

THE
TOTAL TOWN
MAKEOVER

THE
TOTAL TOWN
MAKEOVER

RETHINKING BUSINESS,
COMMUNITY, AND HOME
IN SMALL-TOWN AMERICA

ANDREW McCREA



BLAKE
& KING

Maysville, Missouri

© 2019 Andrew McCrea

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reproduced or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic or mechanical, including photocopying, recording, or by any information storage and retrieval system, without permission in writing from the publisher.

Published by Blake & King
4663 State Hwy A
Maysville, MO 64469

Publisher's Cataloging-in-Publication Data
McCrea, Andrew, 1972–

The total town makeover : rethinking business, community, and home in small-town America /
Andrew McCrea. – Maysville, MO : Blake & King, 2019.

p. ; cm.

ISBN13: 978-0-9725331-9-5

1. Rural development—United States. 2. Community development—United States. 3. Economic development—United States. 4. Small cities--United States. I. Title.

HN49.C6 M33 2019
307.14—dc23

2019930100

First Edition

Project coordination by Jenkins Group, Inc.
www.bookpublishing.com

Design by Yvonne Fetig Roehler

Printed in the United States of America
23 22 21 20 19 • 5 4 3 2 1

Dedication

*To Paula, Luke, and Alison.
I love you.*

Contents

| | |
|---|----|
| Preface | ix |
| Prologue | xi |
| Chapter 1—Vision of the Future | 1 |
| Chapter 2—Strong Economics | 13 |
| Chapter 3—Vibrant Communities | 37 |
| Chapter 4—The Next Generation | 57 |
| Chapter 5—Make It Happen | 81 |
| Chapter 6—Why Not? | 91 |
| Bibliography | 97 |
| About the Author ♥ <i>Andrew McCrea</i> | 99 |



Preface

The events in this book are real-life stories, most of which are based on personal interviews I've conducted, on location, with those creating positive change in the places they live. I've chosen not to place footnotes in the book because so many of the examples are based on these personal conversations.

In most cases, I've identified the people being interviewed and where they live. However, in a few cases, I've omitted the name, place, or identifying details because sensitive or critical information was shared. The purpose is to provide true stories that will be helpful to others but not to share details that could hurt those willing to share challenging situations they've overcome.

This book also draws on others' research and writings on the subject. See the bibliography in the back of the book, which lists these resources that might be helpful in the quest to create a total town makeover.



Prologue

What is a large city? As a kid, I thought a “large” city was any place with a fast-food restaurant or a Walmart. Those cities had everything you could ever want or need in life.

The closest town to our farm in northwest Missouri didn’t have either of these big-city “luxuries.” Neither did our entire county, for that matter. In fact, my *county* didn’t have a stoplight, unless you counted the one that blinked yellow at the main intersection in town.

Conversely, a small town was the place where I went to school—and whom we competed against in sports. Those towns had a one- or two-block main street. The schools graduated fewer than 50 students from high school each year.

The difference between “large” and “small” towns is primarily defined by where we grew up. I struggled with the subtitle of this book because defining “small-town America” is a matter of opinion. I settled on the answer that small-town America can be found anywhere in the nation. By all accounts, the place where I grew up is a small town. In fact, my entire *county* has just 6,500 residents.

“Small town” can also be used to describe smaller areas or neighborhoods within larger cities. For instance, Westchester County, New York, which is just north of the Bronx, the northernmost borough of New York City, has just under one million residents. Within that county, though, you will find Tarrytown and Sleepy Hollow, each with a population of about 15,000. Tarrytown still has a volunteer fire department and many qualities of a small town.

In my mind, a small town is a place where local citizens live, work, go to school, play, and pray together. It is a place small enough most people

know one another yet large enough to get things done. Regardless of the size of your town, this book should provide insights you can use.

Rural America is my home. Most of my travels have taken me to small towns. They are the places where the local barber is one of the most important people in town, not because he cuts your hair but because he has a 15-minute conversation with almost everyone in town every four weeks and can tell you most of the news you need—or don't need—to know. Small towns are places where you can't put too many people in the annual homecoming parade or there won't be enough people to actually stand on the side of the street and watch it go by.

Small towns are the greatest places on earth to raise a family because everyone knows one another. Small towns are the worst places on earth to raise a family because everyone knows one another. This book is really about two ways to view the place you live. Either way you look at it, you're correct. It's your job—and mine—to make our towns be the best places they can be.

I remember sitting in the local café in our small town with my family late one afternoon sometime in the mid-1980s. Directly across the street a crane was removing the clock from the side of the old two-story bank building. The bank had closed, a victim of the decade's farm crisis. The lady in the booth next to us looked at me and said, "Young man, never forget this day. That's a piece of history that's never coming back."

Around that same time, my family made our monthly trip to St. Joseph, Missouri, which was the "big city" to me. Mom would shop at the mall while my dad, sister, and I went to the bookstore. After that, we ate at Burger King before making the 50-minute drive back home.

One Saturday was different, though. We walked into Burger King, but Dad never stepped up to the cashier. He stared at the menu board for the longest time. He finally turned to Mom, whispered something to her, and walked out of the restaurant.

Mom bent down to my sister and me and said, "Kids, we're going to McDonald's. Burger King has raised their prices."

I will always remember that moment—and can still picture it as clear in my mind as the day it took place. I'm not exaggerating when I say I

lived the next decade of my life without setting foot in a Burger King. That was where people with money ate.

We weren't poor. We weren't staring at foreclosure. But times were tough. Dad never said a word about it. He remained positive. He never gave us a reason to fear.

Perhaps that's why I'm an optimist, which is a blessing and a curse. I like to imagine things for the better. But when those things don't go as planned, they often crush you even more. Being an optimist doesn't mean you ignore the negative; it simply means you choose to see issues with two sides in the best way possible. Why not look for the positive? This book chooses to take that view while recognizing the challenges that must be overcome.

There are several books that take a more negative view on rural and small-town America. There's truth in the trends, statistics, and real-life examples they share, which I'll discuss in this book. You can't ignore the truth, but you can choose to create a better one.

Through the years, I have served on various boards that seek to improve the health and well-being of our region and state. We must think beyond our city limits—county, state, and even global perspectives are important. Otherwise, we will lose sight of the bigger picture around us.

That said, I believe we often miss the importance of the “small” or “local” view. It's not “small” because it's narrow, uninformed, or rigid. It's “small” from the standpoint of looking at how local successes change towns for the better in a relatively short amount of time. This book is also about how the small/local view makes the bigger view even better.

I started working on this book a couple of decades ago without realizing it. For more than 20 years, I've hosted a syndicated radio and television feature that mostly focuses on ordinary people and places doing extraordinary things. The people I interview are often from small towns. Listeners and viewers have told me they find inspiration in these stories.

As the months and years passed, I really didn't think about the stories as a whole as inspirational—I was simply sharing one story after another. As I reflect now, perhaps we were accomplishing something larger. We were telling the real-life stories of people living in small-town America who were positively influencing the place they lived.

This book is about how people and towns are making themselves better. In some cases, one person can do it, and the difference can be remarkable in a short amount of time. Some small towns will survive and thrive. Some will not. The fate of those places is greatly influenced by how you choose to look at it and what you choose to do about it.

Several years ago, while serving on a local planning board, we were discussing a program we were going to create in our town. One person said, “We can’t be as good as the program they have in that town.” After all, *that* town was four times the size of our town.

I replied, “Why not? Why can’t we be just as good?”

Can you imagine a high school basketball coach telling his or her team they couldn’t win? Would a football coach tell his or her high school team they should only hope to win a couple of games in a season? Of course not! We cheer on our local high school sports teams with the hope they can beat even the best teams. So why put limits on the place you live?

Small towns believe they have a chance to beat just about anyone in sports. Why do those same towns believe they can’t win when it comes to more important matters, such as creating the best schools, businesses, churches, and civic groups? This book features people and places that are hard to find on a map. The people didn’t look at their town and see the reasons they couldn’t make it better—they saw all the reasons why they could make it better!

A few years ago, my dad and I were looking to buy another ranch horse. We still regularly ride horses to check and herd our cattle. A friend of ours, Jack, owns and trains horses at his livestock auction, and he had a horse he thought would be a good buy for us. Jack is a great guy who loves life and always seems to be upbeat, even in the toughest of times.

He took us to a pen and showed us a small, thin Quarter Horse. “This horse really knows how to work around cattle,” Jack said. “We’ve been roping big steers off him. We take him by himself in the pasture, and he does great all the time. He’s a real go-getter!”

Dad looked at the horse with skepticism. He certainly didn’t have the frame or muscles to hold his ground with a large steer on the other end of the rope. Dad laughed and said, “Jack, that horse is too little to do that work!”

Jack smiled and said, “That horse doesn’t know he’s little!”

You—and your town—are only little and limited if you think you are. You’ll be amazed at what you can do. Here’s a look at several people and places that chose to be a much bigger horse than they appear to be.

AVAILABLE IN PRINT

ORDER ONLINE AT:

<https://andrewmccrea.com/mccrea-products/>

(FREE SHIPPING)

