

# HEARTLAND

## *Together*

### C A S E S T U D Y

## IS RENO COUNTY AT AN ENTREPRENEURIAL CROSSROADS?

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The purpose of this diagnosis document is to support learning about the system of people and resources that support entrepreneurs in Reno County.

Two recent listening sessions with local champions provided the chance for entrepreneurs, representatives of Reno County entrepreneurial support organizations, business owners, nonprofit leaders and other invested parties to listen to each other's thoughts about their ecosystem. Individuals offered their personal views and opinions about entrepreneurialism in Reno County and their shared visions for a thriving system in the future.

That collective vision includes a changed community mindset which focuses on establishing accessible avenues for joining the business community, or "on-ramps," for new Reno County business owners. During both listening sessions, Hutchinson-area entrepreneurs indicated that national chain businesses have settled in the city with relative ease compared to the obstacles entrepreneurs are facing. Those obstacles partly consist of uncomfortable local property taxes and strict code requirements that have the potential to end 100-year-old Main Street staples through infrastructure upgrade costs. Because of that inherent cost, many Main Street buildings, particularly south of the railroad tracks, sit empty.

During the second listening session at Sandhills Brewing, a local chiropractor named Joel said some

past customer habits weren't being met with the same grace as longtime businesses change hands. Joel has had his clinic for two years and says many people in the Reno County area assume the new business owner will honor their prior arrangements. These interactions can "ruffle feathers" at times, in which situations are often exacerbated by opinions shared on social media, which can lower the reputation of local businesses via negative online comments.

This example serves not to indict any one person or group, but to highlight one of the factions that exists in Hutchinson. Other factions include people who do not actively support local entrepreneurialism, either because of a mentality of contentment, negative outside influences, or simply through personal choices such as driving K-96 to Wichita for shopping. Community members also indicated a difficulty in "selling" local elected officials on the viability of new businesses, especially along Main Street.

Simultaneously, there exists robust entrepreneurial support groups in Reno County that strive for a thriving ecosystem. Members of those groups indicated a need for more accessible educational materials and personal stories, shared either through casual meet-and-greets or local media outlets, regarding the difficulties involved and sweat equity required to start one's own business. Additionally, the need for "business boosters" was also

presented, as entrepreneurial loans are harder to access for first-timers or for those who must support their family with a concurrent day job.

Ultimately, Reno County entrepreneurs, support groups and community champions aim to cultivate an atmosphere of abundance, collaboration and support within the local entrepreneurial ecosystem. They seek to provide positive encouragement, easier access to resources and more education for entrepreneurs to, in the words of an old Hutchinson tourism slogan, “come share our space.”

**To propel positive changes in Reno County, the community will likely need to address competing values between tradition and transformation. Participants seem to agree that collaborative efforts are key, but whose teamwork could fuel significant progress on boosting local entrepreneurship in the area? What might members of the community need to let go of to make progress possible?**

**How might the community spark conversations about identity and who Reno County wants to be in the next decade and beyond?**

