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Forgotten Highways: The Next Economic Development Opportunity?

John L. Gann, Jr.
President
Gann Associates
Glen Ellyn, Illinois
citykid@uwalumni.com

Abstract: Good but little-used non-Interstate ("UNterstate") highways can bring economic development to bypassed rural areas that attract neither industry nor tourists if travelers can be induced to use them for longer trips. Today these routes offer little-appreciated advantages compared with both flying and Interstate Highway travel that can be marketed to travelers. Enterprising Extension agents are well positioned to have major roles in launching and managing UNterstate Highway marketing programs.

In a suburban age, about the only experience most people have with rural America is in travelling. And even then we mostly just fly over it or speed through it without stopping on the Interstate Highways.

The exceptions are the occasional popular tourist or vacation spots. Together with the few places that landed industrial plants, they alone in rural areas benefit from the vast economic resources found in urbanized places.

But standard economic development formulas simply won't work in most rural communities. Most don't have location factors industry wants (or do, but have too many competitors). And few are credible tourist destinations.

Every rural county, however, has older highways, some of them still excellent choices for long-distance travel. These are the routes used to motor from city to city before the Interstate Highways. Not at all like the Interstates, they are the "UNterstates." And they are roads we're hardly using.

UNterstate Advantages

Rural communities could benefit economically if all kinds of travelers (not just tourists) used these older highways more often for longer trips now made by Interstate Highways or flying. That might happen if they were marketed.

Unlike air or Interstate travel, UNterstate Highways invite seeing, stopping, and spending at multiple locations rather than just at a few interchanges or airports, both typically dominated by big out-of-town chains. That means small local stores, lodging places, restaurants, attractions, service stations, and even farm stands can boost sales. More traffic in time grows new businesses. Jobs, better incomes, and increased local

tax revenues follow.

Post-9/11 security measures, economic distress of the airlines, and hours-long captivity of passengers in grounded aircraft have made air travel into travail. Entire books have been written on these tribulations (McCartney, 2009; Mintzberg, 2001). Studies by NASA found that on trips of 500 miles or less, which are most trips by plane, commercial flying was no faster portal-to-portal than driving (Holmes, Durham, & Tarry, 2003).

UNterstate travel offers rural places the *sine qua non* of economic development that almost all of them lack: *visibility*. Out-of-towners have made investments after being intrigued by what they saw from a car window. Chicagoan Lee Burgess, for example, would take two-lane U.S. 18 in preference to the Interstate for consulting trips. He bought a closed and decayed outdoor theatre on 18 just outside Jefferson, Wisconsin, after seeing its For Sale sign. He rebuilt it and reopened in 2000 (Medaris, 2005). It now draws patrons from three large cities within a 100-mile radius. Had he taken the Interstate, he never would have seen the realtor's sign.

Compared with Interstate Highways, UNterstates have much less traffic, many fewer tractor-trailers, more to see, better food, less construction, and not-much-longer travel times (Gann, 2003). A new manual (Gann, 2009) suggests 45 advantages UNterstates offer over Interstate travel that could be marketed to travelers.

Interstates have well-known safety-enhancing features—limited access, medians, wide lanes and shoulders—that UNterstates usually lack. But UNterstates now offer the safety advantages of much lighter traffic and many fewer big trucks. It's hard to have a collision with a vehicle that's not there. That's not to say that UNterstates are safer than Interstates, but only that they are probably safer for long-distance travel than Interstate users think.

Marketing UNterstates must, however, be distinguished from past efforts to market FHWA Scenic Byways or state heritage highways. These routes are a niche product with appeal to a few tourists but—because they are often substandard, out-of-the-way highways—not to the general traveler. Because UNterstates represent good transportation between major destinations rather than cultural experiences, they have a larger potential market.

Could successfully marketed UNterstates theoretically fill up with traffic and lose their advantages? Such an extreme outcome is unlikely from even the most aggressive marketing. Many will with good reason always prefer the Interstate. And today too much traffic is the last thing most rural areas need to worry about.

As with any new idea, UNterstate Highway marketing currently lacks supportive research assuring its outcome. But that visibility and business follow traffic is a truism. Moving traffic to another highway is surely not easy, but moving a rural community to where the traffic has gone is much harder, as is just allowing bypassed towns to continue to stagnate. Our knowledge is admittedly incomplete, however, and further research could provide some answers.

What Extension Brings to the Table

My community development Extension work with the College of Human Ecology at Cornell University made clear that county agents can bring local leaders together in efforts like this. And job creation and tax base enhancement are ever popular politically, a fact not to be overlooked in a time of waning funding support for Extension (McDowell, 2004; Fribourg, 2003).

But many places have a limited idea of what marketing entails. A misunderstanding of "branding," for example, as "logos and slogans" (Anholt, 2007) leads communities to waste resources on gimmicks having little impact on job-creators—something rural towns especially can ill afford. Such misunderstandings can be addressed with the practical local educational efforts that have always been the essence of Extension. And in a time of severe recession followed by a predicted lackluster recovery, there may be no more important cause for Extension to be identified with than economic revival.

The recommended course for marketing an UNterstate involves several steps.

1. Form a multi-community group of local leaders supporting the idea and secure initial funding and expert marketing resources.
2. Choose an UNterstate route that is marketable. (You won't sell a bad road or one not linking prime destinations.)
3. Improve the product: remedy any serious defects in the route selected.
4. Develop a good strategy and marketing message, without which everything else done is wasted.
5. Choose cost-effective media to get this message out.
6. Get new traffic to stop at local businesses with signage, maps, promotions, and the like, including strategic targeting. Gann (2009), for example, cites successful highway facilities catering to families traveling with young children.
7. Measure results; evaluate effectiveness; and make changes.

References listed herein can point the agent without marketing knowledge in the right direction.

Many *JOE* commentaries have argued that to survive, Extension urgently needs to find new clients and new ideas. Extension's mission has been education. And as West and colleagues imply with respect to information on agriculture Extension still disseminates (West, Drake, Londo, 2009), it's not really education if it's something you already know.

Acknowledgment

The author formerly had an Extension appointment in community development at the College of Human Ecology at Cornell University. This article is dedicated to his unlikely and unwitting mentor, O. Cleon Barber, former agricultural agent in Broome County, New York.

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