



Why Leadership Matters to Rural Community Vitality and Volunteering

*Presented to the
Connecting Entrepreneurial Communities Conference
on April 28, 2022*

David Peters, Ph.D.

*Professor and Extension Rural Sociologist
College of Agriculture and Life Sciences, Iowa State University*

Contact Information
dpeters@iastate.edu
<http://smalltowns.soc.iastate.edu>



Funded by USDA AFRI #2014-68006-21827



Common questions ...

- What are the characteristics of “good” leaders?
- Does leadership enhance quality of life?
- Is leadership the difference between successful and struggling places?
- Will it produce tangible results, like more people and jobs?

Why leadership matters ...

- Identify relevant needs of the community
- Motivate and engage residents and organizations
- Manage the process to stay on task and minimize conflict

All communities have leaders, isn't that enough?

**It is not the number of leaders,
rather the style of those leaders that matters.**



Shared leadership ...

- Based on the leader's process
- Uses their influence to achieve shared goals
- Provides guidance and engages in two-way communication

*Fosters creativity and self-direction. Suited for volunteers.
Takes lots of time ... for leaders, for the project to be completed*

Closed leadership ...

- Based on the leader's traits
- Uses their formal authority to achieve narrow goals
- Provides orders/rules to follow with hierarchical communication

*Allows for quick and efficient decisions. Suited to emergencies.
People become dissatisfied, have low commitment to project*



Shared leadership is essential in 21st century!

Issues require innovative and entrepreneurial solutions

- *Population/job loss, school closures, no healthcare, climate change*

Lack of outside resources means everyone needs to be involved

- *Few state/federal grants, fewer people*

People expect to be involved and informed

- *Prevents mistrust of authority*

Traditional/Closed leadership style outdated

- *Society complex and fast changing*

**Shared leadership is needed to address 21st century challenges.
Will allow some small towns to survive and thrive, while others will wither.**

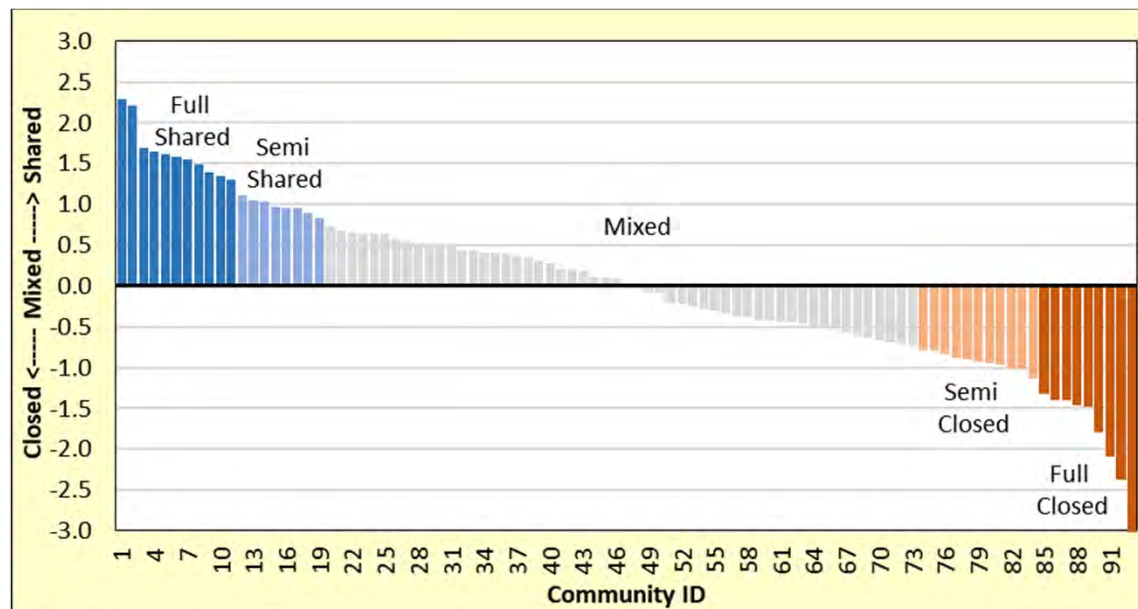


Data ...

- Iowa Small Towns Project 1994-2014. Decennial Census data 1990-2010
- n=91 small towns in Iowa (500-5,000 people, not adjacent to large city)
- Structured interviews in 6 towns (3 shared, 3 closed)

Measures ...

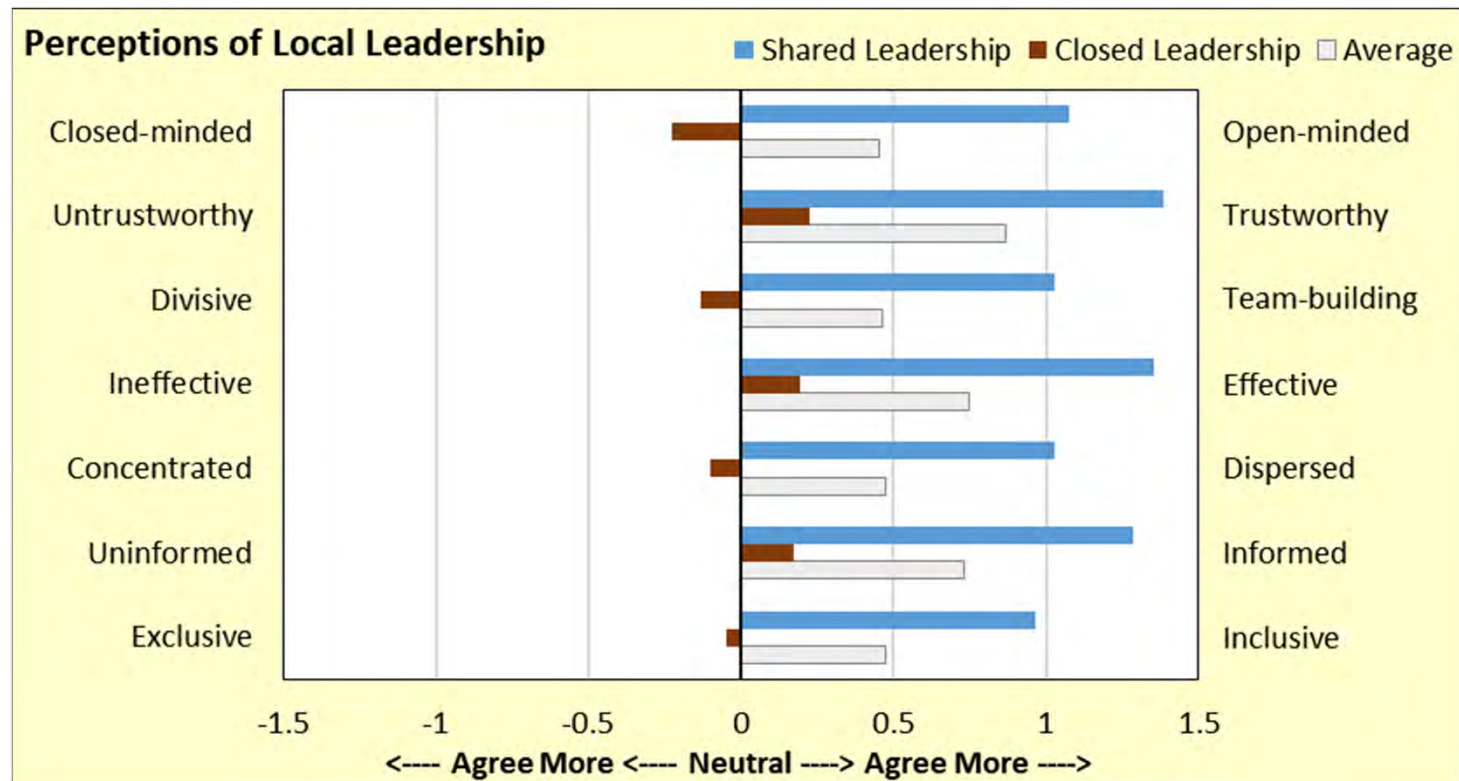
- Scale of 7 leadership items, based on Northouse (2010)
- Jenks method to identify natural breaks





Characteristics of shared leadership towns ...

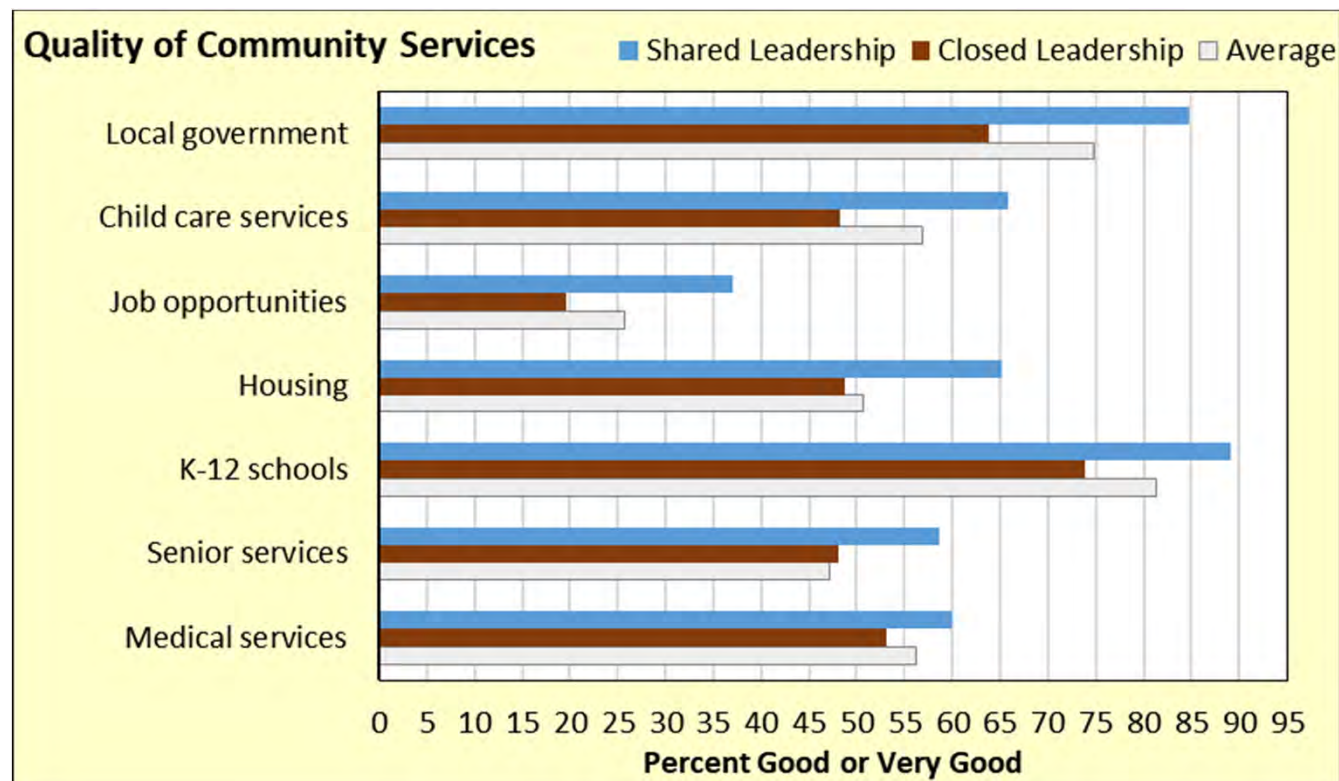
- 11 shared leader towns score high on all metrics
- 10 “closed” towns score neutral. Other towns lean toward shared leadership.
- Openness, trustworthiness, team building, and effectiveness important!





Shared leadership makes for high quality local services ...

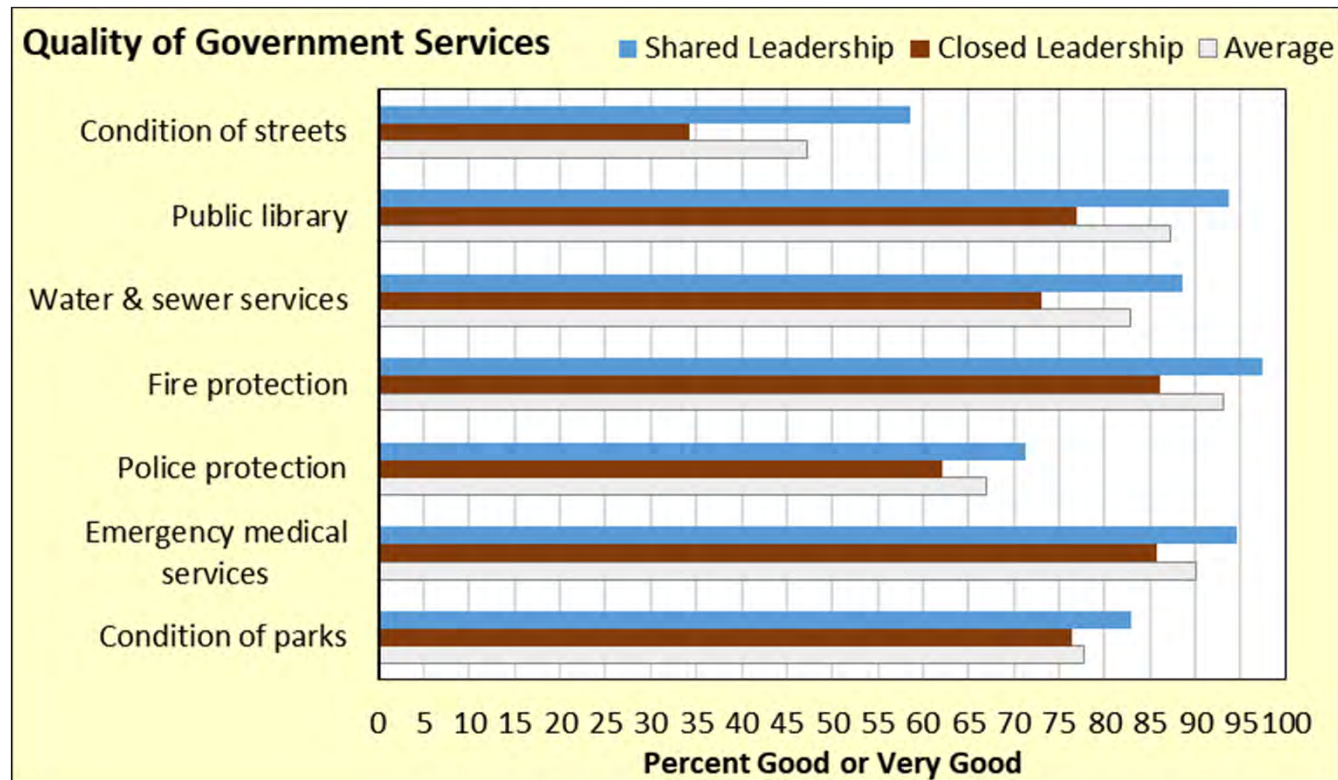
- Shared leaders have more control over locally-managed services
- Less control over services requiring large facilities, skilled labor, regulations, and outside management.





Shared leadership has mixed impact on local government ...

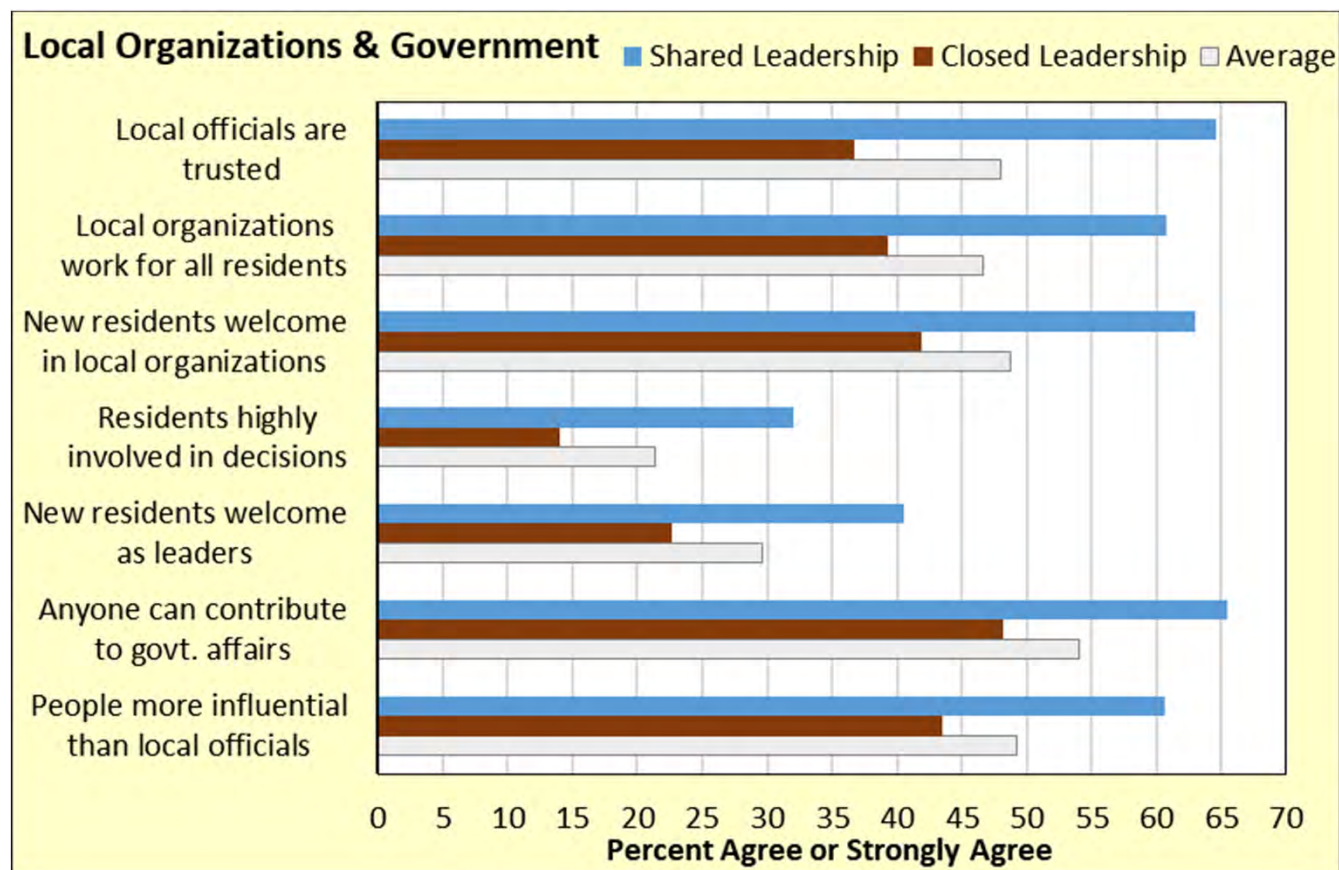
- Locally controlled services score better. More local discretion.
- Mandatory services with state/federal standards the same.





Shared leadership linked to more open governance ...

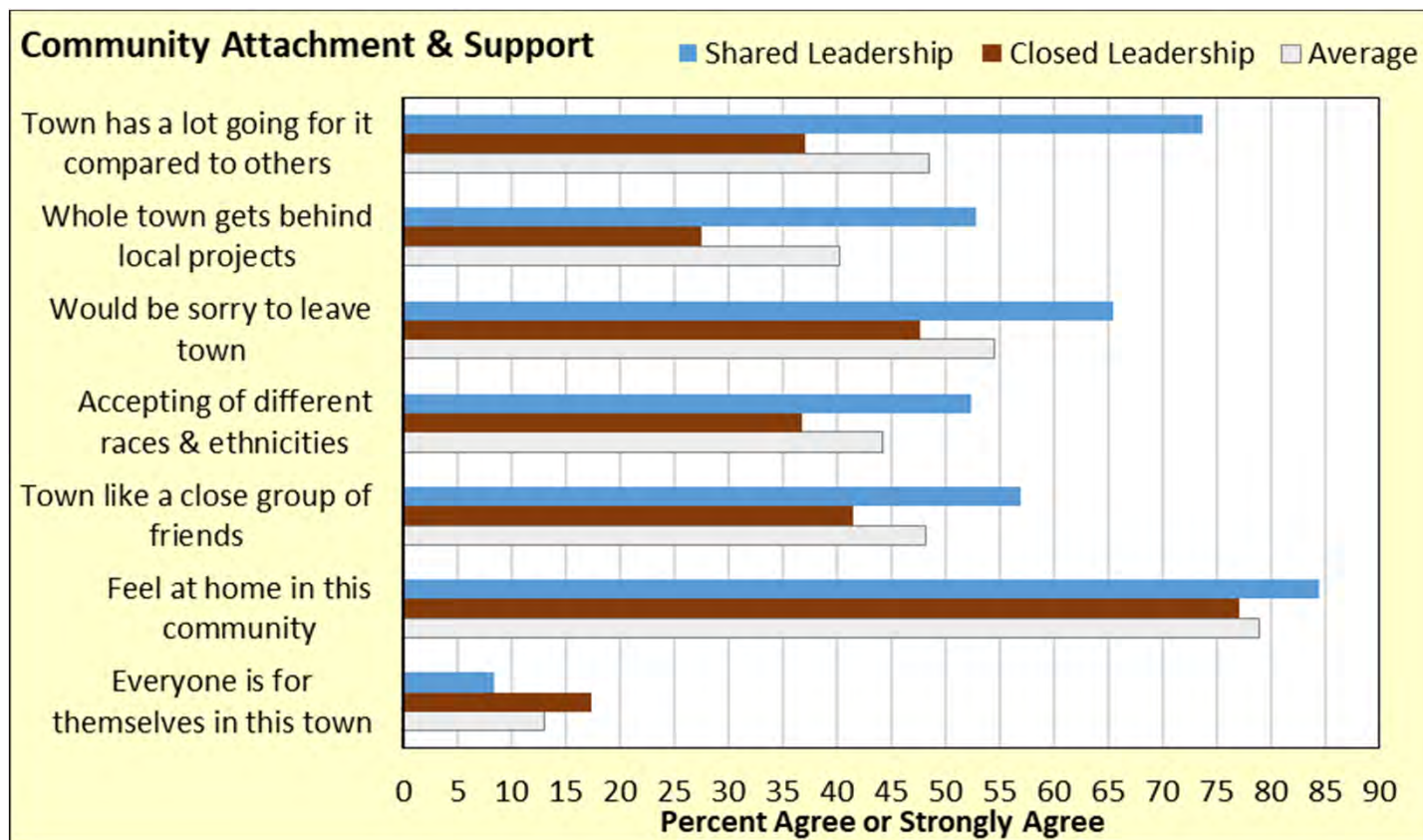
- Involved residents helps identify true community needs
- Involved residents contribute time and money
- Minimizes conflict and generates long-term commitments





Shared leadership sets a “can-do” and welcoming tone ...

- Confidence in the future. Spirit of cooperation.
- Attached to the town, but also welcoming of newcomers.
- Also better kept-up (64% v. 23%) and more open to new ideas (36% v. 1%)





Shared leadership towns small in size, but growing!

- *Population boom ... 8.1% gain vs. -4.0% loss*
- *Growing workforce age 25-64 ... 16.6% vs. 1.1% gain*
- *Baby boom of 17 and under ... 7.8% gain vs. -10.3% loss*
- *Shrinking elder population ... -6.0% loss vs. 3.7% gain*
- *More full-time / full-year jobs ... 55.6% vs. 48.9%*
- *Lower poverty ... 9.8% vs. 14.2%*
- *Strong agriculture sector ... 5.2% with 1.8% gain vs. 2.8% with -0.5% drop*

... but less diverse in terms of race/ethnicity.

- Some are exurbs 45-60 minutes away from cities
- Others are returner “boomerang” towns
- Others “white flight” towns from larger meat packing communities



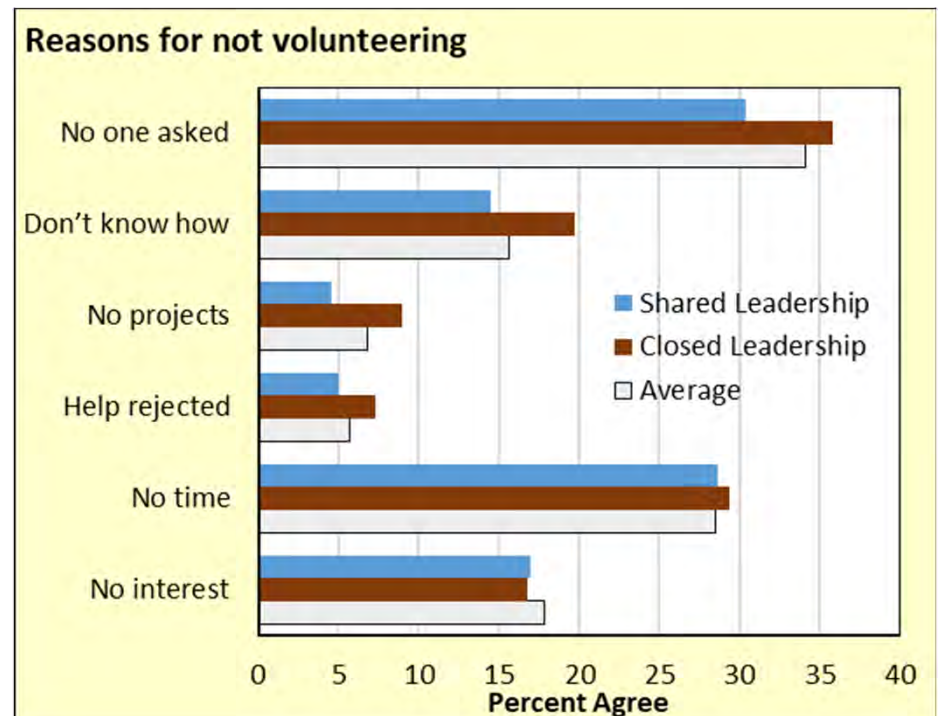
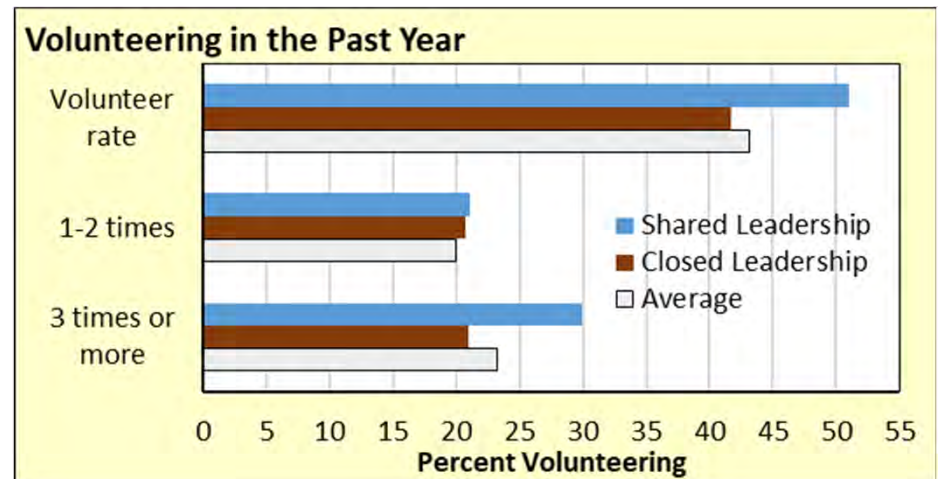
More committed volunteers in shared leader towns.

- High volunteer rate due to residents who volunteer 3 or more times.

People volunteer more because ...

- They were asked
- They know how
- There are projects

Shared leadership cannot overcome limited time and no interest.





Multiple leaders who collaborate

- City, social, foundations. Doing different things, but in cooperation.
- *Versus all city, top-down planning by 1-2 persons.*

Creating spaces for new leaders

- Openness to younger/newer/women residents.
- *Versus all male long-term leaders (some 3- years!).*

Grooming the next generation

- Mentoring of new leaders, sharing credit, lending gravitas.
- *Versus maintain existing leadership structure, shut-out new leaders.*

Accept risk of new ideas

- Trying new ideas, accepting some may fail.
- *Versus reject new ideas for fear of failure = no action.*

Leadership for 2022 versus 1952

- Social media, web signups, shorter shifts, childcare and food.
- *Versus assuming everyone has the time*



Leaders without vested interests

- Typically persons without formal power, but with high social capital.
- *Versus the power elites.*

Being a champion for the town

- Community's biggest cheerleader. Optimism is contagious!
- *Versus giving up or talking about "ghosts". Apathy is contagious!*

Being a convener for the community

- Ability to bring diverse people together, inside and outside the town.
- *Versus lone eagles who are insular.*

Finding the "right" leaders and making it happen

- Businesses allowing leaders on "company time". City paying to get good staff.
- *The right leaders are the ones already there. They are in control.*



Does shared leadership enhance quality of life?

YES ... for services that have more local control.

NO ... for services with large investments and regulations.

Is shared leadership the difference between success and struggles?

YES ... better QoL, better governance, more confidence & cooperation.

YES ... more committed volunteers to make things happen

YES ... growing populations!

HOWEVER, is shared leadership cause or effect?

Likely cause for QoL, government, and volunteering.

Likely effect for social capital, attachment, and confidence.

Likely both for population growth, especially younger families.



What are the major leadership issues in your community?

How do you expand beyond “the same 5 people”?

Why don’t people get involved?