

Sleight: Communities will die if youths not enticed home

Written by Elizabeth Barrett
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Adults need to show them opportunities

Weldon Sleight knows what happens when assumptions are made about businesses.

At a gathering of new Rotary After Dark Club in Gothenburg, on April 17 at the Randazzle Cafe, the dean of the Nebraska College of Technical Agriculture told a story that happened in his hometown of Paris, ID.

“I left over 40 years ago and no one said they would make a place for me,” Sleight said, noting that he was too intellectually immature at the time to understand that people retire and die.

The doctor who delivered him assumed that someone would buy his practice, but the physician didn't actively recruit anyone.

“He retired at 76 and died at 77,” Sleight said. “No one bought it and there's no doctor there.”

That scenario, and numerous others, tell much about why communities die, he said.

Sleight said that mindset prevents young people from returning home because they think there are no opportunities.

Farmers, ranchers and downtown business people may not want anyone to know their business

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and they never think they're going to die, Sleight said.

“There isn't time to think those thoughts as you're building and building,” he said.

However those same people also assume someone will come in and buy their business once they decide to retire.

Perhaps people from outside the community, and from a larger city, do invest in a local business because they want to raise their children in a rural area, Sleight said.

“The problem is that the culture in large and small cities is quite different,” Sleight explained. “The pay scale is different and they are used to having more variety.”

So they leave.

According to a 1999 United States Department of Agriculture study, about 51% of farmland in Nebraska is owned by non-operator owners.

Sleight said the percentage has most likely increased since then and noted that land should be owned and operated by Nebraska families.

That's all the more reason people in Gothenburg, and other small towns, have to show youths that they can own or be a partner in community and/or ranch or farm enterprises.

“You have to help your community understand ownership and maybe that's community ownership, community pride,” he said. “We love the culture and know it.”

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Small, rural Nebraska communities are dying because people in them allow their youths to leave without understanding how to come home.

“You haven’t put your arm around them and shown them those opportunities,” Sleight said. “You need to think and plan together.”

That may involve thinking about retirement, and having someone take over the business, in five years or needing a partner or coming up with a new idea for a business.

“We need to grow our own,” he said. “We’ve watched these kids grow up, we trust them, we know them,” he explained. “We can’t allow them to get too far out there or they’ll forget us.”

Sleight said business people can offer youths a summer job, mentor them and help them understand the experiences and education they’ll need for the job in which they’re interested.

Youths, in most cases, will stay during difficult times when hired hands leave.

“A partnership is ownership and staying through the hard times,” he said. “As the economy ebbs and flows, hired hands will leave.

“We need to keep our cities viable.”

ebarrett@gothenburgtimes.com

308-537-3636