



"People have to eat, and the grocery store is the cornerstone of a community," said Pam Budenbender, store owner. "Statistically, when rural grocery stores fail or close, the town dies."



Talk of the town

Rural Grocery Initiative
feeds small communities

When the sole grocery store in Onaga, Kansas, burned down in 2010, the town lost more than a community hub. The 800 residents also lost their local source of food: The nearest grocery store was a 50-mile round trip.



Pam Budenbender and her husband, Paul, took action. They gathered funds, partnered with food distributors and built Onaga Country Market, an invaluable source of fresh food for the local community.

“People have to eat, and the grocery store is the cornerstone of a community,” said Pam Budenbender, store owner. “Statistically, when rural grocery stores fail or close, the town dies.”

People like Budenbender — along with Kansas State University’s Rural Grocery Initiative — are keeping small towns alive by investing in rural grocery stores.

The Rural Grocery Initiative, part of the university’s Center for Engagement and Community Development, aims to create new models for rural business development and sustainability.

“These small food businesses are anchor institutions,” said David Procter, director of the Center for Engagement and Community Development. “They are important sources of jobs and local taxes as well as the primary place for healthy food in the community.”

Since 2007, the initiative has worked with rural communities — those with populations less than 2,500 people — to help current grocery stores stay open or to help build new stores. The initiative has helped launch or sustain multiple stores in the Kansas towns of Plains, Morland, Minneola and Protection.

The initiative also has aided rural communities in more than 25 states as they improve access to healthy foods.

“We’re now talking about grocery stores in terms of their connection to farmers markets and local growers,” Procter said. “The initiative has changed from a focus strictly on grocery stores to the bigger issue of getting more healthy food into small towns.”

The Rural Grocery Initiative continues to support small communities through several new resources and research projects.

- The Rural Grocery Store Summit is a biennial meeting where store owners can network and discuss issues, challenges and solutions. The 2014 summit included Kansas rural grocery store owners like Budenbender as well as owners from more than 15 states.
- The initiative provides a rural grocery toolkit, which is a resource for current grocery store owners as well as people considering establishing a grocery store. The toolkit contains a variety of links with information on assessing the market, funding, legal licensing and regulations.
- Several U.S. Department of Agriculture, or USDA, grants are helping the Rural Grocery Initiative identify the challenges that store owners face as well as identify different ownership models, including cooperative stores, community-owned stores, nonprofit stores or sole proprietorships.
- A collaborative \$500,000 USDA grant focuses on two interventions — a nutrition education program and a new food labeling system — to help customers fill their shopping carts with healthier foods. The food labeling system adds nutritional value, or NuVal, scores to shelf labels. The NuVal scores range from one to 100, with more nutritional food containing labels closer to 100.

“We want to increase the purchase of healthy food by customers,” Procter said. “Ultimately, we hope that the grocery store will purchase more healthy foods, which can improve the overall health profile of the store and the community.”

The grant also involves the university’s agricultural economics and human nutrition departments as well as K-State Research and Extension and the University of Minnesota Extension Service.

By Jennifer Tidball, Communications and Marketing

