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The Importance of Third Places in Rural Communities

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Places to Gather Beyond Home and Work

Washington Irving captured the essence of community gathering places in his description of Rip Van Winkle's retreat from domestic life:

> For a long while he used to console himself, when driven from home, by frequenting a kind of perpetual club of the sages, philosophers and other idle personages of the village, which held its sessions on a bench before a small inn... Here they used to sit in the shade through a long, lazy summer's day, talking listlessly over village gossip, or telling endless, sleepy stories about nothing (Irving, 1819).

Irving's depiction of the village inn (see Figure 1) captures the timeless human need for gathering places beyond home and work. While much of our adult lives unfold either at home or in the workplace, many of our most meaningful social interactions occur somewhere else entirely. These "third places" are where we form and deepen friendships, worship and commune together, and otherwise engage in civic and community social life. Cafes, bars, and restaurants often serve as cultural touchstones, shaping our shared narratives both in real life and in popular culture, from Moe's Tavern in *The Simpsons* to the breakfast diner in *Seinfeld*. Third places have also shaped history: The seeds of the Enlightenment and American Revolution were sown in coffeehouses that brought together thinkers and doers, acting as the "precursors of democracy" by providing space for spirited debate and conversation (Oldenburg and Christensen, 2023).

These essential gathering spots are often referred to as our third places: the meeting ground between home and work where community happens. Sociologists' general argument for third places is that our lives become too insular without them; building a "sense of community" is too hard when we spend all of our time at home or work (Oldenburg and Brissett, 1982). Third places are frequently described as restaurants, bars, and cafes, but they also include neighborhood playgrounds, schools, sidewalks, parks and plazas, churches, gyms and recreation centers, barbershops and salons, and any other physical place where people can easily and routinely connect with each other (Butler and Diaz, 2016). Wherever people can drop in casually, linger without pressure, and strike up conversations with both friends and strangers qualifies as a third place.

The way many communities are built today increasingly encourages people to keep to themselves (Reed and Bohr 2021). In many areas, fenced-in yards and multicar garages have replaced sidewalks, playgrounds, and front porches as everyday gathering spots, making spontaneous interactions between neighbors less frequent. Suburbanization and the dominance of car culture have further intensified physical isolation and reduced walkability, ultimately undermining the role of third places as vibrant, accessible venues for social connection (Freeman 2001; Morris 2019). As physical isolation grows, the opportunities for informal gathering diminish.

Despite the praise they receive from sociologists and community advocates, rural third places have experienced a more uneven and fragile trajectory over the past 2 decades. As shown in Figure 2, the share of third-place businesses in nonmetro areas has fluctuated considerably, with periods of growth followed by sharp declines—most notably around 2015—and only modest recovery since. In contrast, metro areas have seen a more consistent upward trend. This divergence underscores the greater vulnerability and instability of third places in rural communities, reinforcing the urgency of preserving these vital social anchors.

Why does this matter for rural America, and what might we lose if these places disappear? This article examines third places in the context of rural America, where these gathering spaces take on heightened importance as both generators of social capital and community anchors.

Figure 1. Arthur Rackham's 1904 Illustration of Rip Van Winkle and the "Perpetual Club" Outside the Village Inn

"He used to console himself by frequenting a kind of perpetual club of the sages, philosophers and other idle personages, which held its sessions before a small inn" (Irving 1819)
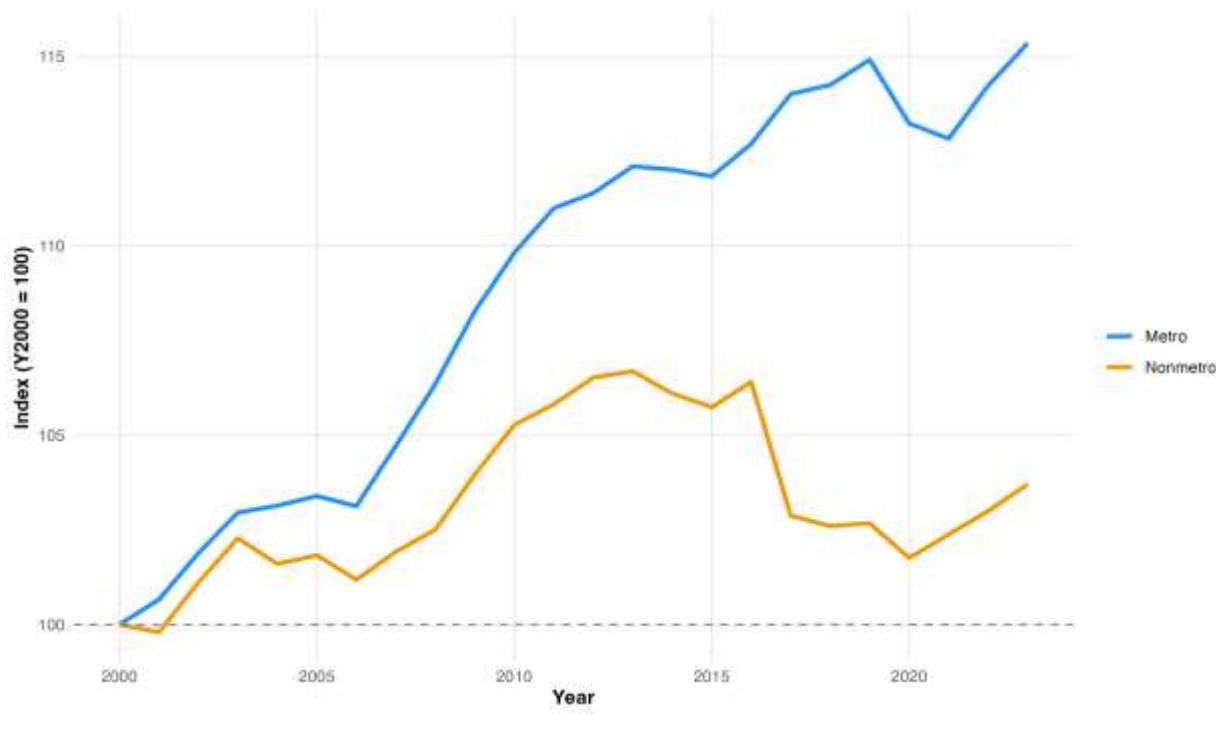
Source: Project Gutenberg, public domain.

Rural third places may not boost GDP or attract new businesses, but they create something equally essential: the trust, connections, and sense of belonging that bind small communities together. As rural residents increasingly turn to digital platforms for social interaction, the decline of these vital gathering spaces represents more than just the loss of convenient meeting places. To understand why third places matter so deeply to rural communities, we need to first look at how they help people build the connections that keep small towns strong.

Third Places as Generators of Social Capital

Compared to larger, more commercially oriented businesses in rural areas, third places employ far fewer people, generate less revenue, and typically receive less attention from policymakers and local leaders. However, their primary contribution to the communities they inhabit is as *generators of social capital*. Social capital encompasses the resources and benefits that emerge from networks of trust and reciprocity among individuals or organizations (Bourdieu, 1980; Woolcock, 1998).

Figure 2. Third Place Businesses as a Share of Total Businesses, 2000–2023

These connections foster trust, promote information sharing, and enable communities to coordinate and cooperate more effectively (Putnam, 1993), leading to job growth and improved development outcomes (Conroy and Deller, 2020; Rahe, Van Leuven, and Malone, 2025). In other words, social capital can be both the product and the engine of vibrant community life. But what role do third places play in the creation and maintenance of social capital?

First, third places act as venues for convening diverse groups spanning different social and economic backgrounds, bringing disparate groups together that might otherwise remain isolated from one another. While home and work are locations that reinforce *bonding social capital*—the close, trusting relationships among family members and close friends—third places aid in cultivating *bridging* social capital. Bridging social capital captures the value of "weak ties," described by Granovetter (1973) as distant but surprisingly powerful social connections that serve as bridges between social networks. These weak ties often span social, economic, and cultural divides, and third places facilitate interactions across these divides, which can introduce community residents to new ideas, new opportunities, and new ways of thinking.
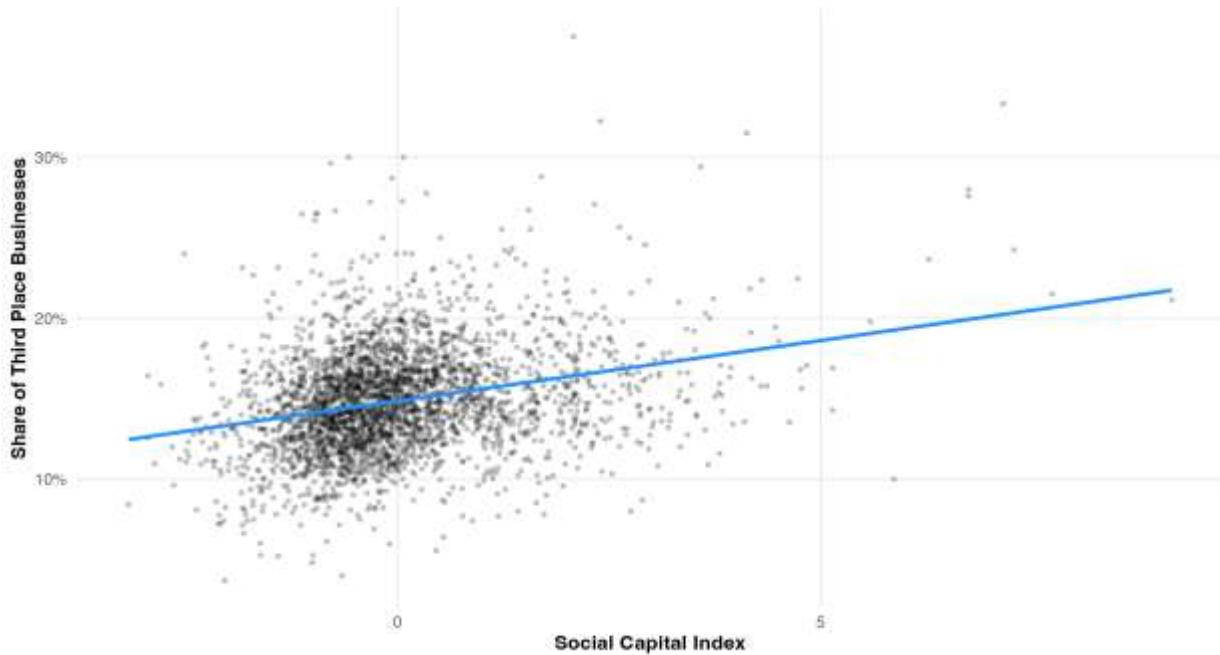
The relationship between third places and social capital is modest but meaningful. As shown in Figure 3, counties with a higher share of third-place businesses tend to exhibit higher levels of social capital. This pattern is slightly more pronounced in nonmetro areas, suggesting that third places may play a particularly important role in fostering civic engagement and

interpersonal trust in rural communities. While this correlation does not imply causation, it reinforces the idea that third places are more than just commercial venues—they are essential components of the social infrastructure that supports community resilience.

Second, third places are often suggested as a remedy to the growing epidemic of loneliness. Sociologists such as Putnam (2000) have long warned about the decline of our traditional civic and social institutions—most notably for Putnam, our bowling alleys—suggesting that these declines correspond with an increase in loneliness (i.e., "bowling alone") and social isolation. More recently, the US Surgeon General has spoken out about an epidemic of loneliness, urging leaders to nurture the social connections that support strong communities (Murthy, 2017; US Surgeon General, 2023). The mere existence of third places is not sufficient to fully abate this epidemic, but increased use and support for third places can work towards (re)building the ties that bind.

Third, these gathering spaces serve as social levelers, offering a rare setting where status, income, or occupation play little role in determining who belongs (Oldenburg, 1989). Unlike many formal organizations or exclusive clubs, these venues are open to all, with few barriers, if any, to full participation (i.e., gatekeeping). In these environments, relationships form organically based on shared experience or simple conversation rather than social rank or credentials. As a result, the social capital generated here is more widely accessible, fostering a genuine sense of equality and inclusion within the community (Littman, 2022).

Figure 3. Social Capital and Third Place Business Prevalence, 2015

Source: Rupasingha et al. (2006); US Census County Business Pattern (2015).

This type of social capital becomes even more critical when framed against the broader economic challenges facing rural America. Traditional development strategies often emphasize large-scale industrial recruitment or commercial growth, but these informal community anchors offer a different, equally valuable form of resilience. They may not generate big paychecks, but they create the trust and connections that help small towns weather tough times and stay together when other supports fall away.

Third Places as Rural Community Anchors

In an era where the economic gains from urbanization and density far outweigh the efforts of communities in smaller, more remote rural areas, third places can serve as an underutilized source of resilience and strength. But how do third places serve as community and economic development assets in rural and small-town America?

In the development literature, the concept of the "anchor" typically involves large institutions—such as universities and hospitals, often nicknamed the "eds and meds" (Adams, 2003)—that, for reason of local embeddedness and relative spatial immobility, are tied to a particular location, such that nearby firms and organizations can view them as a dependable, long-term partner in development. Although third places usually do not fulfill a role as a stable economic anchor institution, their role in anchoring civic and social life is especially vital in communities where other institutions are weakened or absent, helping to uphold local cohesion and resilience at the neighborhood level.

This connection between third places and community anchors emerged serendipitously through our own inductive research, rather than from theoretical speculation (see Van Leuven, Hill, and Low, 2025). While investigating the broader concept of anchor institutions in rural areas, we surveyed Cooperative Extension educators in rural counties—deeply embedded actors in the land-grant system, with unique insight into local institutions—asking them to identify an example of an anchor in their community. Their insights form a central empirical contribution of this article, offering rare, ground-level evidence on the social and civic infrastructure of rural America. Some of the responses unsurprisingly cited well-known institutions: higher education, hospitals and clinics, and major employers such as manufacturing plants or government offices. Educators also pointed to diners and cafes, civic centers, feed mills, grain elevators, post offices, and a variety of small retailers—hardware stores, florists, and clothing boutiques among them—as integral community anchors. Even more striking, some identified places that, at first glance, might seem unremarkable or mundane, including convenience stores, dollar stores, and even Walmart became recurring answers, suggesting that the sense of anchorage extends well beyond the usual economic pillars.

Most important were survey respondents' rationales for *why* they considered such places to be anchors. Their reflections highlight how these locations serve as vital social hubs, sustaining community life amid economic and social challenges.

> [Business name] is the center of [town] & a hot spot for all ages to eat and hang out. *If you want to catch someone, they'll be there* [emphasis added].

> …these are where most of our communities *gather to socialize, learn new things* [emphasis added], have access to internet, and the facilities also help individuals locate resources that they may need. [Business name] specifically has hosted *events where the community has come together* [emphasis added] and offered new things that have shown to be a success.

These narratives underscore the multifaceted roles these establishments play beyond commerce, revealing how they function as gathering places, memory keepers, and quiet engines of social cohesion. Their value lies not just in what they sell but in the relationships they sustain and the sense of continuity they provide in ever-changing rural landscapes.

> It has been in the community at least since the 1970's and continues to be owned and operated by the family. It sits on the main section of the community on [Highway XX]. They support community events and the community continues to support them. They have not changed their recipe and the food is delicious, a good value with something for everyone. As a local says, "*It's like a school reunion on Friday and Saturday nights*" [emphasis added].

> It's the local coffee shop and *gossip place central* [emphasis added]. If you need info about who, what, when, where, or how, stop in between 6-8 am and set down in one of the booths. Anything you need to know can be discovered. *It's where the town's problems are all solved …LOL* [emphasis added].

Together, these firsthand accounts bring to light how third places serve as informal yet indispensable anchors. While third places may lack the financial heft or formal stature of traditional anchors, they play a critical—if often overlooked—role in grounding community life. These spaces act as anchors of the *social* dimension of community vitality, bringing together community members to gather, exchange stories and information, and collectively maintain the social fabric of rural towns.

How Third Places Function as Community Anchors

Third places operate through several mechanisms that make them vital to community functioning. Third places reduce transaction costs by fostering social embeddedness that generates trust among community members, enabling residents to coordinate activities, exchange goods, and make informal agreements with greater confidence and lower risk (Uzzi, 1997). They also facilitate the exchange of private and tacit information—local knowledge, informal updates, and community intelligence—that rarely circulates through formal channels but proves essential for navigating daily life. This sort of knowledge circulation was documented by Cramer (2016), who described the gathering places and "coffee klatches" where community members discussed civic and political issues in rural Wisconsin. Such places also serve as informal stages where opinion leaders can shape public sentiment and community understanding of local challenges, while simultaneously functioning as fertile ground for coalition building that unites people across social, economic, or political divides who might never connect in formal settings. These social functions provide the foundation for understanding third places' broader community impacts.

While third places are primarily valued for their social and community roles, emerging research indicates they may also have meaningful impacts on local economic vitality. Choi, Guzman, and Small (2024) found that the opening of a Starbucks cafe in a neighborhood with no existing coffee shops led to a significant increase in new business startups, with an especially pronounced impact in under-resourced areas. Credit et al. (2024) found that access to third places was strongly associated with the number of new high-tech start-ups, highlighting the role these venues play in supporting entrepreneurial activity and innovation.

While these studies found a positive economic impact stemming from third places' existence, both analyses focused primarily on urban areas, which provide a very different business environment than rural places. A recent working paper from Van Leuven and Weinstein (2025) sought to examine how the presence of third places influences neighborhood housing values. Looking at ZIP codes across five Great Lakes states, we found a significant positive association between third-place establishments and housing prices. Although the estimated impacts were weaker in nonmetropolitan neighborhoods, they remained positive, especially for eating and drinking third places.

Ultimately, even if third places offer some modest economic benefits at the margins, they should never be seen as a silver bullet for economic growth. As enduring community institutions that persist through changing economic tides, their value lies not in large-scale job creation or rapid development, but in their stability and longevity in the community. What third places may lack in economic dynamism, they compensate for in building social capital, fostering civic cohesion, and enhancing quality of life. Many rural communities are under no illusion about the prospects for substantial growth:

They're just trying to survive to see another day. In this regard, third places serve as anchors of continuity, preserving shared norms, culture, and relationships that span generations.

Digital Substitutes for Physical Gathering Places

As rural residents increasingly turn to social media, online forums, and video calls for social connection, an important question emerges: can these virtual spaces replace the face-to-face interactions that third places provide?
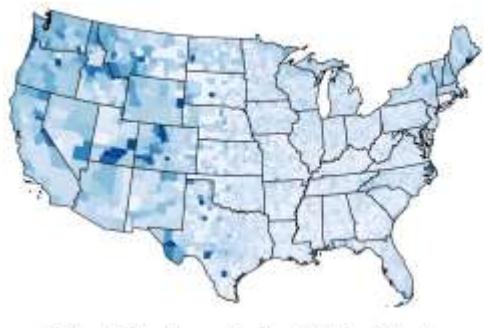
While social capital can encompass both in-person and online interactions, these forms are not interchangeable. Van Leuven and Malone (2025) compared *traditional* indicators of social capital—such as civic engagement, associational density, and other factors measured by Rupasingha, Goetz, and Freshwater (2006)—with *digital* measures derived from Facebook data compiled by Chetty et al. (2022). Their findings suggest that traditional and digital social capital reflect distinct yet complementary dimensions of community

connectedness, rather than serving as substitutes for one another. Similarly, Mumcu (2025) argue that these forms of social capital lie along a continuum, neither entirely opposed nor wholly equivalent.

This line of research suggests that while online gathering places—social networking apps, multiplayer games, chat rooms, and other digital platforms—have been rapidly adopted, they cannot fully substitute for the spontaneity and sense of community that physical third places provide. Virtual communities tend to be more transient and fragmented, shaped by the interests or algorithms of their platforms rather than the geography and shared history that bind rural neighbors together (Tan and Idris, 2023). Digital spaces certainly provide value, expanding access to social networks, reducing isolation for geographically dispersed residents, and enabling new forms of participation. However, they often lack the deep reciprocity and trust that face-to-face encounters in local gathering spots nurture.

Rural communities don't need to choose between digital tools and physical gathering places: both play an important role and can coexist in daily life. Online
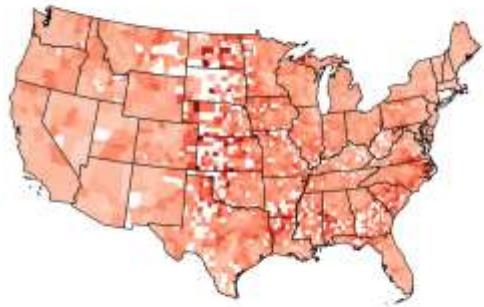
Figure 4. Geographic Distribution of Select Third Places by US County
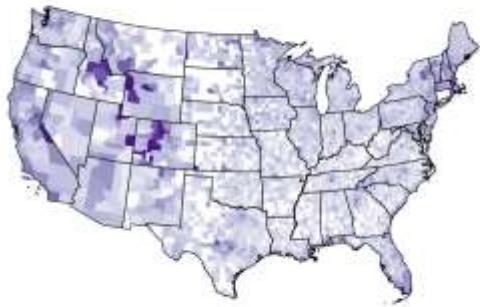
Notes: Counties shown in white have missing data—especially for churches, which are only reported where sufficient establishments exist to ensure anonymity.

Source: Advan Research (2025).

platforms like Facebook and Nextdoor help neighbors stay in touch, share news, and organize events. But they can't fully replace the deeper trust and connection that come from face-to-face interactions. That's why it's so important to invest in the places where people can still meet in person: these local spots are the foundation where relationships grow, problems get solved, and communities stay strong, no matter how much the world around them changes.

Investing in Rural Social Infrastructure

The goal of this brief article was to examine third places and describe their role in rural communities. While they can, and do offer modest economic contributions, their deeper value is as spaces where social capital is nourished and spread throughout the community. Residents come to view these informal "living rooms" of rural towns—welcoming, everyday places like coffee shops, restaurants, farm supply stores, gyms, and bookstores—as pillars of civic and social life. In these settings, relationships grow, ideas are exchanged, and community happens naturally. The benefits they provide go far beyond commerce and economic development.

The importance of preserving third places, especially in rural areas, is not an aesthetic argument. It is not important whether a community gathers at a nostalgic 1950s diner or if they regularly meet in a McDonald's. It likewise does not matter if a community's norms and social institutions are centered around agriculture, a factory or major employer, or faith-based organizations. These details are unimportant, as long as the community maintains accessible, welcoming spaces where people can feel welcome, heard, and a sense of belonging.

However, not all places share the same level of access to high-quality third places that facilitate social capital and upward mobility. As Figure 4 illustrates, third places are, in general, relatively more concentrated (on a per capita basis) in rural counties than in metropolitan areas. Yet, this pattern is far from uniform within rural America itself. Churches are much more plentiful in the rural Midwest and Southeast, reflecting longstanding religious and social traditions in these regions. In contrast, fitness and recreation establishments show greater prevalence in areas like the rural Mountain West and New England, while eating and drinking places are scattered irregularly throughout the country. These maps highlight the marked regional variation in both the types and abundance of third places, demonstrating that even among rural communities, opportunities for gathering and community building differ considerably.

Rural places, especially, face systematic disadvantages in the prevalence and sustainability of their quality gathering spots (Rhubart et al. 2022). Leaders and stakeholders in these communities must take action, recognizing that no matter how "anchored" a community's institutions appear, there is no such thing as permanence or invincibility. Communities should protect their third places, ensuring they sustain a strong sense of connection and a high quality of life (Jeffres et al., 2009). Protection and preservation can take many forms: Community members can band together to support local businesses, create shared spaces in vacant and underused buildings, or organize social events that bring neighbors together. Meanwhile, leaders can pursue policies that incentivize keeping third places viable, foster local entrepreneurship, and resist the privatization or loss of public gathering spots.

Regardless of the approach, third places should be regarded as part of the essential "social infrastructure" that underpins rural community life. These small-town diners, bars, and salons are not just backdrops for social life. They are living, vital spaces whose absence would leave a void that digital connections—or no connections at all—struggle to fill.

The realities of today's global economy make rural third places far more fragile than those in cities. When a restaurant closes in a big city, another often opens to take its place. In small towns, however, the loss of a gathering spot—especially one that unites people beyond the food it provides—often leaves a void that may never be filled. In Vermillion, South Dakota, for example, the town's only bookstore was nearly shuttered when its owners moved away, until residents pooled resources to help a young couple buy it and preserve this vital community hub (Parks, 2025). Yet not every place is so fortunate; with fewer customers, higher costs, and fewer people starting new businesses, such spaces can vanish forever once they close. Safeguarding them requires coordinated effort from local leaders, business owners, and residents alike.

Preserving and revitalizing third places isn't just an act of romantic nostalgia for a bygone era, trying to bring back the "good old days" of *Happy Days* or *Cheers*. Rather, it is an investment in the essential spaces where people feel like they truly belong in their community.

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