



National Planning Meeting



 Smithsonian

A black and white photograph of a rural landscape. In the foreground, a paved road splits into two paths that curve away from each other, forming a crossroads. A large, leafless tree stands prominently at the junction of the roads. To the left of the tree, there is a small signpost with two signs. The background consists of rolling hills and fields, with a single tree visible on a distant ridge. The overall scene is desolate and evokes a sense of a crossroads in a rural setting.

Is Rural America at a crossroads?

Major Themes

What does “rural America” mean? What makes these places unique? How do we identify with them?

How has our attraction to and interaction with the land formed the basis of rural America?

How have rural communities and small towns evolved and changed?





Major Themes

- Changes transformed rural America (including global influences), especially during the 1900s.
- What are some of these changes, and what have they meant for rural life?
- People are holding on in their rural communities. Why and how?
- What is rural life like today? How are rural Americans shaping their future?



Introduction

- Americans come together at crossroads
- Small towns are centers for:
 - Commerce and trade
 - Local politics
 - Culture and ideas
- Rural America changed significantly in the 1900s
 - Demographics
 - Education
 - Access to services
 - Economic viability
- Rural communities may face challenges as well as opportunities





Concepts to Consider

- On the exhibition's "welcome sign", we share our town motto "Where people meet, ideas intersect, and change is constant." Does this describe your community?
- How is your community facing major changes today? Would you say that your town is at a crossroads? How are people responding?
- When you think of rural America, do you think of change? If so, what changes come to mind?
- Think beyond your own community. In what ways does rural America generally appear to be at a crossroads?
 - What are the most significant issues having an impact on rural places? Are they economic, cultural, or political?
 - Why is it important for all Americans, whether they live in rural places or not, to consider changes happening in rural America?

Concepts to Consider

- Think about all of the different ways in which your community and other rural places in your state changed over the past century.
 - Which of those changes had the greatest impact? How does that change still affect day-to-day life?
- Is rural America endangered, thriving, or just scraping by? Do you see dwindling options or a bright future?
 - What do you think of those questions? Are they appropriate questions for rural communities to ask themselves?
 - Are they fair? How might those questions also pertain to urban and suburban communities?
- We ask in the exhibition “At your own crossroads, which direction will you head—toward the countryside or away?” What do you think of that statement? Have you ever thought about how your life would be different if you left your community?
 - Name three things you would miss about your town?
 - What factors would entice you to stay? If you feel that improvements are needed, what changes would you make?
 - **If you were mayor what would you do?**

Identity

- American culture is filled with romantic views of rural life and culture
- Living and working in a rural place can also be a difficult life
- How is rural represented in books, songs, poetry, and art?
- How do rural ideals square with American ideals?
 - Economic opportunity
 - Personal liberty
 - Equality



Creating IDENTITY

Rural identity—so deeply rooted in the land—has profoundly shaped American identity.

During the 19th century, rural ideals captivated the minds and imaginations of philosophers, politicians, historians, artists, and writers. They glorified farmers, framing them as quintessential Americans who embodied notions of personal liberty, economic opportunity, and equality.

Rural Americans have always been a diverse community. American Indians were the original inhabitants. Through the centuries, people from many different cultural backgrounds—including those who arrived on the land or were forced to labor on the land—contributed to the development of rural America.

Across generations, some Americans farmed, logged, mined, and ran businesses and communities, fueling the nation's growth. Opportunities were not equal. Success was not guaranteed.

People experienced rural America in different ways, and their experiences helped shape our rural culture. Family farms and bustling Main Streets became icons of a rural identity that still resonate at the core of American identity.

What Does "Rural" Mean to You?

Liberty



Concepts to Consider

- In what ways does rural America play a role in defining what it means to be American?
 - What words would you use to describe rural Americans?
 - How do you think rural Americans differ from people who live in other places?
 - What characteristics do they share?
- What role did agriculture play in developing our views of rural America? Does agriculture still define rural places today?
 - If not, describe how your community has changed.
- Which cultural or political figures have the most significant impact on how we perceive rural America?
- In what ways is the demographic makeup of rural Americans changing? Do you think rural America differs from the rest of the country?

Concepts to Consider

- **It is difficult to establish a firm definition of “rural” because the word can mean different things to different people.**
- The idea of “rural” America has adopted cultural significance beyond population size and land use. What elements of rural life make it unique to you?
- Authors’ interpretations of rural America have a great impact on how we view rural people and places. How can these books teach us about how views of rural America have changed over time?
 - Which book do you think best describes rural America?
- How does music play a role in how we describe rural America? What emotions are conveyed through these songs?
 - Is there a song that captures the spirit of your community?
 - If you wrote a song about your town, what would you call it?



Land

- Land is core to our concept of rural life
- Our sense of place is powerful
 - Many Americans express strong connections to the rural landscape
 - Memories of recreation in rural places
 - Natural beauty draws people to rural areas
 - For some, rural landscapes represent hard work and isolation
- Not everyone is a landowner. Many Americans connect with rural places through public lands.
- How do attitudes towards land ownership and access differ among Americans?
- Are there stories of conflict over land in your state?



Concepts to Consider

- What is the rural place you consider most memorable? Why?
 - Are your memories positive or negative?
 - Are your connections personal, community-based, or job-related?
 - What other elements of life can be linked to a place?
- Along the bottom panel are three words: “Inspiration,” “Spiritual,” and “Wonder.” Do any of these words resonate with you, or remind you of a memory connected to land?
 - What other words might capture the awe some people feel for the American landscape?
- Many artists, authors and musicians are inspired by land and other natural features and include those places in their creations. What places inspire your creativity? How would you depict or describe that place in your creation?
- What attracts people to land?
 - Does living in a rural community mean that people have a different relationship with land?
 - In what ways might rural people view land differently from people in urban places?

Concepts to Consider

- Why is land ownership important to some Americans and not to others?
 - How did European American views of ownership differ from American Indians?
 - How have views of land ownership changed over the past 100 years?
- Why do you think the exhibition curators say that "Land can be a fulcrum around which social classes and cultures clash?" Consider ways people in your area have been welcomed into or perhaps prevented from entering places because of land ownership or local land use policies.
 - How have people reacted to that? What was the experience of American Indians in your area?
 - How was land obtained and made available for settlement in your area?
- Has the landscape of your community changed over time, from either natural or man-made causes?
 - How has that had an impact on land use and local policies?
 - How has it had an effect on people's relationship with the land?

Concepts to Consider

- Americans do not always see eye-to-eye in matters that concern land ownership and use. That may happen when water rights, mineral rights, and rights of way are disputed.
 - How has your community handled the complex nature of land ownership and use?
 - Have there been significant land disputes in your area?
 - How is land divided between public and private uses?
 - How are local residents involved with the stewardship and management of the land?
- Describe the important role that land, and access to it, played in the development of rural America.
 - How did people in your area make a living by working on the land or using resources from the land?
 - What jobs in your community rely on the land?

Community

- Communities grew at rural crossroads
 - People connect, exchange ideas, work towards common goals, rely on neighbors, and build the future of their community
- Sustaining Communities
 - Country Life Movement
 - New Deal and rural electrification programs
- Accelerated Change
 - Change in the second half of the 20th century
 - Erosion of political power in some states
 - Demographic changes
 - Civil rights struggles
 - Aging populations
 - Challenges of inequality and poverty





Concepts to Consider

- Why did towns develop in rural America? What role did these communities play in creating the image of rural America?
 - Why do you think “Main Streets” became such an enduring symbol of small-town America?
- What do people like to do in your town?
 - Where do people gather to interact? How do people celebrate things that are important to the community?
 - What kinds of things or services are not available and have to be accessed by traveling to another place? How would life be different, in positive and negative ways, if those activities were available?
- Consider all of the different ways you gather with others in your community: in school, at home, in public centers like libraries or shops. The people that make up these groups can vary based on things like age, location, and time. Why might that be? Who makes up your community, and how could that change?

Concepts to Consider

- **Try not to think of "challenges" or "change" as inherently negative or positive forces. If you were to step outside of your community, how might these issues appear?** Personal insights and experience shape our understanding and viewpoints. How do people talk about these issues with neighbors, as well as people from outside of the community?
- How do people work together to make things better for all? There can be small examples, like doing a favor for someone, or big things, like starting a business to address a need in the community.
 - What are some examples of how communities sustain themselves and what you may still have left to do?
- What infrastructure or services are essential to your community? How were those services developed and how did they change people's lives in your town? How can your town maintain them into the future? What would life be like without them?

Concepts to Consider

- What factors led to the decline of many rural communities in the mid-to-late 20th century? What has your community lost that most matters to you and why?
- How did national social change movements have an impact on rural places?
 - In what ways did the rural experience mirror urban areas? How did it differ in rural places?
 - What legacies of those reforms do you see in rural America today?
- What do young people in your community need most?
- **If you were granted one wish, what change for good would you make in your town?**



Persistence

- Rural Americans believe in their communities and many choose to work to resolve issues rather than leaving
- Economic survival requires revitalization of small towns, and inspires new ways of thinking about farming and extractive industries
- Many Americans are discovering the benefits of rural life
 - Slower pace and quiet surroundings
 - Proximity to natural resources
- Popular culture connects urban and suburban Americans to rural life
 - Rural life and people are often romanticized or satirized



Concepts to Consider

- What is an industry that your community is known for? Has that always been the case?
 - If agriculture has been a large sector of the economy in your region, how has farming changed?
- Local businesses and industries are often the backbone of a region's economy. Do you know the oldest business or farm in your town? How long has it been around?
 - You might also discuss new or emerging industries; have they arrived from elsewhere, or started here? How have outside influences shaped the economy?
- People perform a lot of jobs to keep things running smoothly: they have jobs, are family members, and help make up a community. Sometimes, the roles they play change over time, for a variety of reasons. Think about how people's jobs have changed: do people move here or away for new opportunities, start their own businesses, or switch industries? Why do you think that happens?

Concepts to Consider

- What role does your town's "Main Street" play now?
 - Is it a tourist attraction, a hub for day-to-day activity, a ghost town?
 - If there have been revitalization efforts, how has that transformed the community landscape?
- What local traditions are unique to the community? Are new traditions emerging? What are they?
 - How does tradition, its stories, and its reputation impact your town? Has it led to an increased interest in other conservation and preservation efforts?
 - What do you think are the most important things about your town that should be preserved?
 - How have rural areas and small towns used historic preservation and cultural tourism to create interest and economic development?
- Why do people choose to live in rural America today? In what ways do their choices mirror or differ from those of past rural Americans?
- **Describe your town in ten years. Who is here and why?**

A photograph of a rural landscape. In the foreground, there is a hayrack filled with hay, with the word "WELCOME" spelled out in large, decorative letters. The background shows rolling hills with green fields and rows of corn. The sky is blue with some clouds. A large blue triangle is overlaid on the right side of the image, containing text.

Managing Change

Some rural communities face significant challenges

Americans are confronting these issues and finding new and unique solutions

There are many different voices to welcome into these conversations



Concepts to Consider

- What is the big picture? Can you define what rural life means today?
- Why do you think that the artist used crops to spell out the word “wealth?”
 - What are other things that can be part of a community’s measurement of wealth?
 - What are the things that “money can’t buy” that are most critical to your community’s prosperity?
 - How can your community capitalize on those things?

Concepts to Consider

- Thinking beyond your area, what are rural America's best assets? What are rural America's most critical issues?
- In what ways can rural Americans build on the changes, both positive and negative, that affect their communities?
- Why is it important for rural people to engage in discussions about the future of their communities?
- What do you think is the most important issue facing your community that people need to discuss?

Specifications

- Freestanding sections: 6 (including the introduction)
- Square footage: about 750 square feet
- Minimum ceiling height: 8 feet

- Power requirements: 3 outlets
- Media components: 7 (2 monitors, 2 digital photo frames, 2 battery-powered audio elements, 1 touchscreen computer)

- Various sized object cases
- Mechanical, tactile, and low-tech interactives



Welcome to rural America, a crossroads of change in a vast land. American Indians who were already here, those who came in search of a better life, and people who were forced to move all contributed to the development of rural America.

Throughout the 19th century, the majority of Americans lived in rural areas. They built their lives around the work of harvesting what the land could produce—the food, fuel, fiber, ores, and minerals crucial to a growing nation. They built communities at rural crossroads—small towns that became centers of commerce, politics, and culture.

But conditions favorable to robust rural communities changed. Early in the 20th century, growing urban populations shifted economic investment and political influence from the counties to the cities. Since then, the pace of rural change has accelerated.

Today, rural communities are at a new crossroads—a meeting point of ideas where they can chart their own future. With their innovations and creative spirit, rural Americans are helping to define and shape the future of the country.

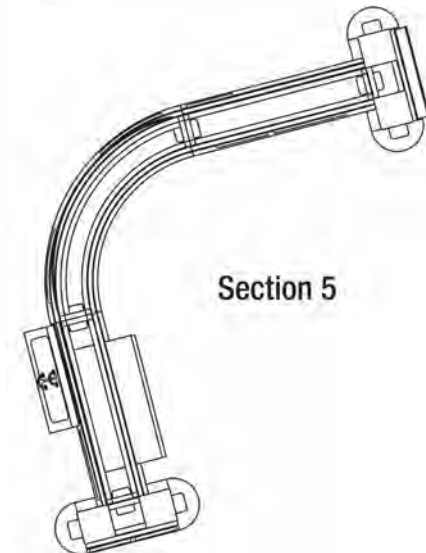
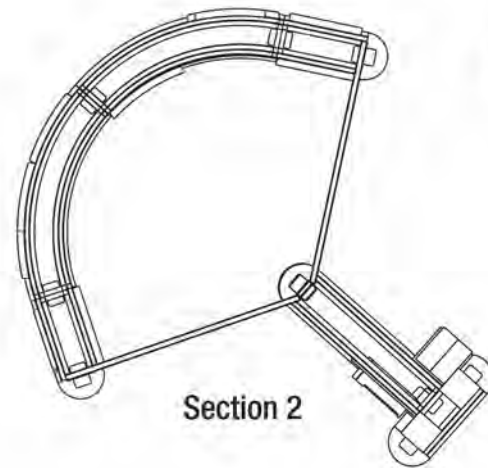
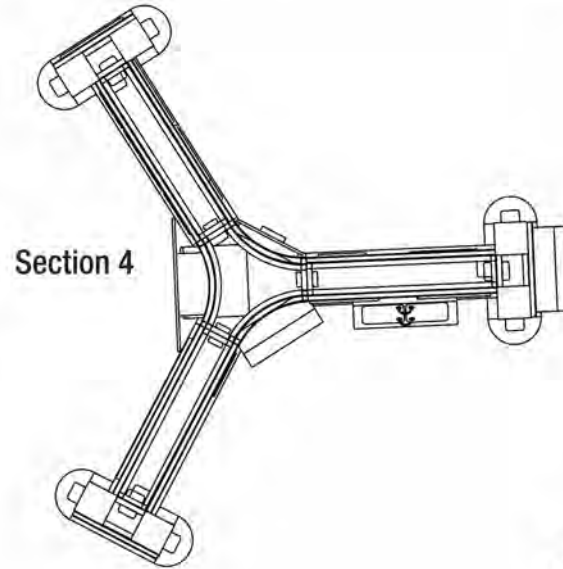
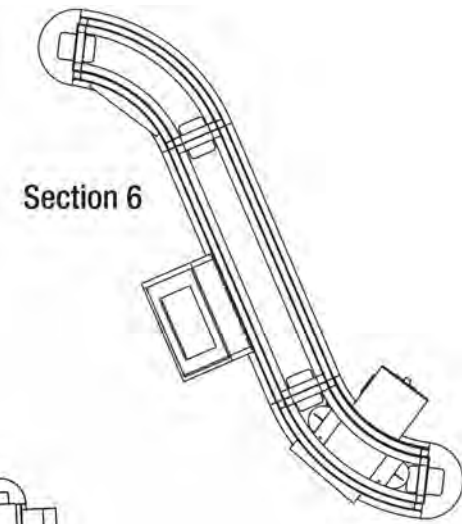
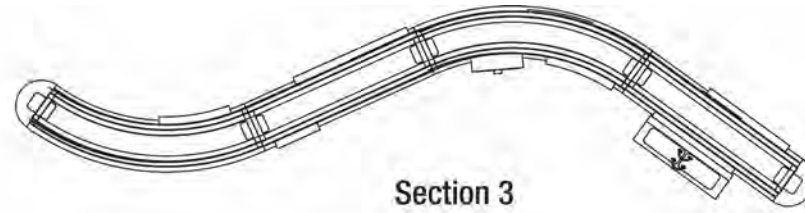
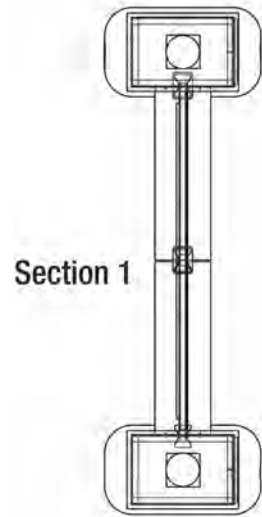
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CROSSROADS

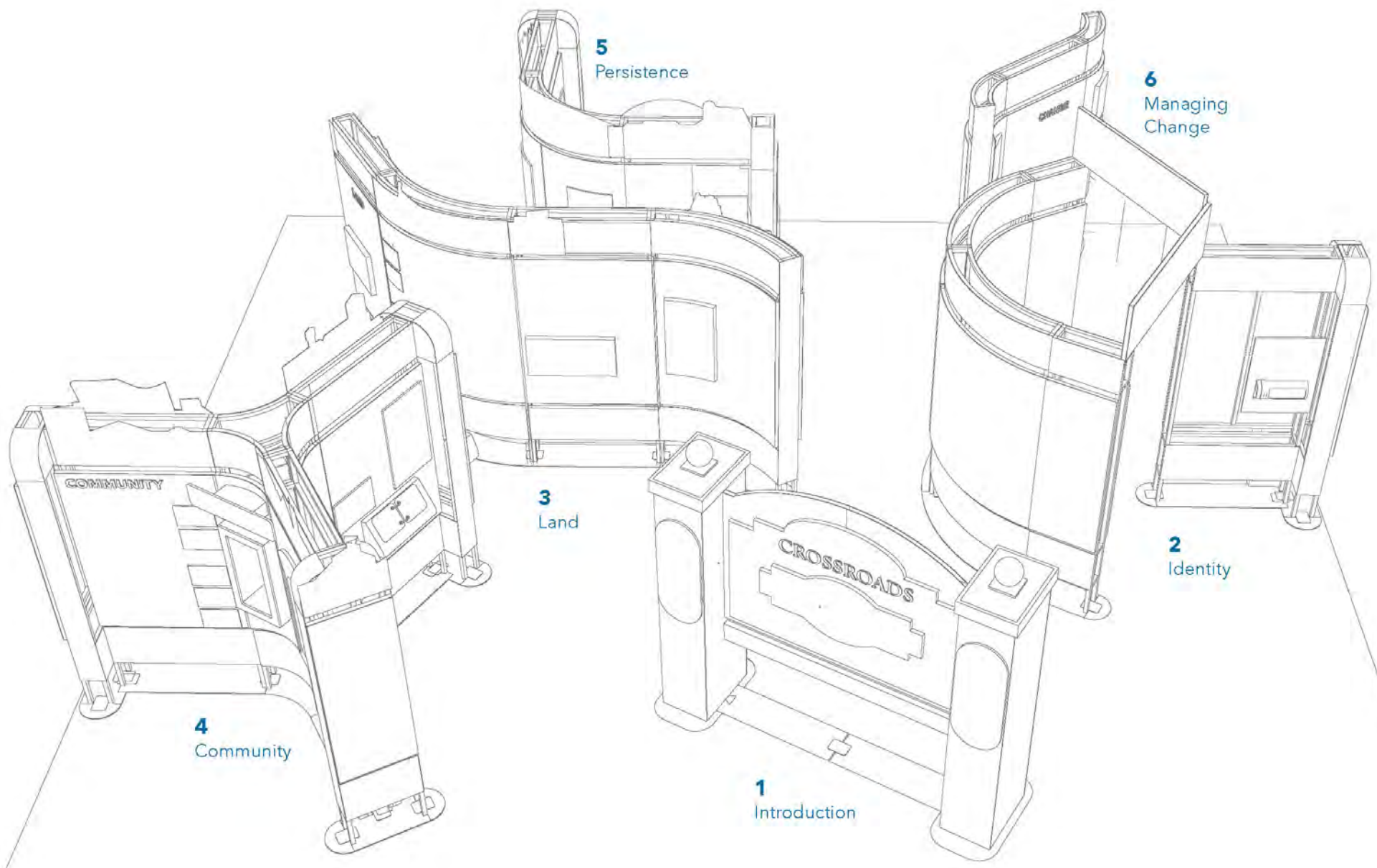


Change in Rural America

Where people meet, ideas intersect

Floorplan





5
Persistence

6
Managing
Change

2
Identity

1
Introduction

3
Land

4
Community

COMMUNITY

CROSSROADS

CHANGE



Logistics

16 crates total

8 large structure crates – 81.5” tall

8 smaller crates

Crates weigh between 150 to 350 pounds

- Trucks require ramp or lift gate
- Plan to use handicap ramps or elevators
- Doors need to be at least 82” high



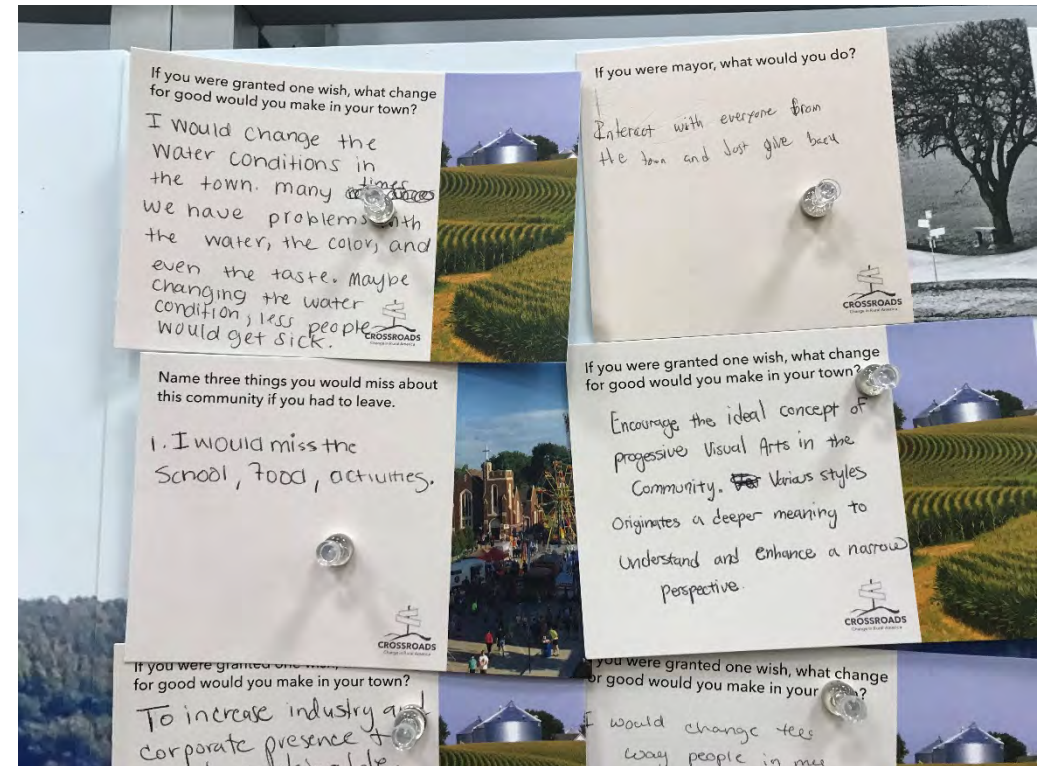


Kiosk

- Features nearly 60 stories from Crossroads films and Stories from Main Street
- 24" touch screen computer requires electricity

Publications

- Promotional
 - Posters (50 for each community, plus 50 for state use)
 - Postcards (six varieties, 100 of each for a total of 600 per community, along with a supply for state use)
 - Banner (1 for each state, travels with exhibition)
- Interpretive and Educational
 - Docent handbook (30 for each community)
 - Question postcards (five varieties, 100 of each for a total of 500 per community)



Let's Talk



- What are your goals for *Crossroads*?
- Are there challenges facing your towns in your state?
- What do people want to change?
- What are the elements of each community's history, arts, and culture that help create a feeling of hopefulness?
- How could *Crossroads* be part of a larger discussion about rural areas in your state?
- How could partnerships enhance your programs and the community?