

Editorial: How to Save a Small Town

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The community of Howard's story should be required reading for all small towns in South Dakota.

It is a drama that has played out each year since 1996, always with a happy ending.

It is a tale about how a small community, struggling to survive, figured out a way to help itself - thanks in large part to the young people living there.

Back in the early 1990s, Howard was like so many towns in rural South Dakota. It had lost a significant part of its retail base, and was in danger of losing more if things didn't change. Enter a group of Howard High School students, who developed an awareness survey that was sent to 1,100 households in Miner County. The message in the survey? To make local residents understand the importance of shopping locally.

Guess what happened? Local folks got the message. The light bulb went on. The dots were connected. Most everyone understood that buying goods and services in Howard would mean the survival of stores that offered those goods and services - and maybe some growth to boot.

But there's more. The increased spending in Howard resulted in more sales tax dollars collected, which in turn meant more money for street repair, the purchase of a fire truck, and other essential community services.

"Shop at home" has been the slogan from hometown merchants as long as we can remember. It's not an empty plea. When residents buy furniture, vehicles, appliances, groceries, clothing - the list is virtually limitless - it helps ensure that a local business stays in business. This in turn guarantees the existence of jobs, sales tax collections, and the turnover of dollars in a community, which is vital to its existence.

No one in Howard - or Mitchell, for that matter - would argue that consumers can find everything they desire in local stores. Yet there is much more available than is often thought, and it is this looking at home first, this loyalty to community, that benefits everyone.

Howard's experience proves it.

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