

## Small Town, USA

Howdy, my name is Savannah Ludewig, and I am an 8th-generation Tyler Countian. I will attend Texas A&M University in the fall, majoring in Nursing Anesthesiology. One of the most exciting parts of going to college is the experience of living in an urban area. I look forward to eating at various places, having the opportunity to go shopping at a moment's notice, and attending the numerous events that city life offers. While many fellow graduates also look forward to spreading their wings, one question remains. How do small towns attract and encourage young adults to relocate/return to rural small towns?

Current economic trends show that small town USA is shrinking. In 2000 16% of the US population lived in rural counties compared to 14% in 2016, with older adults making up most of the population. As of 2020, Woodville census information shows the population as 2,403, with 60% female and 40% male. The median age in Woodville is 41, while the median age in Texas is 35. The median income in Woodville was \$31,000, with an average cost of living index of 79 compared to the Texas average cost of living at 94.2.

To attract young people and families to settle in Tyler County, our community leaders should take notes from other rural communities trying to solve this problem. In 2017, the University of Illinois Extension Department facilitated a survey with results indicating that only 23% of millennials wanted to live in small towns or rural areas. Participants noted they were more likely to move back to their hometowns due to the lower cost of living and proximity to family.

1. City Park with a playground, walking track, and a swimming pool in a safe, family-friendly area. 49% of young people surveyed indicate that lifestyle is integral to where they decide to settle. Work/life balance is increasingly important to young people.
2. High-Speed Internet Availability. Many millennials today work remotely and depend on the Internet to conduct business. The Internet also plays an integral part in education. To attract families with children, parents want to know that access to technology in school and online courses will be available for their children.
3. Invest in the youth. Kids today value socialization, so rural communities need to develop clubs, organizations, cafes, parks, and businesses that attract young people and allow them to participate in activities they enjoy. Organizations such as Rotary Interact and Lions Club Leos encourage young adults to become active members of their community

while still in high school. This builds a sense of belonging and significantly impacts their decision to stay, return, or relocate.

4. Provide more entrepreneurial opportunities. Over 70 % of young people currently want to own their own business. Investing in public markets, offering shared workspaces, and giving the government financial incentives to open a business have attracted young adults to small, rural communities.
5. Actively engage and consult with high school seniors about the benefits of living in a rural community. Involve them in community planning and local government, and gather insight via surveys. This will make young adults feel connected and see themselves as valuable community members whose voice is heard.
6. Build sidewalks. Young people with children enjoy outdoor activities such as walking and biking. Parents are more comfortable letting their children play and travel to school, parks, and neighbors if a sidewalk is available.
7. Market our community to attract young people using intentional marketing strategies that are targeted to young adults. Emphasize the potential for non-traditional livelihoods, quality of life, and affordable housing that Tyler County offers. Recruit employers that want to hire and train young graduates. One study noted, "People do not move to counties; they move to communities."
8. Educational Opportunity. Parents today want to ensure that their children will be able to fulfill their dreams and can compete for jobs that are in high demand. The first thing home buyers look for is top-rated schools. Communities in high demand offer high-performing public education, opportunities, and access to higher education, such as community colleges via education centers that provide college credit and certifications in career and technology fields. This is another reason why high-speed Internet is a must.
9. Access to quality healthcare. Young families are also concerned about access to quality healthcare. Communities that take advantage of government grants that pay for medical school loans see increased quality healthcare available and benefit young families and aging citizens.
10. Interstates & highways. Proximity and access to professional employment, shopping, movies, art, theater, and restaurants in cities such as Beaumont and Lufkin are also essential. While working remotely from home has increased, the good old days of commuting are still necessary since most skilled labor jobs, such as welding, cannot be done remotely. This means that access to jobs via commuting is essential. Updating and building loops around small towns is a win-win. It reduces unnecessary traffic through

town, allows commuters to bypass red lights and school zones, and decreases the wear and tear on rural town roads.

While looking forward to experiencing the urban lifestyle, I also know that I will miss my rural lifestyle. There is comfort in going to Walmart, seeing people you recognize, and have known for years, and catching up. I enjoy getting from one side of town via two red lights in about 10 minutes. Going to school in a small town has also been an advantage. Until sixth grade, I attended school at Livingston ISD. While at Livingston ISD, I attended school with those in my grade but never met due to scheduling and interests. I also never built quality relationships with my teachers due to the sheer volume of students in the class. It was not uncommon for your teachers to not even know your name. When I started school in Woodville, it was a complete culture shock. Several teachers knew my family and even went to school with my mom. Teachers you aren't familiar with know your name and would speak to you to say "hi." Moving to a rural town has helped me become the confident, God-loving, well-rounded young woman I am today. I am proud and excited to go and represent our community at Texas A&M University. I also look forward to the day I can return and raise my own family with the values and experiences I cherish. I hope that other people my age will do the same.

Thank you in advance for your consideration of this scholarship. If chosen to receive this scholarship I look forward to representing the Tyler County Chamber of Commerce. I believe that the values, morals, and attitude that I possess align with our communities.