

## **Request for Ideas: Pre-Proposal Narrative**

**Project Title:** A Path Toward Building Strong Rural Communities

**Applicant Name:** Charles L. Marohn, Jr. PE

**Legal Name of Applicant Organization:** Strong Towns

### **PRE-PROPOSAL NARRATIVE CATEGORIES**

**PROBLEM STATEMENT:** Small towns and rural areas are generally treated, through public policy, as merely smaller versions of major metropolitan areas. They are given the same tax structures, the same economic incentives, and the same transportation and infrastructure approach, among many other things. They are expected to be part of a globalized economy, using the tools and resources at their disposal to compete and thrive. This is not working.

America's rural places are economically and culturally fragile, lagging urbanized areas in key metrics of health and success. The gap is growing. Yet, policymakers have responded to this crisis by imposing even more of the urban toolbox, often with a not-so-subtle (and not-so-helpful) veneer of cultural superiority. Opportunity Zones were supposed to bring Wall Street capital to rural areas, but they simply inflated real estate prices without creating an equivalent rise in wages. Infrastructure investments were supposed to attract new development, but the dollar stores and franchise restaurants that showed up merely extracted wealth while stifling local entrepreneurs. Assistance with higher education allowed some youth to escape the decline leaving behind the rarely fulfilled promise of someday returning to help rebuild.

The disparities are most pronounced in low-income neighborhoods, particularly those of indigenous, black, and immigrant communities. Chris Arnade, the author of *Dignity: Seeking Respect in Back Row America*, uses the term "strip mining" to describe policies that are meant to help but end up extracting wealth and opportunity from rural areas. He recently wrote:

*To truly value poorer communities, the wealthy, the politically connected, the rich, the elites, (call them what you will), have to view them as places to be respected, not places to be controlled with police, or as pools of talent to be extracted.<sup>1</sup>*

The call for an approach centered on humility, one that does not impose but instead takes its cues from these struggling places, aligns with a key component of the economic justice vision put forth by the Movement for Black Lives.

*We demand a world where those most impacted in our communities control the laws, institutions, and policies that are meant to serve us – from our schools to our local*

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<sup>1</sup> <https://americancompass.org/the-commons/cops-and-teachers/>

*budgets, economies, police departments, and our land – while recognizing that the rights and histories of our Indigenous family must also be respected.*<sup>2</sup>

In our small towns and rural areas, our goal must be to build a culture of health, one where everyone has a fair and just opportunity to live a good life in a prosperous place. That is exactly what it means to live in a Strong Town.<sup>3</sup>

Achieving this goal requires policy changes at the state and federal level, but even more urgently it requires systems change at the local level. The 20<sup>th</sup> century economic paradigm places local governments at the bottom of a food chain of governments, their systems oriented vertically to receive capital flows and guidance from centralized systems, both public and private.

As we have discussed at Strong Towns, local governments must reorient horizontally to obsessively focus on the urgent needs of people within their community, especially those who struggle. In rural America, we must:

*Recognize that local government is not the lowest form of government in an ecosystem of governments, but the highest form of coordination and advocacy for the community.*<sup>4</sup>

This is a transformation attainable by any small town or rural community, one that reveals an endless number of productive pursuits.

For example, the quintessential Strong Towns case study is a familiar small-town redevelopment story. Two blocks of shops once served a healthy and growing neighborhood. In pursuit of faster economic growth, the street in front of the shops was turned into a highway. Whatever gain was achieved by this investment was offset many times over by the atrophy of the neighborhood and the financial burden mandatory auto-ownership has imposed on the people living there. The two blocks became blighted, a condition affirmed by city decree.

This is a tragedy if the story ended there, but it doesn't. It actually gets worse. Using incentives and subsidies developed primarily for suburban and urban redevelopment initiatives, the local government was able to get one of the blocks of blighted shops torn down and replaced with a modern fast-food franchise. The new restaurant met all the zoning and building codes required of new construction. On paper, this was a successful redevelopment.

Only, that paper didn't include the most impactful measurements of success. For example, after the redevelopment, the remaining blighted block was worth \$1.1 million. In contrast, the new

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<sup>2</sup> <https://m4bl.org/policy-platforms/community-control/>

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.strongtowns.org/journal/2020/5/22/a-good-life-in-a-prosperous-place-md2020>

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.strongtowns.org/journal/2020/5/2/nine-things-local-government-needs-to-do-right-now-in-response-to-the-pandemic>

fast-food block was worth only \$610,000. Even before the decades of subsidies and rebates are subtracted, the city's approach devalued the redeveloped property by 45%, making the community poorer while shifting the tax burden to other struggling property owners.<sup>5</sup>

The new restaurant created some jobs, but they were mostly low wage and without benefits. In comparison, the eleven remaining businesses on the blighted block were not glamorous, but they were all locally-owned. They all reported using local accountants, attorneys, print shops and advertising.<sup>6</sup> In other words, the blighted block was part of the community's economic ecosystem, an emergent network essential to building local wealth and prosperity.

The community would have been better off had they done nothing, but there were many productive things they could have done. They could have used a tiny fraction of the tax rebates given the franchisee to instead match façade improvements the shop owners made.<sup>7</sup> They could have changed their zoning codes to provide more flexible use of the sites<sup>8</sup> or changed their approach to code enforcement to make upgrading less of a financial burden.<sup>9</sup> They could have worked to make it easier for people in the neighborhood to walk to the shops, expanding options for residents while growing patrons for the businesses.<sup>10</sup> The list of alternatives is long.

The community could have spent less money, experienced greater financial returns, and had that wealth accrue to people in the city's most struggling neighborhoods (spatial equity), had they shunned modern wisdom given to them by outside experts and instead focused on the urgent needs of people within their community. This experience that has been repeated for decades in neighborhoods across North America. It continues still, despite the damage.

By focusing on the struggles of the most vulnerable in their city's neighborhoods, not only can any rural community broadly build wealth and prosperity, but it can also become an enlightened, focused, and empowered advocate for its citizens. Local governments need to be repositioned to advocate up instead of merely administering down. As an alternative to populist fervor or broad disenfranchisement, this is the kind of authentic representation that Rural America needs.

## **PROJECT:**

### **Objectives and Activities**

Strong Towns, along with Urban3 and other collaborators, seeks to create a vast network of rural partners to share experiences, use data-driven insights to improve dialogue and understanding, and implement a humble practice of learning and iteration that improves the

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<sup>5</sup> <https://www.strongtowns.org/journal/2017/1/29/the-cost-of-auto-orientation-rerun>

<sup>6</sup> <https://www.strongtowns.org/journal/2012/1/4/the-lost-opportunity-of-auto-orientation.html>

<sup>7</sup> <https://www.strongtowns.org/journal/2020/5/14/how-paul-stewart-inspired-his-neighbors-to-revitalize-their-declining-neighborhoods>

<sup>8</sup> <https://www.strongtowns.org/journal/2019/7/3/making-normal-neighborhoods-legal-again>

<sup>9</sup> <https://www.strongtowns.org/journal/2017/10/1/rules-for-the-uncomfortable>

<sup>10</sup> <https://www.strongtowns.org/journal/2018/5/1/the-ultimate-guide-to-walkable-streets>

rural condition, especially within the most struggling communities. This network will, in turn, influence policymakers and institutions, evolving a more cohesive understanding of rural empowerment and practice.

We seek to (1) work with *Thrive Rural* partners to receive and interpret the research, data, and evidence they have prepared, incorporating their expertise and insights into our ongoing efforts. We anticipate a series of meeting and briefings to share ideas and insights. We will add to these our experience, data, and insights, using collaborative dialogue to check our understandings. The Strong Towns Advisory Board, which is currently being assembled to assist in updating our Strategic Plan, will also serve as an independent source of grounding, especially in the early phases of discernment.

Further, we will work to (2) identify narrative arcs supported by the research and data and develop ways to share these stories with partner communities, as well as other *Thrive Rural* partners and key influencers. We have found that change requires narrative, that even the best data and most comprehensive research will not compel permanent change without an accompanying story that draws on the authentic experiences of those we are seeking to influence. While our work and experience has given us unique insight into small towns and rural areas, we know that narrative development is an ongoing and ever-evolving process, one that requires nimble tools and adaptable constructs. We will develop these devices and share them with other *Thrive Rural* partners.

Finally, we will (3) undertake an ongoing campaign to build an expansive network of small town and rural partners, nudging them to actions that build a culture of health, one where everyone has a fair and just opportunity to live a good life in a prosperous place.

This nimble campaign will focus on the three core actions. First, we will create compelling content that builds a narrative arc, one that compels action by recipients. This content will include blog posts, social media micro-content, podcasts, long and short form video, emails, graphic memes, presentations, live events, and other sharable communications devices. We have learned that it is impossible to identify exactly what content pieces will resonate and penetrate audience segments ahead of time, so our approach is to constantly iterate (we call this “jabbing”) and then build off success.

That requires the second core action, which is a robust distribution platform to test, refine, and broadly disseminate content. We have spent years developing an approach that allows us to authentically reach millions of people each year, resulting in greater overall engagement than content creators with vastly more resources and many times our reach. We have a sophisticated approach to using both organic and paid distribution of our content on social

platforms, as well as ongoing email campaigns that coordinate with these efforts. We have focused on building the Strong Towns movement using platforms and methods that connect people to each other, allowing the network effect to accelerate message distribution. Our reach permeates both urban and rural America.

The third core action involves nudging people to action, an approach that builds on content and distribution to assist people in “taking the next step” and “doing what they can” to make their place stronger. We focus on iterating toward success, working with what is available and doing the next smallest thing in collaborative teams to build momentum for change. We have created the Strong Towns Academy to help train and coach changemakers inside and outside of local government and, in January of 2021, we are planning to launch the Strong Towns Action Lab, a platform of resources, examples, and connections to help people join or start a Local Conversation and take that next step.

Our proposal will leverage these existing resources, building on their reach and capacity to create change around a *Thrive Rural* framework. We will run this part of the project like a political campaign, deploying resources strategically to build on success and create momentum. The greatest success is realized when our vast network of rural partners are seen sharing our insights and ideas with each other as if they were their own, having complete and independent ownership over the narrative.

### **Deliverables and Outcomes**

Within the first six months of commencing the project, we will produce a briefing document and hold an interactive video briefing for *Thrive Rural* partners. In these, we will review what we have discerned regarding existing research, data, and practice and share the narrative arcs we have identified. The goals of this briefing include sharing information, receiving critical feedback, and strengthening collaboration among *Thrive Rural* partners.

Following the briefing, and within nine months of commencing the project, we will deliver a work plan to our *Thrive Rural* partners. The plan will outline the campaign that is being developed and how partners can plug into it, adding their skills, insights, and expertise to the effort. We will also outline how content materials can be accessed and how *Thrive Rural* can utilize the expanding network for research, feedback, and other project objectives. We want to use this work plan to strengthen internal partnerships.

Finally, beginning at three months after commencing the project and accelerating at the nine month mark, we will undertake an ongoing campaign to build an expansive network of small town and rural partners, nudging them to actions that build a culture of health. Success in these

efforts will mean broad update and prominent use of the campaign's narrative arcs by target audiences and key influencers.

At the conclusion of the project, twenty four months after commencement, we will publish a briefing on our strategy, how we went about our work, what has resulted from our efforts, mistakes that were made along with lessons learned, and our recommendations for future action. In conjunction, we will make our entire team available to *Thrive Rural* partners for debriefing and consultation.

### **Research Method**

Urban3 has a decade of experience working for municipal governments, including state, regional, county and local governments. Their parcel-level economic data sets come from over 160 US towns, cities and counties, and include rural geospatial typologies from each county and 35 states. They have cleaned parcel-level data sets for communities in counties as small as Clear Creek County, CO (pop. 9,700) up to the scale of the entire state of New Hampshire, which includes nearly half its population living in rural areas. More importantly, Urban3 is deeply embedded in the communities they have worked within, and has an extensive network of local government staff, elected officials and activists in rural areas across the country. This network will provide an on-the-ground opportunity to engage directly with rural audiences and policy makers in an ongoing manner, from the very outset of the project.

Urban3's approach to data collection, visualization and analysis is centered in what they call information equity. Their work simplifies complex economic and geospatial information to include everyone in real conversations about community development and growth. Residents should be able to understand their community's financial health without having any formal education or training, but, unfortunately, this is not the standard in planning practice. Complex spreadsheets, economic concepts and jargon create a fog around why communities are thriving financially or not. Through Urban3's visualizations and storytelling, communities have the resources to make informed decisions about their existing and future built environment with easy-to-understand images and stories. Urban3's economic models reveal how communities can grow their own wealth using assets already within their control, with simple and straightforward policy changes. When communities clearly see their financial health on a map, elected officials, residents and staff are able to make data-driven decisions together. This act is intrinsically connected to the overall health of a place. Living in low-density suburban-style areas creates greater health risks for residents, including rising rates of obesity, heart disease and mental health crises. Additionally, if communities don't have financial resources due to tax structures and land use decisions, they are unable to support social services so desperately needed in rural areas. Residents and leaders of rural places have a right to understand why

their communities are growing broke, and the resulting externalization of health outcomes. Urban3's data-driven research approach will enable rural stakeholders to take control of their fiscal future and become more financially resilient.

### **Communications**

Our communications approach is included in the outline of activities already presented. We will take this opportunity to elaborate on audience formation and our philosophy of communicating across difference, including power dynamics.

The *Request for Ideas* to which we are responding has identified two target audiences, both of which can broadly be classified as "influencers" or, to use our internal language, "front row" people. These are people with connections, access, and influence. Audience #1 is a national front row audience of policy makers, thought leaders, and influencers. Audience #2 is a more local or regional analog of the national audience.

Our strategy as an organization, and the approach contained in this proposal, does not target either of these audiences directly. Even with the \$1 million allocated to this project, we doubt that anyone could be successful in meaningfully influencing these audiences through direct messaging.

Our approach is designed to make our ideas as ubiquitous and available to local changemakers as possible. We have found that they are the most effective advocates in influencing a local front row audience (Audience #2) and, subsequently, that local front row audience is the most effective messenger to the national front row audience (Audience #1).

We have watched our ideas be powerfully transmitted in this way. We have been invited to advise the Obama administration, including invitations to the White House and multiple executive departments. We were also invited to advise the Trump transition team on infrastructure investments.<sup>11</sup> We have supporters who are members of Congress, one of which invited us to share our ideas with the House Transportation and Infrastructure Committee.<sup>12</sup>

The Governor of North Dakota is a Strong Towns member, and we are aware of other state executives interested in our work, too. We have dozens of supporters in state legislatures and have been invited to testify to legislatures in multiple states. We also have hundreds of members who serve in local government, mostly in small towns and rural areas.

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<sup>11</sup> <https://www.strongtowns.org/journal/2017/12/11/a-letter-to-potus-on-infrastructure>

<sup>12</sup> <https://www.strongtowns.org/journal/2020/3/17/you-were-mentioned-on-the-floor-of-congress>

Strong Towns contributors are frequently cited in national media, including our founder and president Charles Marohn, who has a column in CNN Business and has appeared in Time, Newsweek, and Forbes. In 2014, Marohn was invited to speak at a forum by the Washington Post with then Vice-President Joe Biden.

None of this front row interest and support came from targeting influencers. It came from our core strategy of bottom-up narrative construction, where our audience shares our message with others in their own authentic voice. That is what we are proposing in this project.

### **Staffing**

Strong Towns is the lead on this project. Charles Marohn, the primary author of this proposal and president of the organization, is a licensed civil engineer and a land use planner with decades of work experience throughout rural Minnesota and across North America. Marohn is a published author, popular speaker and commentator, and in 2017 was named one of the 10 Most Influential Urbanists in history.<sup>13</sup> He lives in Brainerd near the farm where he grew up.

The firm Urban3 is the primary partner on this project. They are subject matter experts as planners, urban designers, geospatial analysts, former government staffers, and former elected officials. Strong Towns and Urban3 have collaborated on numerous projects and have a strong working relationship with shared vision and objectives. Urban3's team consists of urban planners, urban designers, economists and GIS experts lead by principal Joe Minicozzi. Over the past 25 years, Joe has worked in local government, real estate development, finance, and downtown nonprofits before founding Urban3. In 2017, Joe was recognized as one of Planetizen's, "The 100 Most Influential Urbanists."<sup>14</sup> Joe is a sought-after lecturer on planning issues and has been featured at the Congress for New Urbanism, the American Planning Association, the International Association of Assessing Officers, and New Partners for SmartGrowth and dozens of other local government conferences. He grew up in the small town of Rome, NY, and now lives in Appalachia, in the heart of the Blue Ridge Mountains.

We are open to other partnerships and collaborations. We have reserved space in our proposed budget for possible additional partners. We spoke with nearly all the invited respondents and found many potential collaborators, but our inclination is to get further into the initial discernment phase before we determine the right partner for the narratives that emerge.

### **Timeline**

Our timeline is included in the outline of activities already presented. To summarize, we plan to take six months to review existing research, collaborate with *Thrive Rural* partners, and identify

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<sup>13</sup> <https://www.planetizen.com/features/95189-100-most-influential-urbanists>

<sup>14</sup> <https://www.planetizen.com/features/95189-100-most-influential-urbanists>



narrative arcs. Halfway through this discernment phase, we will begin development of a work plan and start developing and testing communication materials. At nine months, we anticipate sharing a collaborative work plan with our *Thrive Rural* partners while shifting to full campaign mode. The full campaign will run from months nine through twenty-four, at which point we will conclude the project.

### **STRATEGY:**

The ethical teachings contained in Pirkei Avot inform us that it is not our responsibility to complete the work, but neither are we free to desist from it. We do not pretend that we will solve the ancient problems of rural poverty and disenfranchisement, but we can take dramatic steps towards building a culture of health by giving local leaders of all types the narrative foundation, spatial insights, and clear path to develop uniquely rural responses to nagging problems. We feel urgency to do this work.

We believe our efforts will be successful if, over the two years of the project, we are able to (1) document our content being accessed by at least 1M people in targeted geographies, (2) document at least 50,000 requests for resources from people in targeted geographies, (3) interact with at least 5,000 people from targeted geographies during in person or online events, (4) document at least 100 instances of media using our narratives and content, and (5) identify at least 24 instances where our work inspired direct action in targeted communities.

Strong Towns is financially sustained primarily through the contributions of thousands of individual members who support our mission. We anticipate that this project will grow our membership, giving us the support we need to continue this project indefinitely.

### **RISK AND CHALLENGES:**

In assembling this proposal, we are apprehensive about three things that we will take an opportunity to outline here.

It is not clear to us how the different parts of *Thrive Rural* are expected to work together. We do not know all the partners, relationships, and expectations, and we anticipate – due to the expansive nature of this undertaking – that it could be quite complex. We have added time and resources to our proposal to work through these complexities. We are eager collaborators.

After speaking with potential partners, we felt it was prudent to start the project with Strong Towns and Urban3, and engage with other *Thrive Rural* collaborators before choosing a specific partner or communications device. We are excited about collaborating with other organizations, and have spoken in particular, with IDEO. We remain open to any partner suggestions.

Finally, Strong Towns content is licensed under Creative Commons, giving access to anyone to use, modify, share, reprint, or republish whatever we produce. This ethic aligns with our mission and is important to us. We will make whatever materials we produce or develop available to the entire *Thrive Rural* team in whatever format is most useful, but we also want to make it freely available through our platforms to others who may be able to benefit from it.

### HIGH-LEVEL BUDGET

If invited to submit a full proposal, we are prepared to provide a detailed budget including detailed personnel costs as well as any anticipated direct and indirect costs. The following high-level budget provides an overview of how we propose to allocate resources for the project.

	<i>Year 1</i>	<i>Year 2</i>	<i>Total</i>
<i>Review Research - Initial Collaboration with Thrive Rural Partners</i>	\$100,000		\$100,000
<i>Identify Narrative Arcs and Preliminary Content Needs</i>	\$60,000		\$60,000
<i>Development of Work Plan / Briefings</i>	\$40,000		\$40,000
<i>Content Development and Testing</i>	\$100,000	\$225,000	\$325,000
<i>Distribution Campaign</i>	\$75,000	\$250,000	\$325,000
<i>Campaign Acceleration</i>		\$150,000	\$150,000
<b>TOTAL</b>	\$375,000	\$475,000+\$150,000	\$1,000,000

Our proposal blends Activity #2 and Activity #3 as they are presented in the Request for Ideas in an iterative process. We also include reserve funds for acceleration activities as they are presented during the campaign.

### PORTION OF BUDGET DEDICATED TO EACH ACTIVITY

<b>ACTIVITY #1</b>	\$160,000
<b>ACTIVITY #2</b>	\$265,000
<b>ACTIVITY #3</b>	\$475,000
<b>CAMPAIGN ACCELERATION</b>	\$150,000