

How the Best Communities Are Stepping Up (at a Time When It Really Matters)

## Description

In hard times, great communities matter more than ever. When storms are raging and chaos is swirling, people need a soft place to land. The economic, social, and political challenges weâ??ve faced over the last few decades have driven home this truthâ??and 2020 has underlined it in bold double lines. A strong community is a safe haven. It helps us feel grounded, protected, and empowered, and provides a much-needed sense of belonging and connection.

I recently spoke with James and Deborah Fallows as part of my Busy Leaderâ??s Podcast series (click here to listen), and they reiterated this truth. They spent a lot of time talking about their front-row seat to the nationwide movement to renew and revitalize communities. They said this movement is happening all across the U.S.: from Pensacola, Florida, to Bentonville, Arkansas, to Rapid City, South Dakota, to Fresno, California.

James and Deborah are the authors of *New York Times* bestseller *Our Towns: A 100,000-Mile Journey into the Heart of America*, which explores what they learned when they crisscrossed America in a single-engine prop plane. Basically, they visited communities where good things were happening that were not necessarily shown on the evening news.

What they learned is that despite the fact that Americans are worried about the direction of the country, local communities everywhere are getting things done. Theyâ??re finding money to innovate their schools, investing in businesses and policies to revitalize their downtowns, and building better places for people of all different experiences and backgrounds.

In the podcast, James and Deborah discuss some of their findings from their adventures as well as the upcoming HBO documentary based on their book. Also, they highlight some of the things the towns and cities that are having the most success have in common. Here, based on this and other conversations Iâ??ve had with them, are some of those common threads:

**Thriving communities have civic patriots who make things happen.** When James and Deborah would ask, â??Who makes things happen here?â?• people had a ready answer. The answer varies: It may be a mayor, or a local business leader, or a real estate developer, or a university president. The

faster people came up with an answer, the better off the town was.

**People who live there donâ??t just consume. They create.** During the podcast, James and Deborah talk about how they got a note from somebody who had worked for Google in the San Francisco Bay Area and had decided to move to a small town in Texas. The note said that if you want to consume a great community, you can live someplace like San Francisco. But if you want to create a great community, you can come to some place like this city in Texas. Itâ??s an attitude; people know itâ??s up to them to build that town.

**Despite fundamentally different outlooks, people are on their best behavior.** People in these thriving small towns act like neighbors even if they have different viewpoints from those around them. They know they must work with these people every day and see them in the grocery store or school meetings, so theyâ??re on their best behavior. (This is so important in a time of divisive national politics. Better to focus on practical problems that can be solved locally.)

**Institutions are really kicking in.** One theme in thriving towns is the presence of lots of institutional experimentation. In thriving towns, when James and Deborah asked about schools, community colleges, libraries, arts commissions, and so forth, there were typically a lot of creative things going on.

**Thereâ??s a noticeable sense of openness.** The best, most successful cities realize if a city is going to grow in the long run, it has to attract new people. It has to convince the young people growing up there to stay. And so theyâ??re taking steps to make people of different backgrounds, ages, political views, and orientations feel that this could be â??theirâ?• place. People can live and work anywhere now. Smart cities realize this and make themselves open.

**Collaboration is everywhere.** Thriving towns have lots of people working together. This is true at a high level like public/private partnerships. It also happens on a more â??microâ?• granular level like businesses on Main Street getting together to attract customers (i.e., â??You supply the beer and weâ??ll supply the music.â?•). Thereâ??s lots of networking going on. People donâ??t just know each other; they know how to work with each other. What this creates is a kind of synergy and trust.

**A high value is placed on training and education.** The strongest communities are those that realize people donâ??t intrinsically have the skills to revitalize a community. They invest in teaching these things, whether itâ??s leadership training or civic education, such as Pensacola does with its CivicCon speaker series. People donâ??t know how to ride a bike or drive a car until theyâ??re taughtâ??being great citizens is something people can learn to do and become better at as well.

**Thereâ??s an emphasis on local journalism.** Thriving towns know that quality local reporting is very important. They find ways to keep it going at a time when so much local media is eroding. Positive messaging is a big part of creating vibrancy. To read an earlier article I wrote on this subject for Strong Towns, click here.

While this town-by-town movement toward revitalization has been happening for a while, James and Deborah say the COVID-19 pandemic has created a new sense of urgency. In the midst of all the chaos, it has become increasingly clear that we canâ??t wait for outside or top-down solutions. We need to fix things ourselves on the local level.

And the great news is we *do* have what it takes. While America is surely going through a hard time now, weâ??ve been through many other hard times before. We can achieve renewal and reconstruction. It is up to us to make it happen.

*James Fallows and Deborah Fallows will also be featured speakers at EntreCon, our virtual business and leadership conference, which will be held Wednesday and Thursday, November 18-19, 2020.* (Click here to register.)

*James has spoken in Pensacola before, during the 2018 CivicCon. Click here to watch.*

**Date Created**
November 2, 2020
**Author**
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