

Op/ed: Economic Blood Brothers

By Derek Bildmor, CEO, Blakemore Industries

I have been thinking about what sets small town America apart from Big City America. The more I think, the fewer distinctions I come up with. Yes, big city folks have Broadway while small town folks have Main Street. But show me the meaningful differences. In fact, I feel we are not only similar, we are related; we are economic blood brothers bound by our state's and nation's circulatory system. And we need one another as our state is to do well in the global economy.

People are the same in rural and metro areas, and our communities are interconnected.

We both have local concerns, however. For example, we worry about our schools, the delivery of health care in our communities, and economic development. And this is my point. Our concerns are very similar. "We" worry about many of the same issues, whether we live in the metro area or the smallest of towns. It is in our common interests to solve them together.

System thinking: our state is a system, it is in our shared interest to solve the problems our communities face.

Our state is a system, similar to a human body. Communities, transportation systems, related government layers, policies, and a history and a culture that go back centuries make up our state. Respiratory, circulatory, nervous and regulatory systems built of muscle and bone and blood make up our bodies. Our body is strongest when all its parts are in good working order. The same is true of our state.

In my small town, we feel a pinch put on by policies that have led to a steady drain of industries and an increasing difficulty in maintaining our education, health, and human service systems. This pinch chokes off economic life, much the way a tourniquet pinches off blood flow to a hand.

A model to help make abstract ideas concrete: in this case the model is the human body and the application of the tourniquet.

Policy disincentives, public under-investment, hindrances of all kinds make up the tourniquet I am describing. As it tightens, our community suffers. National health policies make it hard for us to attract and keep doctors and dentists. National policies as broad as our trade agreements make it harder for individual farmers and small industries to do well in the new global world. Everywhere there is a trend toward bigness and consolidation. And there are few bridges, such as available capital and technology transfer programs to help industries or farmers move to sustainable enterprises. As a result, many enterprises that fueled small town economies have closed. When they did, nothing took their place. For our state as a whole, this is unhealthy. Economic circulation

dries up. When a community withers, our state is that much weaker.

In the metro area, there are very similar concerns. There the worry is not so much about attracting doctors—there are many. Rather it is about whether all people who need it can afford health care. In both cases, we are concerned about accessing good health care.

In the metro area, a conglomerate buying a local industry causes concern; in my county a conglomerate buying out a local farmer is a worry. In both cases the main concern is the erosion of our community's economic base and the need for new economic development policies.

We can do many things to loosen the tourniquet and re-connect small town America to the nation's economic circulation. We can create national policies that will increase healthcare and improve education. For example, the federal government could provide more scholarships to young doctors who are willing to work in small towns. We could do the same for people who want to teach here. And there is every reason why such efforts should also address the concerns of the metro area by addressing the larger issues of access to quality health care and quality education.

State, federal, and local governments could similarly address economic development concerns. For example, we could create incentives and policies that expand investment in emerging business and build needed infrastructure. This kind of investment would help farmers retool to grow new high-value crops, or entrepreneurs acquire the capital to begin new ventures.

I own a business, as do many people in my town. I do not farm. In fact, in this region, and this is true for the nation as a whole, only a small fraction of those of us who live in small town America are farmers and less than 20 percent of our region's total gross output comes from forestry or farming or other resource based industry. We make our money from commerce, industry, service business, and retail. Or we make it as artists, craftsmen, and professionals. In other words, we do what you do in the city. We need to recognize this truth as we think about our future. And we need policymakers to update their vision of rural America so that we can make a contribution to the country commensurate with our potential.

Derek Bildmor, a fictional entrepreneur, runs a company that develops quality control test kits for biotechnology companies.

Shared fate helps illustrate our interconnectedness.

Solutions. Explicit solutions for federal, state governments.

Derek Bildmore as a spokesperson keeps this away from politics as usual; And because he is a businessman, he does not represent a rural stereotype.

*His company is headquartered in Middleton, Any State,
population 2,500.*