

# An Opportunity for Warren: Taking Advantage of Small-City Migration

Steve Sorensen © 2004  
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## By the way...

Slower, quieter, cheaper. That's what Warren County, Pennsylvania has to offer. Those are some of the traits people will be looking for in the coming decades, and Warren can enjoy an economic revival by marketing these characteristics while developing some important others.

I've spent the last few days reading an insightful new book, a book that anyone who wants prosperity in Warren will do well to read. The book is called "Life 2.0" and the author is Rich Karlgaard, publisher of Forbes magazine. The subtitle of the book is "How People Across America are Transforming Their Lives by Finding the Where of Their Happiness." If the Warren Public Library doesn't have this book, it should.

The book describes courageous relocations that dozens of people have made away from the bi-coastal metropolis and into the American heartland — to smaller places like Bozeman, Montana, Fargo, North Dakota, even Clearfield, Pennsylvania.

The thesis of the book is that economic forces sweeping the planet now favor small-city migration and revival. These forces are driving real estate, education, security, and many other social and economic trends. If Karlgaard's thesis is correct, maybe Warren can again become competitive. But to capitalize, a slow pace, quiet life, and cheaper

cost of living are not enough.

Karlgaard insists that several things are necessary for the prosperity of a community. The objective of this column is to name just a few, in hopes of getting some of us thinking about how Warren can take advantage of this trend.

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One thing that's necessary for prosperity is accessibility. In this, Warren has been at a disadvantage since the end of the lumber and oil booms. Historically, river and railroad travel flourished and contributed to those bullish days. Once those became obsolete, getting in and out of Warren wasn't so easy, but that disadvantage has been slowly disappearing.

Today, we're not nearly so isolated as we were a generation ago when driving to a nearby town was a major trip. With better cars, cheap gas (by historic standards), and improved high velocity roads, we hop into the car and stomp on the gas without hesitation. A drive to Erie for shopping or Olean for an NCAA basketball game is a mere evening jaunt.

For those reasons, air travel is also more accessible. Although airports are farther away, time-wise they're as close to us as they are to residents in many east coast cities.

Thankfully, the most significant accessibility trend in the world today has not bypassed Warren. The Internet has proven to be a powerful tool, shrinking the world to an extent unimaginable a few years ago. I offer one startling fact as evidence: amazingly,

Blair.com is the number one website visited by women over the age of 55.

But, while roads and cars and air travel and the World Wide Web have improved our

accessibility, we lack another critical necessity that Karlgaard cites as integral to prosperity.

It's the entrepreneurial role model. They were legendary during the boom years of timber and petroleum. We had them on a broader and larger scale in business creators and industrialists including Clinton Wilder, G. G. Greene, Thomas Struthers and, I dare not forget, John L. Blair. The question is, do we have them today? Karlgaard suggests specific ways of making a community attractive to entrepreneurs.

Another essential is education. Without a college or university (and the intellectual capital of a stockpile of PhD's), our secondary educational system is all the more important. So, we need to focus more attention on our school district. "Smart, talented people are drivers of economic growth," says Karlgaard, and they are



attracted by stellar kindergarten through twelfth grade education for their children.

Entrepreneurs who consider moving here will ask, "Are the schools good?" The point is, they're not good enough. I don't say that to hurl insults. I say it because we need to remember that we are not competing against the schools in our little PIAA athletic conferences. When it comes to academic excellence, we are competing against the world.

"Life 2.0" is more than a collection of inspiring people stories. It also makes a huge statement about how to set the stage for economic creativity, the kind of environment where it is more realistic to recruit 10 entrepreneurs who can create 20 jobs each, than to stake everything on one company with 200 ready-made jobs. At the end of the book the author lists dozens of places of all sizes that are attractive settings for small-city migration. With some tweaking, Warren could be one of them.

*Steve Sorensen lives in Russell with his wife and Greta. He returned to Warren in 1981. He pounds on the keyboard because he thinks that a word is worth a thousand pictures. He's seen it done, but hasn't yet succeeded in writing that word himself. Maybe next time. Greta, by the way, is a miniature dachshund, just to clear up the pictures that word created. You can contact Greta or her master at Greta52@verizon.net.*