

## **Economist talks about hope for rural survival**

*APRIL 12, 2007 | BY JOE DUGGAN*

A regional economist delivered a dark message Thursday about the quickening pace of population loss and economic decline in rural Nebraska.

Larry Swanson also offered a glimmer of hope: Nebraska cities with populations less than 10,000 have a chance to reverse trends — but they must act immediately.

“Nebraska has not really stepped up to pursue those opportunities aggressively,” he said.

An audience of about 100 listened to Swanson, director of the O’Connor Center for the Rocky Mountain West, give a presentation at the Great Plains Art Museum. It was the second in a series of annual talks about grassland conservation and rural sustainability sponsored by the Grassland Foundation.

Swanson blitzed his listeners with a series of slides showing population, aging, income and other trends in the central Great Plains. Forty-two of Nebraska’s most rural, isolated counties have lost population since the 2000 Census, he said.

Such counties are not only seeing people leave, they’re experiencing death rates that are higher than birth rates. That means that by 2015, many of those counties will see growth in just one age group: 65 and older.

“It’s happening fast and we can’t catch up with it unless we really work at it,” he said.

Swanson, a native of Edgar who earned a doctorate in economics at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln, has closely studied population growth in the Rocky Mountain states that started in the 1990s and continues now. The growth was fueled by economic shifts — downsizing by large companies, outsourcing to smaller companies and

globalization — that allowed companies and people to move to non-urban areas. In other words, they moved to where they wanted to live.

“The geography of economic activity is now a moving target,” he said. “All the old textbooks need to be thrown away. The old economy encouraged urbanization. The new economy encourages growth where people want to live.”

What makes Colorado, Wyoming and Montana places where people want to live is the quality of the communities and their proximity to mountains and wilderness areas, or so-called natural amenities.

But they’ve also become expensive places to live, particularly for young people who want to buy houses. Small towns in Nebraska can offer quality places to live and affordable housing, but also have to offer the natural amenities to seal the deal.

Swanson argued that the traditional model of chasing factories and companies doesn’t work in isolated counties anyway, but standing out as an interesting place to live with nearby recreational opportunities, smaller cities could attract new residents.

Nebraska’s rural leaders should focus renewal efforts on a few “middle places,” or communities with populations of less than 10,000 that have the greatest potential, he said. Among those he identified were Alliance, York, Sidney, Chadron and Ogallala. He also said growth potential exists for a few smaller communities that are near such truly unique natural amenities as the Sandhills.

Communities don’t need only to attract migration numbers in the tens of thousands to reverse the declines. To be successful, the efforts will require investments of finances and efforts much greater

than are now being made.

Swanson knows some people will think he's picking winners and losers. But if trends continue in Nebraska, all but Lincoln, Omaha and a handful of other cities will lose anyway.

"We can't play-act, we can't walk through the motions," he said. "We're talking real money ... and a targeted approach."

*Reach Joe Duggan at 473-7239 or [jduggan@journalstar.com](mailto:jduggan@journalstar.com).*