CLIFTON, Kan. – The signs of progress were all around David Coltrain as he stood recently on Main Street of this northcentral Kansas town.

“Clifton has a lot to gain, a lot to look forward to,” says Coltrain, an agent with the River Valley Extension District who specializes in community development. “I’m excited about the projects they have put together.”

In 2011, Coltrain helped Clifton residents through a program called Pathway to the Future that allowed them to form a vision statement for the community. It includes steps to beautify their town, and bring people together.

So far, the town has spruced up Main Street with storefront planters; built a small nature park; hung banners on lamp posts; put up welcome signs; and hosted a block party. They have also laid plans to use a grant from the Sunflower Foundation to build a walking trail, and have made decisions about how to maintain existing festivals and other get-togethers.

“Pathway to the Future is a program that [extension professionals] put together to help communities with their vision and what they want to look like in the future,” Coltrain said. “Citizens, leaders of the community or just ordinary citizens get together and look at where the community is and what things need to be (in the future).

“What we talk about a lot in community development is to preserve, improve and create.”

As a district extension agent, Coltrain is available to 28 communities, some even smaller than Clifton (500 people), and some larger like Clay Center and Concordia (about 5000 people).

“As the district agent here, I can spend more time with individual communities (compared to what a county agent can offer),” Coltrain said. “In a county with two agents or even one agent, community development kind of goes down to the bottom of the pile...but as a [district] specialist in community development, I’m able to think about different projects and help communities work on their projects.”

“Most of these towns already have festivals and already have involved citizens; they just need a little push and a little encouragement from a person like myself and I think they can get a lot done.”

In the past year, Clifton residents have begun discussions on building a community center; and are forming ideas on what to do with the town's aged What-Not City – a re-created – but no longer open -- Old
West saloon town that once was a popular tourist stop. In early 2012, the town applied to become a Kansas PRIDE community, which is a grassroots community development program also offered by K-State Research and Extension.

“These types of things really are what keep communities going,” Coltrain said.

At right: Children play at Berner Memorial Park on the west end of Clifton recently.

To learn more about Coltrain’s work, go to www.RiverValley.ksu.edu, then click on “Community Development.”