

REWRITING THE RURAL NARRATIVE

BEN WINCHESTER, A SENIOR RESEARCH FELLOW WITH THE UNIVERSITY OF MINNESOTA

Extension Service, urged North Iowa leaders to “re-write the rural narrative” during a June visit to Mason City.

After presenting to the annual meeting of the North Iowa Corridor Economic Development Corp., Winchester gave a run-down to a smaller gathering of board members of local Chambers of Commerce, regional development people, and construction and real estate representatives.

Winchester described himself as “a data guy.” He laid out a picture of what is coming for rural regions like North Iowa, based on data. One of his focus research areas is what he calls “the Brain Gain,” the trend of people ages 30-49 choosing to move into rural areas. He spoke about the need to be mindful of what we project to people considering a move.

There is a migration to rural communities by families looking for a simpler pace, safety, and low housing costs, according to Winchester. “They may have left for a career opportunity but choose to move back for the quality of life. Among those who say they’d like to move, urban residents are most likely to choose a different type of community.” His data shows about a third of those who move to rural communities lived there previously, approximately two-thirds have at least

a bachelor’s degree, and about half have children in the household.

“Let future residents know they can thrive here,” he said. “Help people envision their life here, not just their job. Rural branding matters more than ever.”

Winchester described how many non-residents stop to buy gas and ask the clerk, “What is there to do around here?” and often hear back, “Nothing.”



“You need to re-write your rural narrative. If you hear someone say something negative about this area, challenge them. Engage

newcomers. Do you understand what people are looking for? Build a model of that demand. The future of your community may be in the hands of people who aren’t even here yet. It all depends on how welcoming you are.”

It’s also important to cooperate as a region to attract these families. Many newcomers choose to live between larger towns to make it easier to find jobs, according to Winchester, and interact with many communities in a wide radius for shopping or recreation.

Winchester also spoke in the afternoon session about the future of housing availability in rural areas. “The data paints a very clear picture of change coming,” he said.

From 2000 to 2010 in North Iowa counties, the age range with the largest group of homeowners shifted from 35-54 years to 45-64 years, according to Winchester. With Baby Boomers getting older, by 2020 he expects to see the largest number of houses owned by people over 65.

He described a drop in population head-count but no change in number of houses, due to death of a spouse or children leaving home, so fewer individuals are occupying the house.

Winchester introduced the idea of “moving over,” the transition of people over 65 into smaller, easier living arrangements in their current communities. He said staying in a house when it’s too big or no longer safe for the owner’s health, or adult children hanging on to an empty family home, can lower the home equity when maintenance is not kept up.

Thirty percent of income in Cerro Gordo County comes in the form of “transfer receipts”: Social Security and Medicare/Medicaid dollars that get spent here, he said. “You’ve got a tremendous senior service economy. If they leave, they’re going to take their transfer receipts with them.”

Winchester urged communities to start the conversation about more options for older residents to choose smaller, maintenance-free living arrangements, which could open up traditional houses for that incoming 30-49 age group wanting to own family homes in North Iowa.

CHAD SCHRECK

PRESIDENT & CEO

cschreck@northiowacorridor.com

SHAUN ARNESON

VP, EXISTING BUSINESS & PROJECT MANAGEMENT

sarneson@northiowacorridor.com

KEN BALES

DEVELOPMENT SPECIALIST

kbales@northiowacorridor.com

HUNTER CALLANAN

WORKFORCE SPECIALIST

hcallanan@northiowacorridor.com

JOYCE MARTIN

MARKETING & COMMUNICATIONS COORDINATOR

jmartin@northiowacorridor.com

