



Willcox: Is it BoomTown material?

By JANE AMARI/Arizona Range News

The key to a successful small town is passion in its citizens, according to Jack Schultz, author of "Boomtown USA," and an expert in small-town economic development.

"One person with passion is more valuable than 50 or 100 who just go along," he said.

Schultz spoke last Thursday morning to a crowded room at the Elk's Lodge in Willcox. His visit was sponsored by the Willcox Regional Economic Development Alliance.

"The key to success is in the minds of the people. How do they see the problems and the opportunities in a town," Schultz said.

The CEO of Agracel, a company focused on creating new jobs in what Schultz calls Agurban America, he has studied more than 15,000 small towns across the country to determine why some flourish and others fail. He has identified 297 that are doing the right things, including Arizona towns Eagar, Globe, Snowflake and Thatcher. He has also identified 100 "golden eagles" that have successfully integrated all of his keys to success. Tombstone and Prescott earned "golden eagle" status.

According to Schultz, there is great opportunity for towns like Willcox. He said America is on the brink of its third large population migration caused by technology. The first wave came last century when people moved from farms to cities for manufacturing jobs. The automobile prompted the second wave, from cities to suburbs. The third wave, now under way, is from the suburbs back to small towns in rural areas.

"People are interested in getting out of the rat race," he noted.



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Jack Schultz, author of BoomTown U.S.A., speaks to a crowd at the Elk's Lodge last week on small-town economic development.

And technology is making that possible, he said, citing the Internet and modern communications. He noted that last year 750,000 Americans made their living on eBay. In addition, Schultz said, a new kind of light, inexpensive jet will soon make town-to-town air travel possible because planes require short runways and will be controlled by GPS rather than expensive radar towers.

"You can eliminate the whole hub thing because you can fly from Willcox, Arizona, to Willcox, Texas, without going through Tucson or Dallas," he said.

The agurbs are attractive because of quality of life, lower cost of living and deregulation that allowed the growth of companies outside big cities. Businesses also see lowered costs and what they perceive as a better work ethic in rural/small town employees.

There is no question, according to Schultz, that small-town America is booming.

"Between January 2001 and January 2004, 743,000 jobs were created in America. One out of three of those jobs was created in the 397 agurbs we pinpointed."

"In the top 100 agurbs we identified, high tech employment grew by 32 percent during the 90s while it grew by only 12 percent in the top three high tech areas - Boston, Seattle and Silicon Valley," he continued.

The question is not whether the small-town boom will happen, it is whether Willcox will be a part of it.

Schultz identifies what he calls the 7 1/2 keys to economic success (see accompanying article above). Towns that embrace these keys prosper. Towns that don't, wither.

Asked to identify Willcox's strengths and weaknesses, Schultz was cautious because of his limited time in town. But he offered some opinions.

"I think you are on the cusp of dramatic growth. You have your location, climate, land and water availability and scenery. You can build on that," he said.

He added that Wings over Willcox was another strength, noting that bird watching is the fastest growing spectator sport in the country. He also said the city's location on the interstate and the railroad was a plus.