

Small Towns, Listen to Them Roar!

A federal government official once described a small community to me as one with a population of 20,000. When I asked how this official would classify a community of 862, the response was, "Well, I guess a dying community." It did not take me long to straighten out this person's way of thinking!

Small communities have much to offer those in the local government management profession. Managers of small local governments are responsible for everything from A to Z—from attending council meetings to making sure a pothole is filled in front of someone's home. I should know. I serve as the administrator of West Bend, Iowa, which has a population of 862!

West Bend has an economy based on agriculture and tourism. The 1990 census data show that 65 percent of its population base is 65 years of age or older and 24 percent is 18 years and younger. Census data also show that residents have low-to-moderate income levels: 42 percent earn under \$25,000 and 25 percent earn under \$15,000. The community remains strong because the people living in and around it believe in the value of living in a small community.

Serving as West Bend's administrator is a rewarding experience. Let me take you on a brief tour of West Bend's business community and tourist attractions, and I will explain why I find my job so satisfying.

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West Bend

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Is Doing

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Fine,

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Thank You

.....
Mary Steil

A Tour of West Bend

Our tour begins at city hall. In West Bend, as it might be in other small towns, city hall is one of the major places to gather information. While conducting business there, people connect with each other to talk or to tell city employees about what is happening in the community. Citizens also know they can call city hall to find help with their problems.

West Bend is governed by a mayor and five-member council, and it employs nine full-time staff members. In addition to the administrator, these positions are city clerk, deputy city clerk, utilities superintendent, two electrical linemen, two utility employees, and a police chief. Part-time positions include a librarian, two library employees, several reserve police officers, and, during the summer, the swimming pool staff. A 28-member volunteer ambulance crew is on call 24 hours a day. Staff cooperation is ever-present. During Operation Desert Storm, for example, when one of the utility employees was called to active duty for a year, staff members willingly accepted additional duties until the employee returned.

West Bend is located in two counties—Kossuth and Palo Alto. The majority of West Bend is located in Palo Alto County, and the county assists with street projects on county roads that run through our community. Palo Alto County also has more equipment and will help maintain city alleys.

West Bend operates with a zoning ordinance, personnel policies, and standard operating procedure manuals for all departments. Strategic planning is incorporated into the budget process, and the staff is taking steps to create a more formalized planning process.

West Bend's Services

Readers might wonder how a community of this size can provide jobs

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for its residents. West Bend provides jobs by operating gas, electric, water, and sewer utilities for the community. It also provides a full-service library and operates a community center, swimming pool, recycling program, volunteer fire department, and police department.

West Bend's municipal gas and electric system has been operating since 1961. Devoting the time and money to bring natural gas to West Bend was a wise decision made by former elected officials. The amount of revenue generated from natural gas sales has put the city in a solid financial position. West Bend's gas department often can provide a loan to another department or function, eliminating the need for the city to pursue a bond issue to finance a project.

Electors approved the establishment of an electrical plant in 1914 and the plant was started with a 50-horsepower steam engine and boiler. Since then, other engines and 50 miles of rural electric lines have provided power to the community. West Bend now purchases power jointly with 12 other municipal utilities through the North Iowa Municipal Electric Cooperative Association.

Community Support

West Bend residents built and help maintain the municipal swimming pool. A question was placed before the voters in 1989 to implement a recreational tax levy to help pay for pool improvements. The measure received overwhelming support, and consequently, necessary pool improvements can be completed.

In 1989, councilmembers approved the three-month trial recycling program, "Don't Throw It, Bag It." The first items that could be recycled were plastic containers with the recycling emblem and glass food containers of all colors. Support for this program enabled the council to make it permanent, and it has been expanded. Recyclable items now include plastic containers, tin food cans, newspapers, white paper, corrugated cardboard, and glass containers. Due to the program's high participation rate, other communities have contacted West Bend to find out how it works.

The program objectives were to keep it simple and to keep costs low. West Bend did not purchase standard recycling containers, but it provides a plastic bag to hold plastic containers. Residents can place newspaper in a paper or plastic sack or tie them with string, and glass containers and food cans go inside recyclable corrugated cardboard boxes. A garbage hauler collects the recyclables once a month and charges \$1 per household for the collection and disposal of recyclables.

West Bend is at least 25 miles from any community larger than 3,000 and is the home of more than 60 businesses. Currently, it does not have social or environmental problems. West Bend has survived some difficult times in the last 10 years, yet it remains a tightly woven community with its mix of housing, offices, and businesses.

I do not mean to paint a picture of total success; small communities can

have a difficult time. West Bend has had businesses come and go, but as I write this, the 37 Main Street storefronts are 90 percent occupied. Much of this success is due to West Bend residents. A group formed the Doctor's Committee when West Bend's only doctor retired in the 1970s. The committee raised money to recruit a new doctor and to build the West Bend Medical Clinic. A united community was there again when citizens sold shares of a car dealership to keep it operating and when they raised money to build a golf course and clubhouse because they believed a country club would be a community asset. Both projects were built with volunteer labor.

West Bend Economic Development, a group created four years ago, operates with financial assistance from the city. It spurs economic development by providing loans to new and existing businesses through a revolving loan fund.

Tourism

West Bend benefits from the area's tourist attractions, although they are separate entities that operate without funding from local, state, or federal governments. Tourist attractions include the Grotto of the Redemption (the largest of nine grottos in the world) that attracts 100,000 visitors each year; the first schoolhouse in Palo Alto County, which attracts 600 schoolchildren each year; and a sod house that is one of the few sod houses still existing in Iowa. The sod house attracts 1,400 visitors annually.

The city's 135-year history is being preserved by the local Historical Society and the society's museum, which is funded through private donations.

Why a Small Community?

To be honest, I did not imagine myself living and working in a small community. I thought I would be a

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"city gal." But after growing up in a small community and then living in a larger city for a few years, I returned to a small community and the qualities of small-town living. These qualities are being rediscovered by people of all ages. The signs of interest in small-town living can be seen when police walk the streets instead of staying in cars, when people move out of large metropolitan areas, or when zoning codes are not approved for narrow streets or houses built close to the street.

Small communities offer a special opportunity for local government managers. Using West Bend as an example, I am responsible for council meetings, the city organization, zoning administration, budget preparation, personnel administration, and utilities oversight. I have a complete view of West Bend operations each day.

One area that is having a tremendous impact on my job and West Bend's finances is the amount of federal and state mandates imposed on small towns each year. State of Iowa

mandates have been issued on solid waste, energy efficiency, water/wastewater regulations, swimming pool regulations, and finance. One of the most recent mandates is approval by the Iowa legislature of a two-year property tax freeze. My responsibilities during the last several years have centered around these mandates. I realize the difficulty of dealing with them in any size community; however, the strain is greater for smaller local governments. It takes time and effort to keep track of the mandates, and it can be difficult for a community of West Bend's size and services to weather the changes that must occur because of them.

Pros and Cons

It can be frustrating to serve in a small community. Citizens do not always understand the need for various programs. Yet that provides me with the opportunity to explain how government operates, and I enjoy these opportunities to interact with citizens.

Small towns do not have all of the amenities of larger communities, but they do have special assets. A manager can know the people and can learn the history of why something is done the way it is. Our city hall includes an office for the city clerk and deputy city clerk and an office for the administrator. Both offices are immediately visible when people walk in the door. I believe that this accessibility is crucial to the positive relationship I want to build with West Bend's citizens.

A small town can offer a wonderful opportunity to learn management firsthand and to learn how various programs and projects work. Yes, small towns do roar! Anyone looking for a challenging position should consider them. Individuals in these communities are working to ensure the vitality of our future. **DM**

Mary Steil is city administrator of West Bend, Iowa.