

Communities Play Different Roles

This is the seventh in a series of briefs exploring fundamental concepts in economics and community and economic development.

Every place is part of the hinterland of one or more cities. Each community occupies a niche in a hierarchy of places.

This hierarchy of places can be thought of as a pyramid with a broad base of many small places rising in steps toward a single city at the apex that is the center of world commerce and culture. A five-order hierarchy illustrates the basic idea, called Central Place Theory.

First-order places, hamlets with less than 2,000 people like Ruffin, Pelion, and Cam-

burg and Greenwood are third order places which have populations of 10,000 to 50,000. They offer more diverse shopping opportunities and more specialized professional services than hamlets or villages and may have a hospital with medical specialists and a daily newspaper.

Fourth-order places are cities of about 50,000 to 200,000. They offer even more specialized services than lower order places, including cultural amenities like concerts and stage plays. They usually have airports with regular commercial service and often contain a university.

Many are state capitals. Charleston, Columbia, and Greenville/Spartanburg are South Carolina's fourth-order places.

South Carolina has no fifth-order places—metropolises serving an entire region. Their cosmopolitan populations provide brain surgeons, copyright lawyers, and other specialized professionals. A metropolis has a hub airport, well-endowed museums, and big-league sports teams. Atlanta is a fifth-order place, and Charlotte may be about to become one.

According to Central Place Theory, in its pure form, all places of the same order would be equal distances apart and equal distances from a hub city. In reality, differences in buying power; location of mountains, lakes, and other natural features; and differences in natural resources affect application of the theory.

The Pee Dee provides a good example of the problem in utilizing Central Place Theory. Based on geography, Florence should be a fourth-order place, but it lacks some specialized services usually provided by a city. Myrtle Beach lacks the permanent population of a city, but has many of its specialized services.

The Pee Dee may remain the most underdeveloped part of the state because the central place system is not well developed. Or, it may be the central place system in the Pee Dee is underdeveloped because there is not enough buying power in Florence's hinterland to propel it to become a full-fledged city.

What use is Central Place Theory? It can help community leaders understand both the possibilities and limitations of their local situation, so they can pursue economic development with greater skill.

Each city is the economic or cultural center of a hinterland—an urban zone of influence with various sized satellite communities dependent on it.

pobello, provide basic services of the sort that people frequently need. Here people can buy bread and milk and fill up the car with gasoline.

Second-order places or villages where 2,000 to 10,000 people live provide basic services, but also may have a doctor, a dentist, and a few lawyers. Often they are county seats like Bishopville, Barnwell, and Abbeville with small shopping centers and a weekly newspaper.

Country towns like Orange-