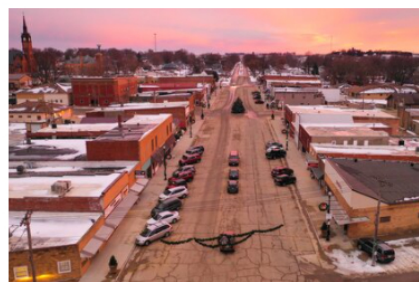
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## About the Author



**Scott Winton** offers planning and consulting services to small towns that want to change their trajectory by utilizing his 40 plus years of diverse experiences. He is a former mayor, homebuilder, real estate broker since 1987, and land developer, including designing and developing the Piazza Escondida in El Paso, TX. He is a 2020 graduate from the University of Texas at Austin School of Architecture with a Master's Degree in Community and Regional Planning. He can be reached at [scottwinton@sbcglobal.net](mailto:scottwinton@sbcglobal.net), 915-637-0787 or at [www.leaptown.org](http://www.leaptown.org).



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I find this interesting. Less because of the recovery aspect, which I know little about, and more because of the bad habits (policies, zoning, ordinances, etc.) that towns and cities get into, often unknowingly, that cause most of their problems. Although not a planner, I am interested in city planning and recently made a partial list of those policies that prevent cities, and their residents, from prospering as they could without these policies. The length of my list surprised me. I thought about this list for awhile and decided that improvement depended mostly upon the ability to change these offending policies. But, I wondered, did the cities even have the authority to do so?

I have discovered that 39 states allow Home Rule Municipalities, to varying degrees. Typically these municipalities are given far more autonomy by their states than is given to Statutory Municipalities. Whereas statutory municipalities can only exert authority that has been specifically or implicitly delegated by the state, home rule municipalities are given far more freedom to govern themselves. In some states like Colorado, most urban dwellers live in home rule municipalities.

My question is, do these cities take advantage of their extra autonomy to free themselves of policies that lead weaker cities? In general, I think not because we can see the results all around us. But now I know that many cities can lead a better life if they can find the strength within themselves, and accept some Strong Towns guidance, to make the necessary changes.

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