

Buffalo Commons? Not in Greeley County

National Attention Focuses on 'Can Do' Community

“There is a cooperative spirit and effective civic leadership.”

BY LIZ SOSA AND TERRY WOODBURY



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After scanning the USA for a county that defied the decades-long exodus out of rural America, *The Wall Street Journal* came across Greeley County on Kansas' western border, with fewer than 1,300 residents. After three decades of increasingly rapid population loss, Greeley was reversing its course.

Rutgers University researchers, Deborah and Frank Popper, studied the steady depopulation of the Great Plains in the 1980s and envisioned it becoming a “Buffalo Commons” preserve. More recently, Wichita State University's Center for Economic Development and Business Research forecast continuing population decline across western Kansas for decades to come, projecting Greeley would shrink by half in 25 years.

So when *The Wall Street Journal* learned Greeley was bucking the odds, they sent Mark Peters from their Chicago bureau for a close-up look. He discovered that Greeley's four percent growth in the last two years appeared to be the start of an upward trend: the high school's four grades have only 50 students, but the pre-K classroom numbers 30.

Peters called our Public Square office because Greeley County is in its 10th year of utilizing our rebuilding process. He had noted the technical strategies tapped by Greeley, including government incentives and commercial development. But there are other counties using similar tactics –and still losing

population.

“So what makes Greeley work?” he queried.

Our answer, in short, was “a cooperative spirit and effective civic leadership” both by key players in guiding institutions and by citizens who get involved and stay the course.

First, Greeley openly admitted they had a problem. Peters quoted County Commissioner Mike Thon saying, “What I saw in the future, and what probably everyone saw, was a slow death.”

Then, the community engaged—year after year after year—in community conversations, not just to name a shared vision that went far beyond survival, but to consider consolidating city and county government, to set street maintenance priorities, to reopen their theater, to start recreation programs for all ages, to address health care challenges, to judge voters' readiness



In recent years, community conversations have been the prime method for gaining consensus in Greeley County.

for a school bond, to explore ways to build new moderate income housing for their workforce, and more.

Institutional leaders in all sectors of the Public Square—government, human service, business and education—became bold and savvy in convening community conversations as soon as an issue emerged, *before* they had fashioned a solution. They invited the public to the table on the front-end of a problem and surfaced conflicting opinions early on rather than craft a strategy then hold a “public hearing” to learn their citizenry’s after-the-fact reaction.

Christy Hopkins, Community Development Director whose office usually hosts these conversations, says with a smile, “When we face a new challenge, someone will ask me, ‘shouldn’t we have one of those Conversation thingees?’ This is now our default behavior.”

But Greeley isn’t resting on its laurels.

In recent months, after celebrating a decade of accomplishment, citizens re-gathered to fashion goals for the next 10 years. Those that had formulated the original game-plan recruited

newcomers to be full partners in shaping the county’s next chapter.

Their new strategies, complete with an Action Team for each, include building mid-range workforce housing, diversifying their tax base, expanding the community’s parks and recreation opportunities, and starting a council to provide visual and performing arts.

A day after *The Wall Street Journal’s* October 25 feature story, a curious caller from Peoria, IL, claimed, “If a 1,300-size community can pull this off, our 120,000 version can learn from them.”

He’s right. Civic leadership is a skill. It doesn’t take a grant. If institutions and citizens lock arms, work through their toughest issues side-by-side, and persevere, they can change the course of history. **KCL**

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