

# DEVELOPMENT IN IOWA'S RURAL COMMUNITIES

In May of 1997, 458 leaders of 99 Iowa rural communities were asked to participate in a survey about development activities occurring in their towns. The purpose of this survey was to identify recent community development activities as well as problems these communities face when acting collectively. Up to five individuals were invited from each community to take part in the survey. They represented city government, businesses, the local newspaper, churches, and civic organizations.

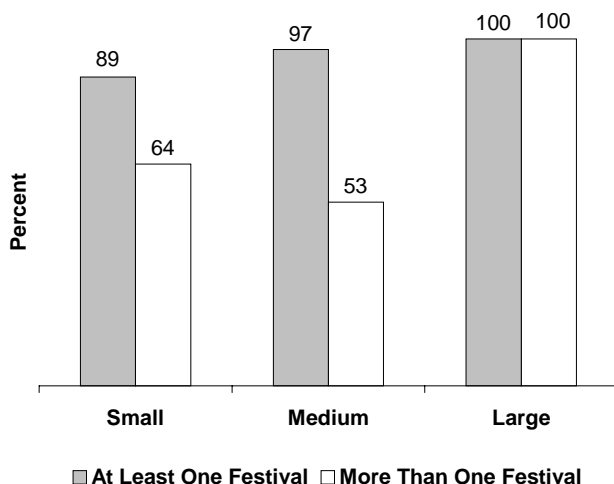
Of the 458 questionnaires distributed, 345 (75 percent) were completed and returned for an average of 3.5 informants per community. This report highlights the results by community size, dividing them into small, medium, and large communities. Throughout the report, small communities include those with populations of less than 1,000 residents; medium-sized communities have populations between 1,000 and 2,499 residents; and large communities have between 2,500 and 10,000 residents. Of the 99 communities involved in the study, 47 were small, 32 were medium, and 20 were large.

## Recreation

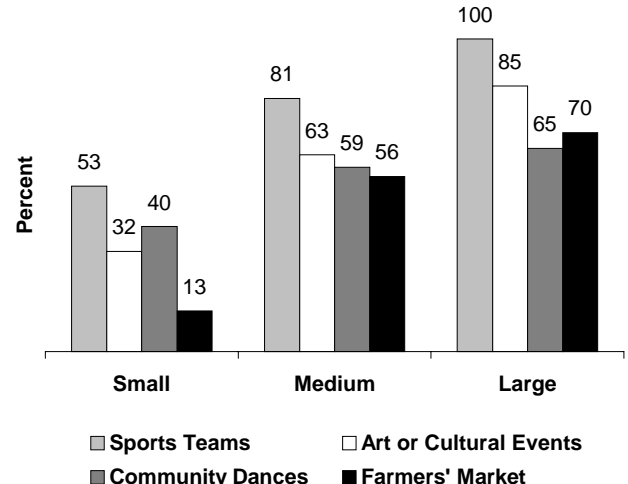
Community festivals allow residents the opportunity to interact with each other while enjoying and supporting their community. Holding festivals (Figure 1) is one way residents come together to celebrate holidays and local heritages while promoting the local economy. Communities also hold festivals to celebrate special occasions and milestones such as centennials or newly completed infrastructure projects. Small communities have the fewest annual festivals, while all of the large communities report having more than one.

In addition to festivals, community-wide recreational activities provide opportunities for community participation and promotion. When asked about local recreational activities such as adult sports teams, community dances, art or cultural events, and farmers' markets during the growing season, informants reported considerable activity (Figure 2). Large communities offer the most opportunities for recreation, while small communities offer the fewest. Sports team recreation is more available than any other form of recreation across all community sizes.

**Figure 1. Community Festivals**



**Figure 2. Recreation**



## Community Leaders

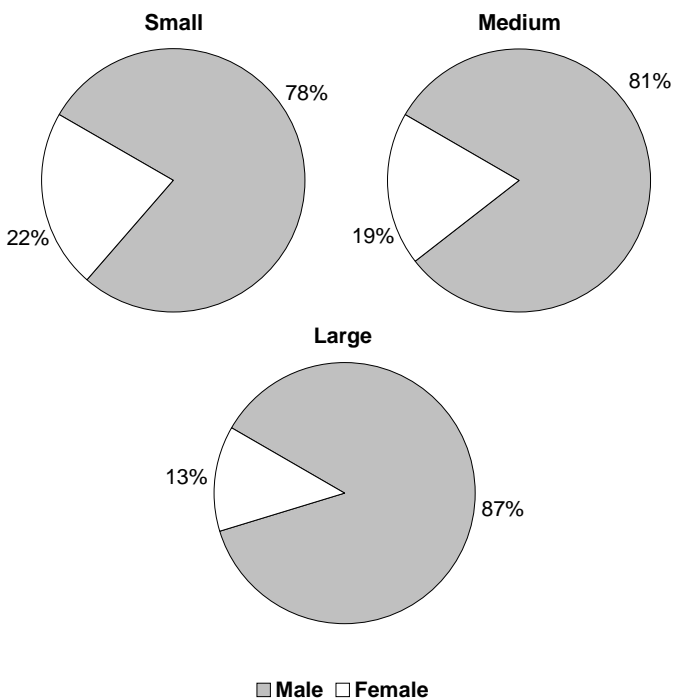
Recognized leaders normally play a significant role in community development activities. For this reason, we wanted to know more about the people identified as leaders in Iowa’s rural communities—those whose support would be most needed for the success of a project. Those mentioned could, but need not have been people in formal or elected leadership positions. Informants were asked to name up to five leaders in their community and to provide gender, age, occupation, and length of residence information for those mentioned.

As illustrated in Figures 3 through 7, recognized leaders in Iowa’s rural communities tend to be employed males between the ages of 46 and 59 years who have lived in the community for over 40 years.

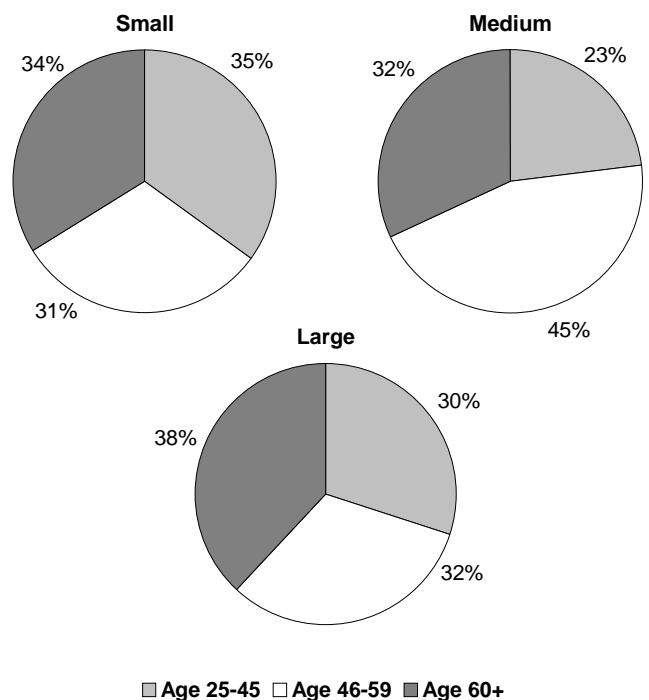
The dominance of males who are recognized as leaders is readily apparent (Figure 3). In fact, over three-fourths of the individuals mentioned are males. Interestingly, large community informants more often listed males as leaders than did informants from small and medium-sized communities.

The ages of identified leaders also vary by community size (Figure 4). In both small and large communities, leadership is almost equally spread across the younger (25-45 years), middle-aged (46-59 years), and older (over 59 years) age groups. In medium-sized communities, however, we find fewer young leaders and more leaders from the middle-aged group.

**Figure 3. Gender of Community Leaders**

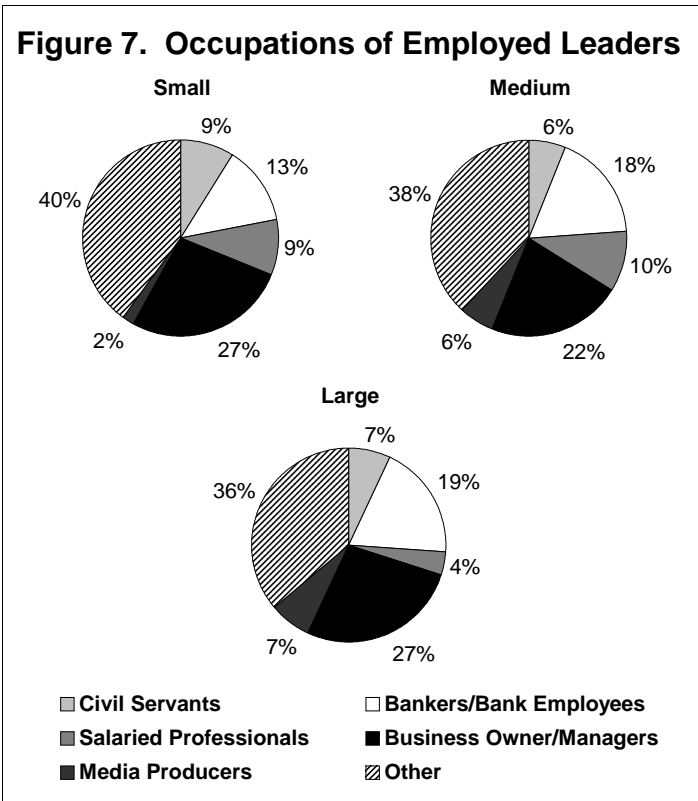
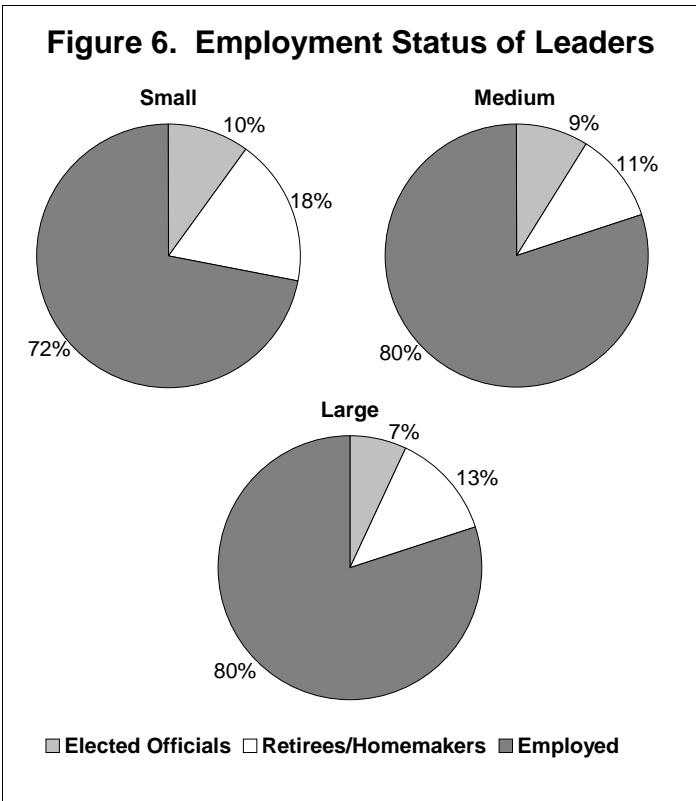
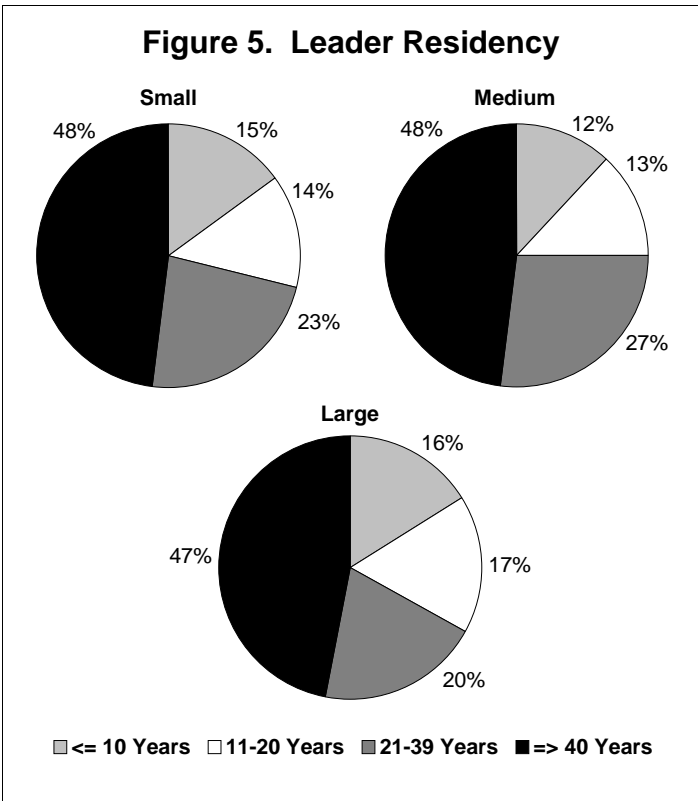


**Figure 4. Age of Community Leaders**



Length of residence of identified leaders is reported in Figure 5. In all three community sizes, long-term residents dominate local leadership. In fact, almost half of the leaders in each of the three size categories have lived in the community 40 years or more. In contrast, few have lived there 10 years or less. While this pattern holds true across all three community sizes, informants from large communities reported a slightly higher proportion of newer residents (both 10 years and less and 11–20 years) as leaders than did small or medium-sized community informants.

Figure 6 illustrates the employment status of leaders. Noteworthy is the greater role retirees and homemakers play in the leadership composition of small communities as compared to that of medium-sized and large communities. The occupation status of employed leaders is shown in Figure 7 where the top five categories are represented. The pattern of leaders' occupations is similar in all community sizes; however, those affiliated with the media play a greater part in leadership activities in medium-sized and large communities.



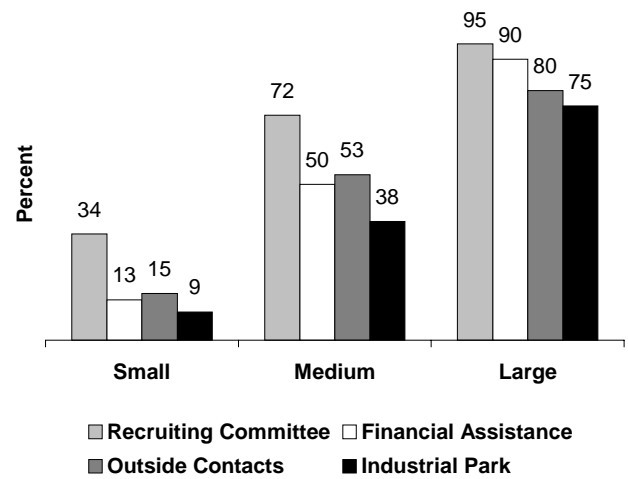
## The Business Sector

The condition of the local economy is an important aspect of Iowa's rural communities. Communities use various strategies to promote the local economy. One strategy is to engage in industrial recruitment that involves attempts to attract businesses and industries from outside the community (Figure 8). As might be expected, large communities are the most active in this form of economic development. Establishing a recruiting committee and seeking financial assistance are strategies used by almost every large community. In contrast, only a third of the small communities have a recruitment committee and far less seek financial assistance, make outside contacts, or have built an industrial park. Such industrial recruitment activities and incentives more often exist in medium-sized communities, but their existence is considerably below that found in large communities.

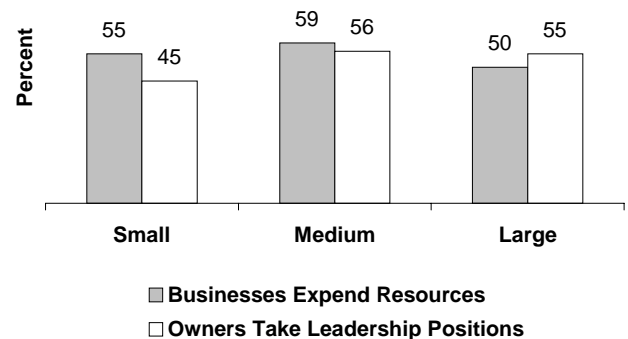
An important part of the business sector in communities is the extent to which businesses contribute to community life—what might be called business social responsibility. In Iowa's rural communities, on average, over half of the businesses are willing to expend resources to benefit the community (Figure 9). Informants also reported that business owners take leadership positions in about half of the communities. The willingness of business owners to take leadership positions was slightly lower in small communities when compared to medium-sized and large communities.

Local business development projects were considered by asking informants to identify specific actions that had been taken in the past year to promote local economic activities. All 20 large communities were involved in implementing projects to revitalize downtown areas, retain or expand local businesses or industries, and promote tourism through the development of local historic or cultural sites (Figure 10). Eighty percent had applied for financial assistance from government agencies to expand local businesses. The involvement of medium-sized communities in each of the four promotional activities was lower when compared to large communities but greater than the involvement reported by informants in small communities. Comparatively speaking, small communities' infrequent use of financial assistance to promote economic activities is a notable difference.

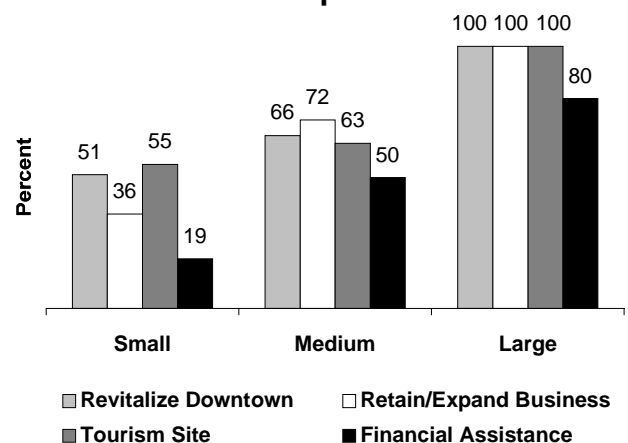
**Figure 8. Industrial Recruitment**



**Figure 9. Business Social Responsibility**



**Figure 10. Local Business Development**



## Community Organizations

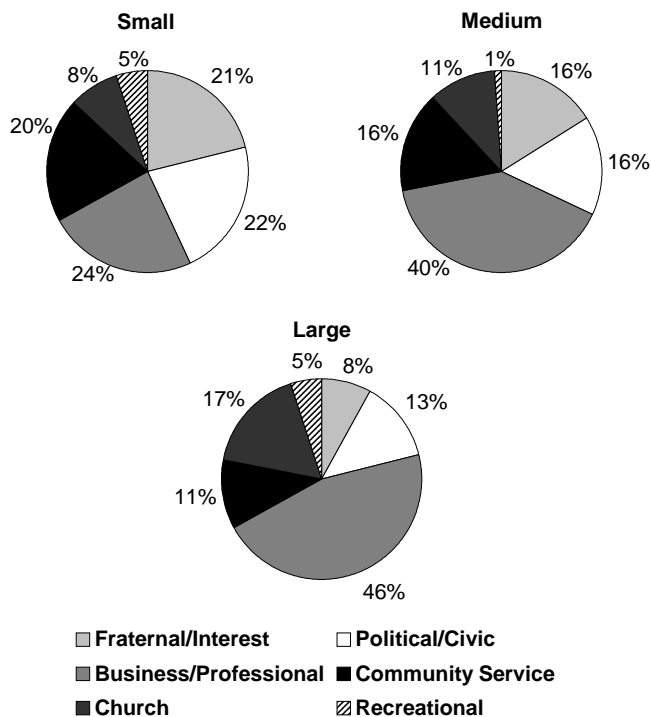
Formal and informal organizations are an important part of any community. These organizations may have a specialized interest or more community-wide focus. They also vary by the opportunities they provide for residents to interact with each other and participate in activities that benefit the whole community. Thus, categories were devised to reflect the different types. In Figures 11 and 12, fraternal/interest groups include those such as the Lions Club, the American Legion, Men's and Women's Clubs, and senior citizens' groups. Political/civic groups represent booster and historical clubs, charities, and Civic League; and business/professional associations are comprised of economic development organizations, Chamber of Commerce, and labor unions. Community service groups include both public and private sector organizations which provide community services such as city government, schools, fire and emergency services, banks, newspapers, and local utility groups.

Which type of local group best brings diverse groups of people together within the community to address community-wide concerns? Twenty-six percent of the communities in this study (18 small, 4 medium, and 4 large) reported having no such organi-

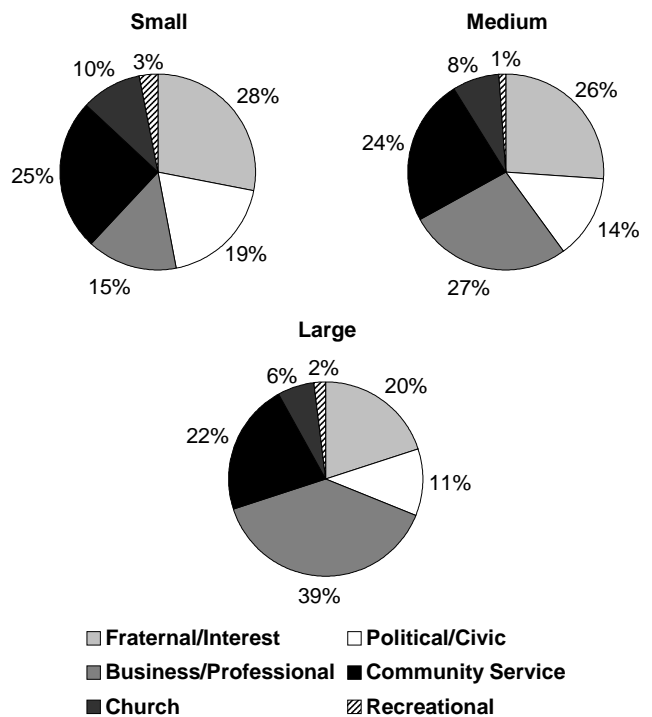
zation. Of the remaining 74 percent, business groups stood out as the dominant form of whole community organizations in large communities (Figure 11). In small and medium-sized communities, business groups also were mentioned most often but not as frequently as in large communities. Political and civic groups, as well as fraternal and interest groups, were more often mentioned in small and medium-sized communities than in large communities. Variations also occurred by community size in the ability of community service groups to bring the community together. Another notable pattern was the lower influence of churches serving as whole community organizations in small and medium-sized communities when compared to large communities.

When informants were queried about the most influential organizations in their communities (Figure 12), small communities reported fraternal and interest groups most often, followed closely by community service groups. Comparatively speaking, perhaps the most interesting pattern is the lesser role of business groups serving as influential organizations in small communities than in either medium-sized or large communities.

**Figure 11. Whole Community Organizations**



**Figure 12. Influential Organizations**



## Government Processes

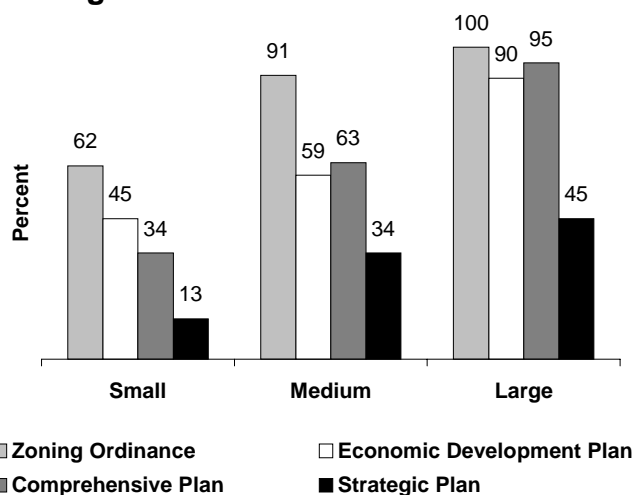
City government decisions are central to rural communities. We were interested in finding out what decisions had been made by the community and to what extent citizens had provided input on those decisions.

One indication of government involvement in communities is the presence of plans and ordinances (Figure 13). We asked whether communities currently have in place any of four different types of government planning procedures—zoning ordinances, economic development plans, comprehensive plans, or strategic plans. Zoning ordinances play a vital role where 62 percent of small, 91 percent of medium, and 100 percent of large communities indicated having such ordinances. Approximately one-third of small communities, more than half of medium-sized communities, and almost all of large communities have economic development and comprehensive plans. Strategic plans are the least common regardless of community size, but as in the case of other planning mechanisms, become more common practices as community size increases.

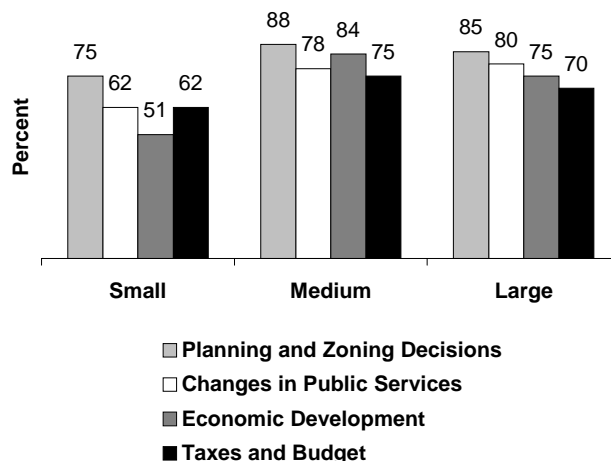
We also asked informants to consider whether citizens have “no influence,” “some influence,” or “great influence” on the outcomes of the four community planning procedures (Figure 14). In all communities, citizens have “some” or “great” influence on planning and zoning decisions, changes in public services, economic development, and taxes and budgets. Citizens appear to have the greatest influence on planning and zoning decisions followed by changes in public services. Overall, citizens have the least amount of influence in small communities and the greatest in medium-sized communities.

On a related note, we were also interested in the types of government issues likely to generate different points of view and significant discussion in the community (Figure 15). Results differed little according to community size where schools are consistently the primary focus of local debate. In large communities, zoning issues receive more attention than they do in small communities whereas city services play a more prominent role in small communities than they do in large ones.

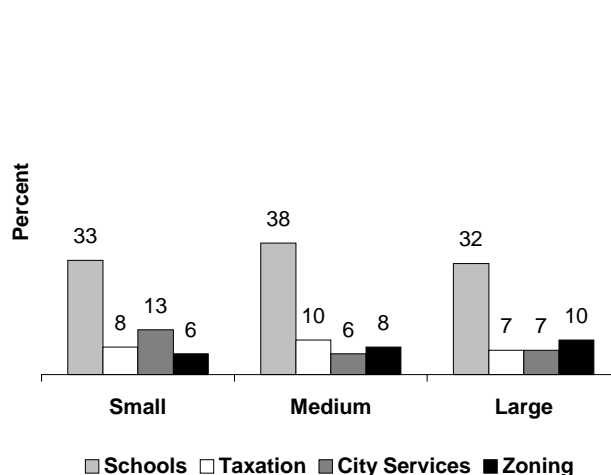
**Figure 13. Plans and Ordinances**



**Figure 14. Citizen Input**



**Figure 15. Community Issues**

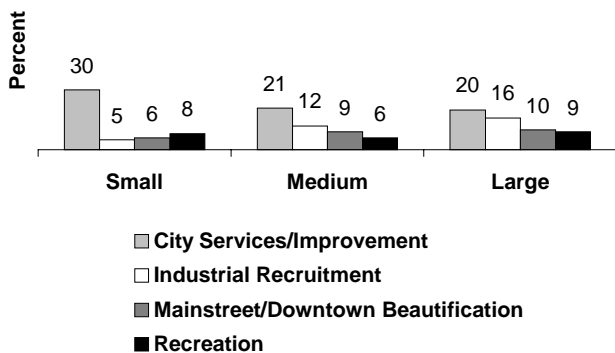


## Community Action

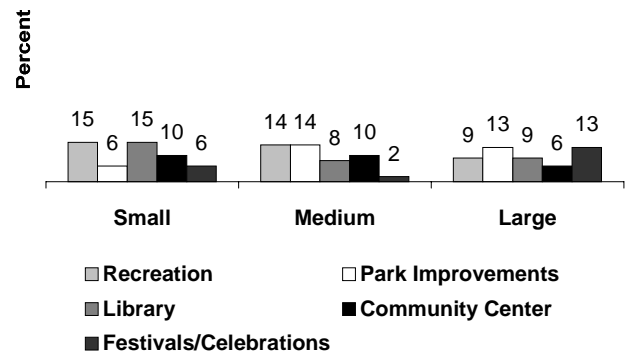
Communities often come together in pursuit of common goals, some of which may include economic development or other community improvement activities. We inquired about projects that were significant to communities during the past three years (Figure 16). Only one community reported having no recent community improvement project. The most common projects, regardless of size, involved changes or improvements to city services such as streets or sewer systems. In medium-sized and large communities, industrial recruitment activities and mainstreet beautification also were common, but less so in small communities.

Community-wide fund drives (Figure 17) are often used to raise money for specific development projects. Eighty-four percent of communities reported at least one community-wide fund drive in the last three years. In these communities, fund drives were most commonly held to support recreation, park improvements, libraries, community centers, and local festivals/celebrations. In small communities, fund drives were most common for libraries and recreation facilities (other than parks); in medium-sized, it was recreation and park improvement fund drives; and in large communities, fund drives for park improvements and festivals/celebrations were most common.

**Figure 16. Community Improvement**



**Figure 17. Fundraisers**



## Overview

The results of this study indicate that community development in rural Iowa is a complex mixture of similarities and differences depending on the size of the community and the aspect under consideration. For example, the proportion of long-term residents who serve as leaders in both small and large communities is quite similar, yet female leadership is greater in small communities than in large ones. Where large communities commit considerable resources to both industrial recruitment and local business retention, small communities do not. Notably, fraternal and interest groups play a greater role in community development in smaller communities than in large communities. In general, medium-sized communities fall

between the range of responses of small and large communities; however, this is not always the case, as businesses in medium-sized communities surpass both small and large communities in accepting social responsibility within the community.

Many of Iowa's rural communities are struggling to survive the ongoing farm crisis and changes in the world economy. This research helps identify patterns among different community sizes where population size appears to have an impact on how communities respond to such changes. The next step is to identify key economic development factors that are known to work and to consider them as possible avenues for improving Iowa's declining rural economies.

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