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A common-sense approach to reinvigorating small-town America

December 10, 2020 By Emily Rapplaye



As a small town revitalization expert, Deb Brown is filling vacant storefronts in small towns across America. Her recipe for success is simple: Involve locals, break the rules, talk about ideas, and no matter what, do not form another committee.

"Kill the committees! What do you need a committee for? Kill them all. Just go do the work," Brown told Ben Rowley on the Rural Business Show.

Brown is a rural business consultant — she gives keynotes, webinars and workshops on how to foster economic development in rural towns, and she co-founded www.saveyourtown.com, a resource with practical advice on how to make your town a better place to live. Brown and her co-founder, Becky McCray, offer newsletters, videos, toolkits, virtual support and embedded community experiences. But their business is no ordinary small-town consultancy. Brown doesn't parachute in with a preplanned template, lay it down and leave.

"I know that doesn't work," she said. "Because every town is different."

Brown grew up in rural Geneva, Iowa, (population: 141). Though she's lived in places of all sizes, including a major metro city, she now calls Webster City, Iowa, (population: 8,070) home. When Brown was interviewing for a job as chamber director of Webster City, she counted 14 empty buildings downtown. Brown got the job, filled 10 of the 14 vacant buildings within 18 months — and hasn't stopped since. While many of the strategies Brown developed in Webster City work elsewhere, she believes in tailoring the application to local needs and talent.

"A lot of the factory town work," Brown said. "It's about involving your locals. It's not so much about looking for visitors to make the difference. It's about using what you already have and making better use of that."

One of the ways Brown has done this is by starting a local incubator. She looks for an empty building and gains buy-in from the owner to rent the space to entrepreneurs at a reduced rate. Then she looks for one entrepreneur, or several, to fill the space. This takes a little creativity, but Brown suggests looking on Etsy, hosting events to attract vendors, or simply asking the community. Everyone benefits — the building owner has utilities paid and people seeing the property, and the entrepreneurs have the chance to test their idea without investing in real estate.

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Deb Brown

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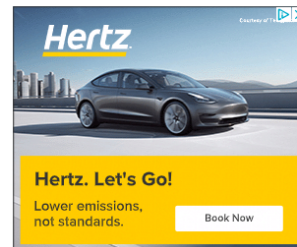
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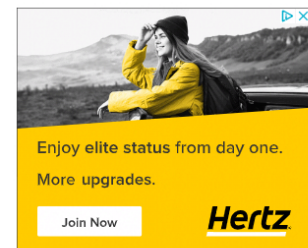
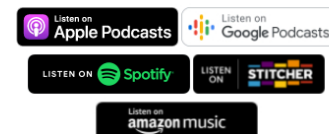
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She recognizes, however, that some revitalization efforts come from the ground up. Her advice to locals who want to see change but can only see red tape is to just do it and ignore the naysayers. “We did a video called ‘8 Ways to Break the Rules.’ One of those eight ways is to do it anyways and just pay the fine,” she said. “If you think about it ... most of our city codes are old and outdated, and the fines are really small. What if you tried your idea out, paid the fine and then shared the success?”

Brown combines this action-oriented attitude and her penchant for involving others into what she calls the “Idea Friendly Method.” This method requires finding other like-minded people, building a network and taking collective action, little by little. She recalled a group of friends in the Twin Cities who wanted more breweries and bakeries in their neighborhood. They came together, started a cooperative and invited others to join their venture. Together, they invested in a building, then found a brewer or baker, and helped get the business off the ground. When that person bought the building back, the cooperative went on to the next building. Brown said she has seen this strategy work in towns as small as Waynoka, Okla. (population: 927).

“Take the small steps and make it happen,” she said.

The easiest first step to take is spreading the word. Brown began her work in Webster City by talking up the vacant spaces. “I decided, instead of hiding them and not talking about them, why don’t we show them off?” she said. She talked them up on the radio, in the news and hosted an empty buildings tour. Brown credits the tour for generating buzz and eventually attracting businesses to nearly all of the vacant spaces.

She applied a similar strategy earlier this year in Ripley, Ohio (population: 1,701). After her embedded experience in Ripley, Brown was happy to see residents start a Facebook group to continue the conversation and create a space to build networks and launch new ideas.

“Do not be afraid to dream and experiment and listen to other people’s stories and make stuff happen,” Brown said.

Brown is offering virtual support for small towns during the pandemic. To learn more about how to work with Brown, visit www.saveyourtown.com and buildingpossibility.com.

Listen to the full episode [here](#).

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