

Cole Herder - Humboldt

This is Kansas Profile. I'm Ron Wilson, director of the Huck Boyd National Institute for Rural Development at Kansas State University.

"Here's your mail." It is always good to check the mailbox and receive personal mail. Today we'll learn about a remarkable rural town that has people working together to improve the community. They are also working to attract and retain youth in their community, using the mail – and an actual mailbox – as a reminder. It's today's Kansas Profile.

Cole Herder is City Administrator in his hometown of Humboldt, Kansas. Cole grew up here and went to Wichita State where he studied Electrical Engineering Technology. After a 29 year career in manufacturing, he gave local government a try and became city administrator.

Cole had already been involved in the civic affairs of his community as a volunteer. He was concerned about the future of the community in the early 2000s, as economic and government problems challenged the region.

In 2007, the community of Humboldt signed up for a program called Public Square Communities. As we have previously profiled, this program is intended to bring elements of the community together for progress. When the program came to Humboldt, a public meeting was held.

Cole Herder spotted a notice in the paper about Public Square having a public meeting about the future of the community. He was curious, but also tired of hearing negative comments from people at the time. Cole still remembers that night.

"There was a show coming on I wanted to watch," he said. "I told my wife, 'I'm going to this meeting. I'll be back in a few minutes. As soon as people start complaining, I'm leaving.'" But a funny thing happened: Instead of a complaint session, this was a positive meeting about what could be done in the future. Cole never left. He decided to stay and help. Task forces were organized and progress was made. Eventually he became city administrator where he could give official leadership. After the Public Square process concluded, Humboldt organized into a PRIDE community so as to continue the work.

Fast forward to 2015. When a statewide planning committee was designing the 2015 Rural Opportunities Conference, the planners were looking for a town with a success story to tell. The town which was selected was the rural community of Humboldt, population 1,927 people. Now, that's rural.

At the conference, Cole Herder and others talked about Building Synergy to Grow Your Community. Cole was joined by Chamber of Commerce President Chris Bauer, City Council President Sunny Shreeve, and school superintendent K.B. Criss who spoke about how the community is working together for progress.

For example, Sunny Shreeve described the collaborative work that was done at the park along the Neosho River. It was determined that an entrance sign was needed. A community service class from school cleared the land. A local business owner donated stone from his farm. His employees put up the sign. Westar donated the pillars from old power poles. The local monument company put on the letters. Youth grew and planted flowers from the school greenhouse. The result is an attractive riverside park to which many people have contributed time and effort.

Cole Herder talked about another of the issues facing Humboldt and other rural communities: The outmigration of young people. Students tend to graduate and move away, perceiving a lack of opportunities or support locally. In response, Humboldt implemented a neat idea.

At high school graduation, the community gives a mailbox to each and every graduate. The mailbox is decorated with the graduate's name and the town: Humboldt, Kansas. Inside each mailbox is a card congratulating the youth and inviting them to stay and live in Humboldt. It is a thoughtful, creative way of inviting youth to always remember their hometown and maybe even to continue to make their home and career there.

So, here's your mail – and even a mailbox to receive it in. These are examples of building synergy to grow the community, with several entities working together. We salute Cole Herder, Chris Bauer, Sunny Shreeve, K.B. Criss, and the entire community of Humboldt for making a difference with their collaborative efforts and their outreach to youth. They are thinking outside the box – the mailbox.

For the Huck Boyd National Institute for Rural Development, this is Ron Wilson with Kansas Profile.