



Defining Ord and Its Economy

An Entrepreneurial Community

By Don Macke and Cathy Kottwitz

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Ord, Nebraska is a rural, small, farming-based community having experienced decades of challenges. It has become an entrepreneurial community displaying vibrancy and an increasingly diverse and dynamic economy. There are many contributing factors based on e2's case study research, but it is clear that a commitment to entrepreneur-led development is foundational. Consistent with the quote below, Ord has taken on and sustained a commitment to its own development and future.

“A community like an individual has a work to do.”

Aristotle – Inscribed into the Nebraska State Capitol Building

This paper provides insights on Ord the community and its economy. It supplements our core paper, ***Ord, Nebraska, An Entrepreneurial Community***, focused on Ord and its journey to becoming a highly successful entrepreneurial community. Defining a community for purposes of entrepreneurial development is critically important. For additional information on this topic check out our e2 paper [*Defining Your Community*](#).

Community Economic Development – A Local Responsibility

Every community in America, regardless of size and location is primarily responsible for a relevant, competitive, and successful economy. Unlike most other developed nations, in the United States community economic development is a local responsibility. Assuming this responsibility is essential for any community seeking vibrancy and success.

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Ord is a much larger community than defined by its municipal boundaries. It has engaged with its larger region to grow a more dynamic and successful economy driving people attraction and quality of life placemaking.

Defining the Ord Community

On the surface we most often define a community based on its legal status as a municipality or county. While these definitions are practical given how data is gathered and shared by local, state, and federal sources, these geographies often do not reflect the socioeconomic community which typically reach beyond these legally defined boundaries. In our story capture work of Ord, we employ four **place** definitions including:

- Ord the Municipality
- Ord's Zip Code
- Valley County where Ord is the lead community and county seat
- Ord's Socioeconomic region (the Ord region)

Ord the Municipality. Under Nebraska law Ord is defined as a city of the Second Class based on its size. Think of Ord the municipality as the hub part of a larger, regional socioeconomic community. Ord is the

county seat of Valley County where Ord is the lead city. Founded in 1880 with an 1880 Census population of just 181 residents Ord grew rapidly during the 1880s with an 1890 Census population of 1,208. By and large Ord grew continuously peaking in population of 2,658 in 1980. Figure 1 provides Ord development based on population change from settlement to present.

Figure 1 – City Ord’s Population History

Census Year	Population	Decade Change	Notes
1880	181		
1890	1,208	567.4%	Town Building Boom Years
1900	1,372	13.6%	1890s Depression
1910	1,960	42.9%	Boom Years with World War I and Agriculture
1920	2,143	9.3%	Continued growth through the Dust Bowl Years
1930	2,226	3.9%	Depression
1940	2,240	0.6%	World War II Build Up
1950	2,239	0.0%	Post-War Contraction
1960	2,413	7.8%	Irrigation Introduction
1970	2,439	1.1%	
1980	2,658	9.0%	Calamus Reservoir Project Miniboom
1990	2,481	-6.7%	1980s Agricultural Crisis
2000	2,269	-8.5%	Depopulation Roots
2010	2,112	-6.9%	
2019	2,076	-1.7%	Depopulation Moderates

Source: U.S. Census Bureau. 2019 values are estimates from the American Community Survey.

Figure 2 provides comparative contemporary resident populations based on each of these four geographies:

Figure 2 - Comparative Ord Community Populations

Community	Population	Data Year	Comments
Ord Municipality	2,076	2019 Estimate	Census Bureau
Ord Zip Code	2,893	2020 Estimate	Esri
Valley County	4,199	2020 Estimate	Esri
Ord’s Region	9,784	2020 Estimate	Esri

As we move from the smallest population of Ord or its municipality to its immediate Zip Code community the resident population increases by 871 or 39%. The Ord Zip Code reflects those residents closely aligned with the community but living in rural areas immediately outside the city of Ord. Moving from the city to Valley County the population increases by 2,123 or 102% including rural areas and villages within the county. Most of these residents have strong affinity to Ord for health care, shopping, K-12 education, and hometown identity. But the real socioeconomic community is much larger reflecting Ord’s region based on commuting and shopping patterns. The Ord socioeconomic region has



nearly 10,000 residents, which is 7,708 more residents when compared to the City of Ord (371% larger residents base).

Ord’s Zip Code. Employing Zip Code areas is a reasonable way to define the immediate town and country community. Ord’s Zip Code is 68862. We employ this Zip Code community definition in some of our absolute and peer community analysis. In 2010, based largely on the Census, Ord has a population of nearly 3,000 (2,977). Esri estimates the population for this Zip Code in 2020 at 2,893 suggesting a small population decrease (loss of 84 residents or 2.8%) indicating a transition from decades of decline to increasing population stabilization.

Valley County. Valley County, where Ord is the lead community and county seat, posted a 2010 Census population of 4,260 and an estimated population of 4,199 in 2020 (loss of 61 residents or 1.4%), a basically stable population for the latest decade in this community’s life. Figure 3 provides the population history for Valley County.

Figure 3 – Valley County, Nebraska Population History

Decade Year	Population	Decade Change	Notes
1880	2,324		Initial European American Settlement
1890	7,092	205.2%	Heavy Settlement Period
1900	7,339	3.5%	Economic and Agricultural Depression
1910	9,480	29.2%	World War 1 Agricultural Boom
1920	9,823	3.6%	Post-World War 1 Agricultural Contraction
1930	9,533	-3.0%	Great Depression.
1940	8,163	-14.4%	World War 2 - Agricultural Automation Accelerates
1950	7,252	-11.2%	Farm Consolidation Driver Depopulation Sets In
1960	6,590	-9.1%	
1970	5,783	-12.2%	
1980	5,633	-2.6%	Calamus Project
1990	5,169	-8.2%	1980s Agricultural Crisis
2000	4,647	-10.1%	
2010	4,260	-8.1%	
2018	4,259	0.0%	Population Stabilization

Source: U.S. Census Bureau. For decennial Census years and Esri estimates for 2018 rooted in Census American Community Survey estimates.

Other Community Information. There are three other resources that provide additional background information on Ord and Valley County:

1. [Valley County Development Opportunity Profile](#)
2. [Valley County Generational Diversity Profile](#)
3. [Valley County Philanthropic Profile](#)

These documents provide both additional research and analysis painting a richer picture of Ord and the Valley County region.



Ord’s Socioeconomic Region. We cannot precisely estimate Ord’s larger socioeconomic region. But we can employ commuting and shopping patterns to create a reasonable region. This expanded definition of community is important because Ord is actually much larger than its municipality population would suggest. When we refer to the “community” herein, we are referencing the City of Ord and Valley County with the understanding that the greater Ord community is multi-county in nature. Ord is the leading retail and service hub for this part of North Central Nebraska. The service area of the Ord region includes villages in northeastern Custer County (i.e., Sargent, Comstock, and Westerville), southeastern Loup County (i.e., Almeria, Taylor and the Calamus Reservoir), Garfield County (i.e., Burwell,) Wheeler County (i.e., Ericson), Western Greeley County (i.e., Greeley and Scotia) and the villages in Valley County (i.e., Arcadia, North Loup and Elyria). Employing this descriptive definition of the Ord region we employed associated Zip Codes to craft the larger socioeconomic Ord region. Esri estimates the following for this larger region:

Figure 4 – Ord’s Regional Population for Selected Years

Year	Population	Households	Population Changes
2000	10,548	4,394	2000-2020 Change – (764) or (7.24%)
2010	9,856	4,384	2010-2020 Change - (72) or (0.73%)
2020	9,784	4,406	2020-2025 Change – (25) or (0.26%)
2025	9,684	4,381	Estimated by Esri

Most rural counties like Valley County in the Great Plains Region are experiencing chronic and severe depopulation. While this region is posting modest population losses based on Figure 4 data, it is important to put it into perspective. For example, employing Census data for non-metropolitan Nebraska (e.g., a substitute for rural Nebraska or comparison groups for this region) we find the following population changes:

2010 Population	545,421 Residents
2018 Population	497,400 Residents
2010-2018 Population Change	(66,981) Residents
2010-2018 Percent Change	(11.9%)

For the Ord Region the net population loss for 2010-2020 was less than 1% for the entire decade long period compared to the eight years of non-metropolitan Nebraska with an 11.9% loss or a 16.3 times greater decline. This is significant and reflects that the socioeconomic success of Ord is driving greater population success in its region. Additionally, according to Esri the “Day Time” population within this Region is 9,536 (e.g., workers at 4,894 plus residents at 4,642). This is a very strong value compared to other similar places reflecting that this region is doing a great job retaining its human talent within its economy.

While most rural areas have suffered both declining and aging populations due to loss of youth, this region has bucked these trends. The population has remained stable, and the dependency ratio remains at about 1 dependent to 1 worker (e.g., slightly more of an elderly population compared to younger residents.) ratio. The region has been particularly successful attracting in-migration of young, family-aged adults.



Figure 5 provides a visualization of the Ord region based on community alignment, distance from other hub cities in the larger region, and the Zip Code areas of aligned communities. We have employed classic geographic theory to estimate Ord’s region.

There are regional hub cities including Broken Bow (3,534 2018 population) to the west, Kearney (33,761 2018 population) to the southwest, Grand Island (51,478 2018 population) to the south and Columbus (23,274 2018 population) and Norfolk (24,651 2018 population) to the east. Consequently, the Ord region extends to the north and west in the sparsely populated Sandhills region of Nebraska. This is ranching country where the rates of depopulation are stabilizing when compared to the medium and small farm country of Eastern Nebraska where farm automation and farm populations continue to decline but at slower rates when compared to previous decades.

Figure 6 provides another map of Ord, Valley County, and the expanded Northcentral Nebraska rural region where Ord is located. Based on our analysis one of the outcomes of Ord’s development success over the last 20 years is it has expanded its socioeconomic influence and footprint to a larger region. This conclusion is strongly supported by both Census and U.S. Bureau of Economic Analysis trend data where Ord and its immediate region is now an employment, retail, service, and entertainment destination or hub.

Figure 5 – Ord’s Region Visualized

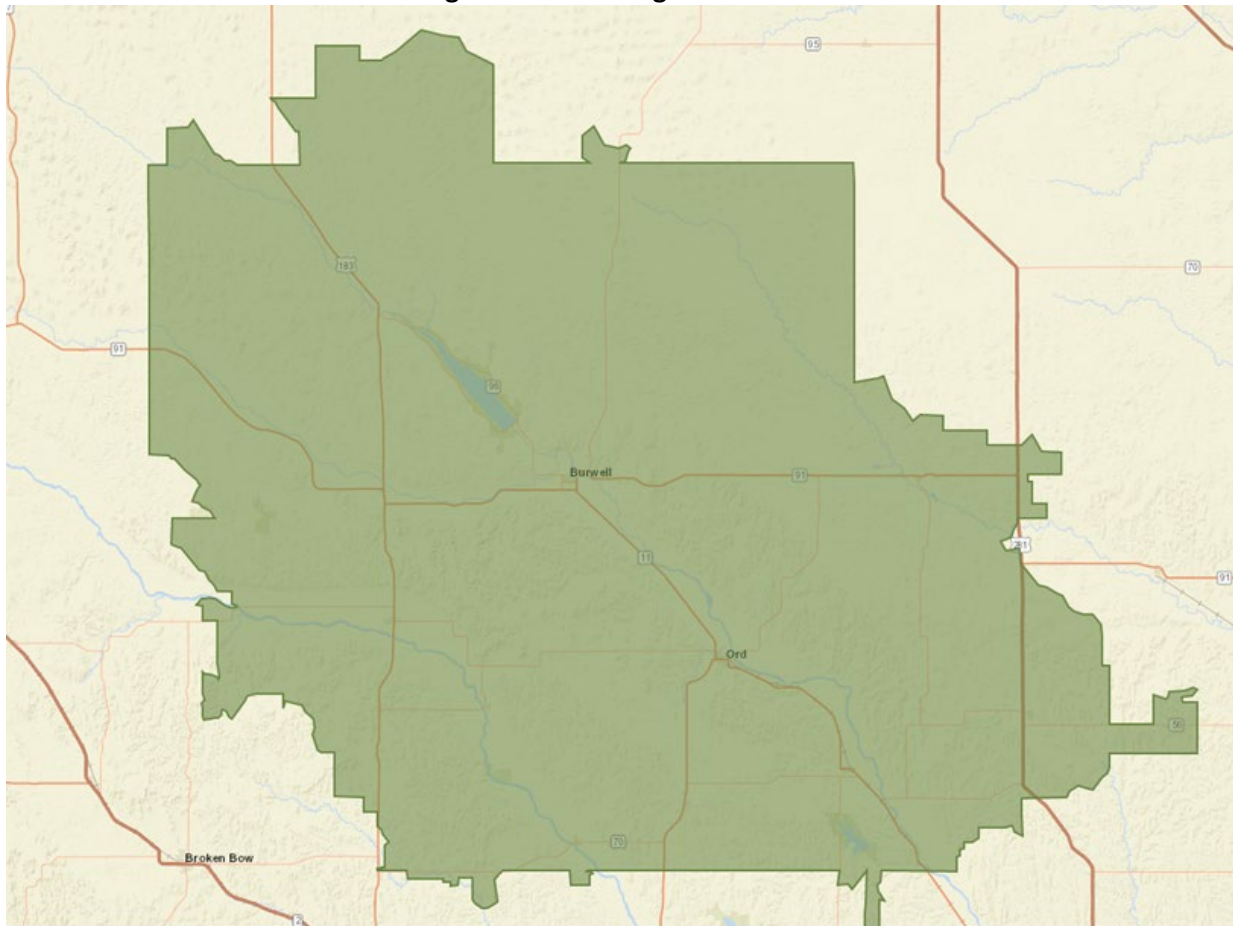
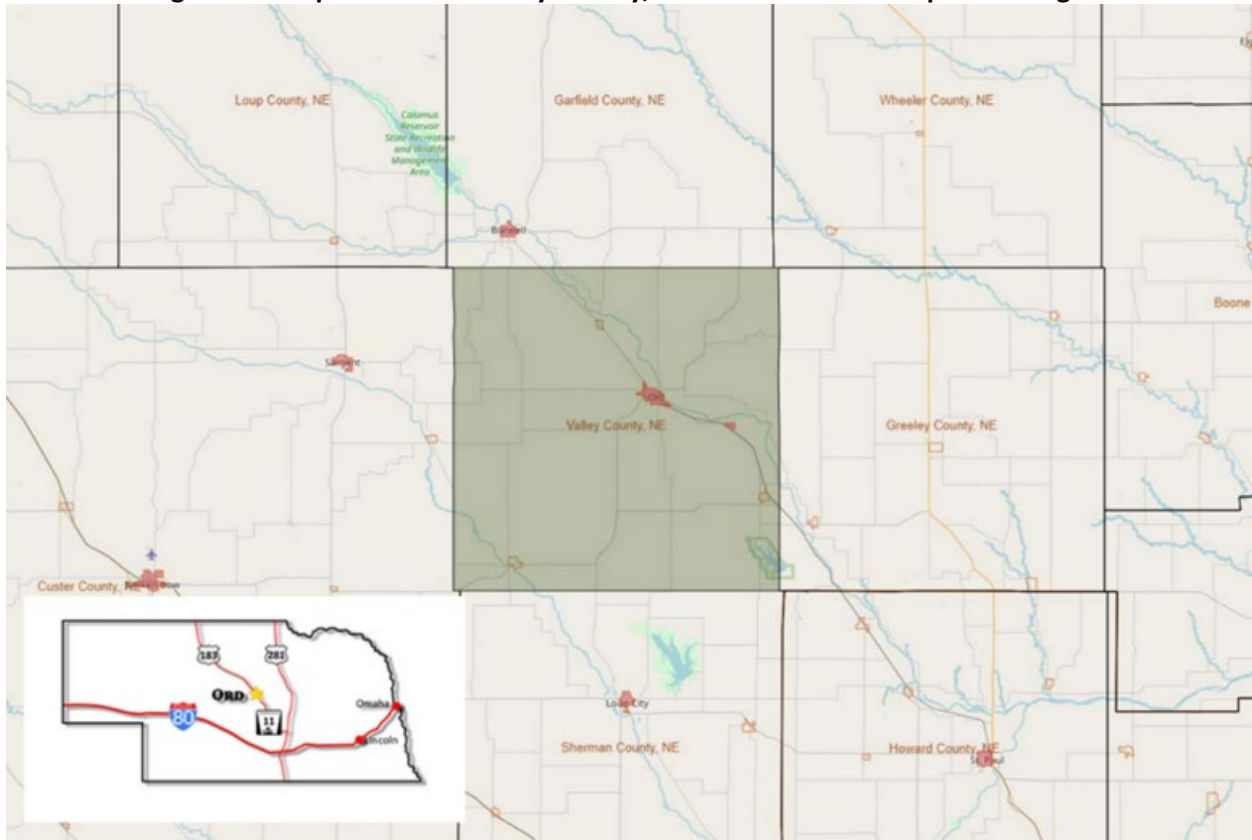


Figure 6 – Map of Ord and Valley County, Nebraska within its Expanded Region



Defining Ord's Regional Economy

Development opportunities are rooted in the larger regional economy. In an asset-based development environment, development opportunities must be rooted in the underlying economic opportunities afforded by the regional economy. The exception is where there is massive external investment to create or generate new opportunities. For example, massive generational investments by the Appalachian Regional Commission into roads, communications, and other critical infrastructure has enabled a growing recreational and experiential tourism industry tapping into millions of potential visitors from the East Coast.

Transformation from a Two-Dimensional to a Multi-Dimensional Economy

Over the past two decades (i.e., 2000 to 2020) Ord and its region has transformed from a two-dimensional economy rooted in production agriculture and Ord's role as an area trade center community to a multidimensional economy. We believe that this transformation has been empowered by Ord's commitment to entrepreneur-focused development. In our main story, *Ord, Nebraska, An Entrepreneurial Community*, the e2 community change model addresses (see Chapter 2) economic diversification as key to sustained socioeconomic vitality and success.

Today there are four anchor economic drivers shaping Ord's development opportunities:

Anchor 1 – Agriculture including Value-Adding Activities

Anchor 2 – Area Trade, Service and Cultural Center

Anchor 3 – Valley County Health System
 Anchor 4 – Tourism

Ord and Valley County are like hundreds of rural communities in America’s Great Plains Region that are agriculture dependent, experiencing chronic and severe outmigration and depopulation, and struggling to find the formula for socioeconomic success in the 21st Century knowledge economy.

Figure 7 provides a visualization of Ord’s Regional Economy in 2020. It reflects the progression from a two-dimensional economy to a multidimensional economy. Diversification has occurred within production agriculture with the development of the ethanol value chain and cluster, as well as development of a robust and dynamic regional rural health care system.

Figure 7 - Visual Overview of Ord’s Regional Economy

<p>Anchor 1</p> <p style="text-align: center;">Agriculture</p> <p>Production Agriculture – Farmers & Ranchers Allied Agricultural Services Green Plains Renewable Energy (ethanol plant) Ethanol Plant Value Chain Cluster (distillers’ grains, trucking, cubing, etc.) Cargill Trotter Fertilizer and Allied Ventures Popcorn Country USA Zangger Popcorn Hybrids</p>	<p>Anchor 2</p> <p style="text-align: center;">Area Trade, Service & Cultural Center</p> <p>Retail Businesses Service Businesses Amenity Businesses Central Community College Learning Center The Golden Husk K-12 Schools</p>	
<p>Anchor 3</p> <p style="text-align: center;">Valley County Health System*</p> <p>Hospital Hospice and Home Health (serves 17 counties) Clinics Care Home Independent Living Home <i>*Valley County Health Care System is the largest employer in the region.</i></p>	<p>Anchor 4</p> <p style="text-align: center;">Tourism</p> <p>Calamus Lake & River Calamus Resort & Outfitters Events (Husk, Windmill Festival, etc.) Attractions (Ft. Hartsuff, Chalk Mine, Local Museums, etc.) Amenities (Scratch Town Brewery, cafés, etc.)</p>	
<p>Other Economic Activities Contributing to the Area Economy</p>		
<p style="text-align: center;">Retirees</p> <p>Retirees are the single largest consumer group in the area and are key to the health care system, care home, independent living center, senior housing, and related activities (pharmacies).</p>	<p style="text-align: center;">Growth Entrepreneurs</p> <p>There is a small group of growth-oriented entrepreneurs diversifying the area economy including Subcon, Trotter businesses, Misko Sports, Popcorn Country USA, Zangger Popcorn Hybrids, Ord Locker, etc.</p>	<p style="text-align: center;">Commuters</p> <p>Outbound commuters (living in but working outside Valley County) accounted for 7.3% of household earning in 2017. Inbound commuters are an important segment of the County workforce.</p>

*Check out our story on the [Valley County Health Care System](#) complex for additional detail.



Anchor 1 – Agriculture. Agriculture has been and continues to be the foundation of the Valley County regional economy. Production agriculture is commodity based and vulnerable to commodity markets. However, Ord has been able to diversify its agriculture and increase value-added activity that is enhancing economic resiliency and prosperity. The [ethanol cluster](#) is particularly important strengthening Ord's underlying agricultural economy.

Anchor 2 – Area Trade, Service and Cultural Center. While other rural area trade center communities in the Great Plains have declined, Ord has managed to grow in this role adding diversity and vitality to the community. Ord supports a strong collection of retail and service businesses including a remarkably strong business services cluster (e.g., attorneys, CPAs, commercial lenders, etc.). Over the past decade Ord has also become a **cultural center** with investments in The Golden Husk theater and its associated arts and humanities events, allied amenity businesses (e.g., food, drink, catering, spa, etc. businesses) and amenities like the new water park.

Anchor 3 – Valley County Health Care System. Across America hundreds of rural hospitals have closed. In the 1990s Ord's hospital was near closure. The community rallied and today the [Valley County Health Care System](#) is profitable and thriving. It has become a regional health care system with diverse services. It is the largest employer in the area and provides career opportunities that have been instrumental in the attraction and retention of new resident and human talent.

Anchor 4 – Tourism. Diversifying the economy is a moderately sized tourism cluster. The primary assets are connected to the Calamus Lake and River. The lake and river are a destination for visitors. There is a growing seasonal and permanent resident population at the lake increasing the area's market size. Other assets such as the historic Fort Hartsuff, The Golden Husk cultural and event center, and amenities ranging from Scratch Town Brewery and Utopia Spa enhance the attractiveness of this community as a visitor destination.

Resident Attraction, Development and Retention Connection

Our field experience and research support the view that the ability of communities to attract, develop, and retain new residents and human talent (essential for 21st Century economies and societies) is tied to quality of place (both amenities and culture) and economic opportunities. There is a strong connection among people, place, and entrepreneurial economy.

There are three emerging economic drivers diversifying and now strengthening this regional economy. We explore each of these emerging economic drivers to paint a broader picture of how these drivers are strengthening and diversifying this area's economy and society.

Retirees. Retirees have long been an economic driver in this rural area economy. With the rising tide of retiring Boomers, this development opportunity will increase dramatically. Every day in America 10,000 Boomers are retiring, and demographically this trend will continue for three decades. It is huge. A significant number of Boomers are relocating from the cities where they made their wealth back to more rural communities. There are a wide range of factors driving this trend including escaping high costs, congestion, perceptions about safety or for those who grew up rural, coming home. Retirees are the largest holder of American household wealth and one of the biggest consumer groups. Because of Ord's vibrant economy and quality of life amenities, it is well positioned to capture a share of both the retiring Boomer market and the Boomer entrepreneurship capacity.

Boomers have spending power related to markets that can provide the right housing, goods, services, recreation, and entertainment (e.g., audiences for arts and humanities programming in rural communities), health care and amenities (e.g., wine bars, craft brewers, cafés, coffee shops, bakeries, etc.). With growing numbers of active and relatively healthy Retiring Boomers, there are major entrepreneurial opportunities in locally meeting their wants, desires, and needs.

Younger Retiring Boomers are also engaging in second and third careers. They have energy and passion, resources, networks and are a source of entrepreneurial talent. These Boomers are often investors, mentors, buyers of businesses and starting businesses. The retention and attraction of Retiring Boomers provides important entrepreneurial development opportunities for communities.

Growth Entrepreneurs. There is an emerging class of growth-oriented entrepreneurs in this regional economy. Growth entrepreneurs (e.g., [Subconn, Inc.](#), Popcorn Country USA, [ethanol complex](#), Trotter industries, etc.) create larger community economic development impact with respect to jobs/careers, economic activity, and local tax base support. By increasing overall entrepreneurial activity, Ord is creating a pipeline for more growth entrepreneurs.

Commuters. Ord and Valley County are part of a regional economy and society with significant inbound traffic (live outside of Valley County but work in Valley County) and some outbound (live in Valley County but work outside the county). Over the past 20 years Ord has become a regional employment hub attracting more inbound compared to outbound commuters. With growing numbers of inbound commuters, Ord has the potential to provide hometowns for these workers fueling further development.

Conclusion

A key to Ord's success has been its ability to grow a more diverse and successful region. The stronger region in turn is ensuring a stronger market for its retail, service, and entertainment ventures. The vibrant region is a key reason why there are five commercial lending institutions, a strong arts and culture scene, and students for both its K-12 school system, private schools, and the community college learning center. Additionally, the stable region ensures peers for different age cohorts and a more robust labor market. Despite its municipal size of just over 2,000, Ord is actually a community closer to 10,000 residents when its socioeconomic region is considered.

How e2 Can Help



e2 Entrepreneurial Ecosystems helps communities increase prosperity through entrepreneur-focused economic development and ecosystem building. Led by [Don Macke](#), e2 has a national team of practitioners who bring research, coaching, incubation, market intelligence and other expertise to this work.

What We Do

- ✓ **Mentoring.** We mentor and coach new practitioners seeking to pursue entrepreneur-led development. We provide advice and support for building eEcosystem strategies that work and invite practitioners to join our [National e2 Practitioners Network](#).
- ✓ **Analytics Support.** e2 helps communities and regions understand their entrepreneurial potential through research and data.
- ✓ **e2 University (e2U)** is our online platform for sharing guides, papers, stories, tools, and resources with communities wanting a deep dive into eEcosystem building. Don Macke leads the [e2 University](#) team with analytics support from **Cathy Kottwitz** and report preparation from **Ann Chaffin**. Special recognition for their e2U legacy contributions goes to **Dana Williams** and **Deb Markley**, LOCUS Impacting Investing.
- ✓ **Fostering the eMovement.** We support the national entrepreneurship movement along with our partners including the **Federal Reserve Bank of Kansas City**, **SourceLink**, **Edward Lowe Foundation**, **Kauffman Foundation**, and **NetWork Kansas**. We are a founding member of **Start Us Up: America's New Business Plan**, a coalition dedicated to strengthening entrepreneurship across America. Together, we continue to advance the foundational ideas of building entrepreneurial ecosystems and entrepreneurship-led economic development.

Contact Us

don@e2mail.org

(402) 323-7336

www.energizingentrepreneurs.org

[NetWork Kansas](#), a 501c3 nonprofit organization dedicated to developing an entrepreneurial ecosystem in Kansas, is the home for e2 Entrepreneurial Ecosystems. NetWork Kansas connects aspiring entrepreneurs, emerging and established businesses, to a deep network of business building resource organizations across the state.

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