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**Headline:** **Seeking 'footloose'  
Building on telecom connections can help renew Nebraska towns,  
economist says.**

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**Body Text:** Amenities natural, historical and cultural. Affordable housing. Options for higher education and lifelong learning. Connectivity to the outside world.

Such are tools that offer, as World-Herald editorials have said, the best hope for Nebraska's heartland to regenerate itself.

Larry **Swanson** would call them the last best hope.

**Swanson**, a former University of Nebraska-Lincoln economist, sees encouraging potential for modest-sized Plains cities to stabilize or grow their populations. The director of the O'Connor Center for the Rocky Mountain West in Missoula, Mont., pressed his case during a Thursday talk in Lincoln and will be part of a panel discussion today at the UNL East Campus Union.

In an interview before his arrival, **Swanson**, who grew up in Edgar, Neb., said the very tools listed above have helped his adopted state, once sparsely populated, attract urban refugees in growing numbers.

He says homes in Bozeman, Mont., that sold for \$120,000 when **Swanson** moved to that state in 1988 now go for triple that figure. Ditto in Missoula. Bozeman has grown from about 21,500 people in 1980 to about 33,500 now; Missoula had 33,500 then but has nearly 58,000 now.

Both cities have benefited from what **Swanson** sees as a long-term "footloose" economy. Its players, thanks to the flexibility of the Internet, can thrive in a world market and enjoy their ideal quality of life while working where they choose.

Instead of a firm employing 200 people in one city, **Swanson** said, "you're in many locations, and you've got 200 subcontractors."

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OK, both Missoula and Bozeman have mountains nearby. Even so, **Swanson** believes a number of "middle cities" of roughly 5,000 to 25,000, in both Dakotas as well as Nebraska, have natural features that can attract households that telecommute hundreds or thousands of miles.

The middle-sized Nebraska cities that draw Swanson's attention, by and large, already function as regional trade centers. But even the state's smallest towns have a chance to land a big-city couple or family who long for small-town life.

With what pitch? **Swanson** sums it up: "You're going to be in a good town with a good house, a good school and a good environment."

He adds: "I just get this sense that if we have hope, if we have intelligence, we'll find ways to focus on opportunities for a critical five- to 10-year period. Otherwise, I'm afraid these areas are going to sink."

**Swanson** cites Census figures all too familiar to Nebraskans -- aging populations and the "brain drain" of young adults, especially those in their prime child-raising years. These trends, he said, have accelerated this decade after ebbing somewhat in the last.

Luring enough newcomers or expatriates to avert irreversible decline can seem daunting. Some Nebraskans might even question its desirability if it makes housing prices soar or erodes the very quality of life they need to sell to newcomers.

But human floods aren't required, **Swanson** said. "We just need to stem the spiral of decline at the very time when (small towns) have things that make them more viable. In some of these places, a few hundred people are all we're talking about."

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Some Nebraska towns already have gained some of the people **Swanson** envisions. The Internet enables them to spread their stories so others might join them.

They can promote hunting and fishing, the sandhill crane migration, the sandy beaches of Lake McConaughy (even in low-water conditions), the fine-arts enclaves in some towns and the relative closeness of Denver, Omaha or Kansas City for a big-city shopping or entertainment fix.

They can set up e-mail chains to let expatriates know when jobs open up back home, as Norfolk commendably does. They can map the tendrils that Nebraska's university system, four-year colleges and community colleges have extended statewide.

They can build on the success of the Lied Main Street Program in revitalizing downtowns. And they can highlight how many towns offer so much more home for the money it takes to buy a starter home on the coasts.

"I think Nebraska has more amenities than most people realize," **Swanson** said. But to promote them, "it's going to take some creativity."

Nebraskans need to share successful strategies and put their best faces forward, with urgency but without fatalism. This is a place worth living in or coming back to. Let the world know.