

HEARTLAND

Together

C A S E S T U D Y

IS LIBERAL, KANSAS, STUCK IN A RUT?

Many people throughout Liberal, population 22,000, say that they want the city to grow. They are proud of the community's diverse culture and rich history and are quick to boast about the offerings of its food trucks.

It has plenty of assets. The community is best known for the Mid-America Air Museum; Dorothy's House/Land of Oz; the International Pancake Day race and Hall of Fame; Ozfest; and the Seward County Coronado Museum.

There's a sizable small business community — large enough that the Small Business Administration approved 887 Paycheck Protection Loans in Seward County during the pandemic, totaling more than \$38.5 million.

But the community's population isn't growing. In fact, it's been ticking downward. And the county that Liberal calls home had one of the highest rates of outmigration in the state in the 2020 Census.

Members of the Liberal community gathered with the Kansas Leadership Center in April at a diagnosis event to better understand the persistent challenges in the network of support around entrepreneurship in Liberal. Included in that meeting were local business owners, representatives from Seward County Community College, the Seward County Development Corporation, the Seward County Chamber of Commerce, a local radio station, National Beef and others. (Many representatives from those businesses also ran their own small businesses as well.)

Here are the challenges in Liberal:

- When young people go to college, they don't come back;
- The city isn't reliably educating and producing qualified business owners;
- People in Liberal aren't willing to pay for entertainment and go to neighboring cities to get it;
- Liberal is hesitant to bring in large businesses because they might compete with small businesses;
- People in Liberal aren't willing to embrace change.

Other themes included: pervasive feelings of competition ("I want you to do great, if I'm doing better"), lack of education for business owners, and a lack of a clear process or one-stop shop for entrepreneur support.

But Liberal doesn't yet agree on how to get more people more fully involved in the economy through its entrepreneurial ecosystem. Some business owners are frustrated by the lack of housing and buildings for businesses in town; others say there is plenty of available housing and business space. Longtime business owners say people work together; business owners newer to the community disagree and say there's a "good old boy" system that needs to change.

Race and ethnicity also serve as dividing lines, but identities here are unusually crosscutting compared to the nation as a whole. **About 26% of Liberal residents identify as being white but not Hispanic or Latino**, according to the U.S. Census Bureau. **65% of the community identifies as Hispanic or Latino**. The community is **about 3% African American and Asian**; and **nearly 18% identify with two or more races**. **Slightly more than 50% of the community identifies as white**, meaning that 38% of the Latinos in the community also identify as white. Latino and African American community members say that more people of color need to get involved, run for different boards in town and get elected to the city and county commissions, so Liberal's leaders more accurately represent the city's diversity. Some African American community members also said their voices often get ignored, especially since few city or county officials share their backgrounds.

Some minority business owners say the key to growth in Liberal is to get young people to move back after they finish college. The same group also say the key is to get retirees to serve as mentors to young teenagers. Some white business owners in the community want to make the process of hiring immigrants easier, to make sure the hiring process is legal and that skilled immigrants are matched with appropriate, skilled jobs.

To make progress, Liberal will likely need a critical mass of people to commit to working on these challenges, perhaps in different ways, for the betterment of the community. What is Liberal willing to do differently in order to grow? What might members of the community need to let go of to make progress possible? And who would need to work better, together, for significant change to happen?

