

Caleb Pollard: Profile of a Young Economic Developer with a Passion for Rural America

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Caleb Pollard, Executive Director of the Valley County Economic Development Board, in Ord, Nebraska (population 2,200) is not interested in talking about the struggles of rural America. Mr. Pollard is interested in talking about the vitality, the diversity, and the rich future of the rural America that he knows and loves. As Executive Director, it is his job to serve as the primary catalyst for economic development for the rural county of 4,200. Yes, he says blithely, Valley County faces some of the same challenges that other rural communities in Plains states face. “Rural depopulation, youth outmigration, lower educational attainment, dependence on farming and the agriculture sector at a time when small family farms are dying and mechanized agriculture is growing.” He lists these things dutifully, if half-heartedly, as if he’s heard this question many times and knows that he must give the expected answer. Yes, that is all true, but clearly for Caleb Pollard, those facts do not encapsulate Ord and Valley County.

“We have had \$115 million in investment in this county in the past ten years, \$80 million in private investment,” explains Mr. Pollard. Of the public investment, \$24 million is being invested in a new hospital, \$9.8 million into a school, and \$1.3 million for a new fire hall. “People don’t invest in a dying community.”

“And,” he says, “We just celebrated the opening of our 100th business. Yes, we’ve lost people since the 2000 Census. But, if you look at the estimates since then, the workforce has grown by nine percent. And, the population of young people is growing. The retail sector is always tricky in rural areas, but we’ve got the best retail pull since 1991. The per capita wages have increased in Valley County for most job categories,” Mr. Pollard rattles these economic development and demographic facts off without a pause. It is part of his job to know these facts. But, his pride in Ord and Valley County doesn’t stop there.

“I got to know Ord when I was doing a college internship,” says Mr. Pollard, now 30 years old. “I fell in love with it.” He fell so much in love with it that he eventually told local residents that if they ever had a job for him to let him know.

When asked why he fell in love with Ord, Mr. Pollard does not exactly laugh, but it’s pretty close. He explains patiently, as if to the uninitiated. “The topography here is awesome. We are 25 miles from four major bodies of water.” He ticks these off quickly, his passion growing as he speaks. “Davis Creek, Sherman, Lake Ericson, Calamus Reservoir. We are 25 miles from four rivers, Calamus, North Loup, Middle Loup and Cedar Rivers. And, the sandhills, it’s one of the most unique ecological land forms in



Caleb Pollard

the world. We have white sand beaches here. The rivers are clean and gorgeous. The wildlife abundance is awesome. We are on the US Central Flyway for birds. We have eagles, one of the largest migration routes for birds.”

Mr. Pollard grew up on a farm in a town called Nehawka in southeast Nebraska. Like many young people, he went to college in Lincoln, Nebraska, a major metropolitan center with approximately 250,000 people. He says he always knew that he had a passion for rural development. He knew he had a desire to contribute to rural communities. So, after college, Mr. Pollard stayed in Lincoln and worked for the State of Nebraska’s Department of Economic Development. He became even more familiar with rural towns across the state and their economic development issues through this work. But, he never forgot Ord.

And Ord never forgot Caleb Pollard. Caleb Pollard was married with two young children and commuting every day to a job in Omaha by the time the Executive Director of the Valley County Economic Development Board approached him. She was ending her tenure in the position, but she and the rest of the Board wanted to make sure the position stayed in good hands. They thought of Caleb Pollard and asked him to consider applying for the job.

“They did it right,” he says. “They offered me a job, and they also found a job for my wife. This is one of the hard things about getting young families to move to rural areas, finding jobs for professional spouses.” says Mr. Pollard. It’s hard to tell if he’s talking as the Executive Director of Valley County Economic Development Board now or as a young professional, himself.

It was the right offer at the right time for Mr. and Mrs. Pollard. “Living in the city was exhausting,” says Mr. Pollard, referring not only to his career and long commute to Omaha but to his wife’s own high intensity career at a busy Lincoln health center. They moved to Ord in 2008.

Mr. Pollard turns the discussion back to rural communities at this point. “You know rural communities are told that they are no good all the time by other people. They start to believe it after awhile. They start to think they can’t do anything.” Mr. Pollard does not deny that hardship and poverty are part of the rural landscape. “Disparity does exist in rural America,” he says. “There are pockets of extreme poverty that sometimes looks like the Third World in America.” That doesn’t mean the story is over for rural America in Mr. Pollard’s view.

“Ord has a business-oriented, economic development mindset,” explains Mr. Pollard. It is his job to promote economic development, so he works with local leaders, business people, and members of the Board regularly. “I don’t have to convince anyone that economic development is good idea,” he says, “its accepted. We just talk about how to accomplish the goals we set. Around here, people believe that they have the ability to direct their own future. Ord didn’t give up. The people here believe they can create their own future the way they want it to be.”



*Valley County Museum in Ord
Nebraska*

“The attitude here is awesome,” he concludes.

Mr. Pollard is not the first one to notice the awesomeness of Ord and Valley County. Ord was featured on National Public Radio in May 2009 for its innovative approach to regional tourism. In 2005, the *New York Times* ran a story about ten young professional couples who’d moved back to Ord, showcasing the rural community’s successful economic development strategy of attracting young families. Ord was the first community in Nebraska designated a state-certified community for economic development. In 2005, it was recognized by the Governor as Nebraska’s Showcase Community. Ord was also the first community in the state to participate in Hometown Competitiveness, a collaborative involving the Nebraska Community Foundation, the RUPRI Center for Rural Entrepreneurship and Heartland Center for Leadership Development. It’s not just Ord, though. It’s all of Valley County. Elryia entrepreneurs were featured in a publication by the Kansas City Federal Reserve publication in 2007.

How do they do it in Ord and Valley County?

“We don’t stop at chasing smokestacks around here,” says Mr. Pollard, referring to the traditional economic development approach, which is based on the notion that if a large business or manufacturer moves to a small rural town, the jobs and economic activity that it offers make up for any public investment in the venture. Business recruitment is part of the local economic development strategy, but it is not the highest priority. Instead, Mr. Pollard and the Valley County Economic Development Board focus on three basic approaches: (1) economic gardening; (2) youth attraction; and (3) grooming entrepreneurs.

“Economic gardening,” says Mr. Pollard “is about growing your own businesses instead of trying to convince outsiders to bring their businesses to us.” This means that Mr. Pollard works closely with new and existing businesses to try to address their needs, whether expansion, local financing, or planning.

“We are also trying to bring the young people back to Ord and Valley County. But, that’s not a hard sell, a lot of people who grew up here want to come back. We aren’t really interested in chasing people who don’t want to come back.” When young people do want to return, they need to know that there are good jobs in the area, economic opportunity. That’s one of the reasons that the Economic Development Board chooses to grow their own local businesses. “What are you going to do when an accountant wants to move back here? That person needs a place to work. A lot of the people who move back here are professionals: accountants, nurses, lawyers, a dentist.”

How do you know who wants to come back?

Mr. Pollard gives another *almost* laugh that you can imagine is accompanied by a slow, knowing and deliberate head nod. “Even in the age of social media, we talk around here. We talk to the parents and the grandparents. We ask, ‘who wants to come home?’ Once we find them, we help build the pathways to bring them back.”

Mr. Pollard does not discount the value of social media for his age set, however. He says that he is very aggressive with a social media campaign including a website, Facebook, and Twitter. “I’m 30,” he says,

“this is easy for me. I understand how to code, how to build websites.” The fact that Ord has broadband internet connectivity is a big boon for them.

Mr. Pollard might be enthusiastic but he is not naïve. “Sometimes, people seem to think that if we can just get our kids back that will solve everything. But, that isn’t true.”

Mr. Pollard says he seeks out “empty nesters” who are looking either for a life change or to retire. “Lots of times, people in this age set 55 to 60, they want to move to a small town and rural America. And, this group is excellent for grooming into entrepreneurs. I call ‘em the ‘Boomerpreneurs.’ ”He also tries to seek out the parents and grandparents of young families in Valley County, who might like to live near their children and grandchildren.

“If you look, the average age in Valley County is high. That means that business owners are often about 45 to 55. So, they will want to retire. We help them with a transition plan. We help connect business sellers with business seekers.” This is one more strategy in the economic gardening approach.

Local economic development activities and activities to groom entrepreneurs are ageless in Valley County. Before Mr. Pollard’s time, Valley County Economic Development staff partnered with the local school district to set up an entrepreneurship class for sixth graders. Sixth graders in the program wrote their own business plans and created their own businesses. Now, there is an entrepreneurship class at the high school.

“We want to be a storyteller and pilot community for the rest of rural America,” says Mr. Pollard. “I don’t hold anything back when I talk to other economic developers. I share everything about our success, even financing details. Everything. Because then we can have a fighting chance in rural America.”

Mr. Pollard explains one of his newest endeavors with his characteristic enthusiasm and passion. The Valley County Economic Development offices are located on the site of a new Central Community College campus. He is exploring a partnership with the Community College to develop a Rural Entrepreneurship Academy. In his vision, students would take college accredited core courses and learn to be business owners at the same time. Elective courses would have a focus on business ownership and entrepreneurship. “Since [the community college facility] is co-located with the economic development organization and we hold the purse strings to launch local businesses, it’s the perfect opportunity.” Mr. Pollard explains that, in his vision, students could actually start businesses in the local business incubator, also co-located with the new campus. “We can provide the bricks and mortar to help them make it.”

When asked if there was model for this idea, Mr. Pollard says, “No, I think it would be the only one.” The only one. Typical for Ord and Valley County. Typical for Caleb Pollard, too.

For more information on...

... the RUPRI Center for Rural Entrepreneurship, go to www.energizingentrepreneurs.org

... Ord, Nebraska and the Valley County Economic Development Board, go www.ordnebraska.com/