

Democracy is at Risk at the Public Square

Citizen Involvement is Crucial in Making the System Function

“We must rebuild a cooperative spirit and a shared vision among the vast majority of our citizens.”

BY TERRY WOODBURY



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The question that sparked the founding of Public Square Communities a decade ago was this: “Were the legislators that represent you—in the Kansas House and Senate—first of all civic leaders in their local communities who were then elevated to greater public service?”

Among the 20 citizens from across the state who pondered this question, only three said “yes.” “That’s only 15 percent,” I muttered louder than I realized. The speaker who had posed the question volleyed back at me quickly, “It’s not their fault; we’ve lost the public square. We’re fragmented and divided. So those who get elected do so because a small group has enough money and power to gain a victory.”

He continued, “When most elected officials arrive in Topeka, it’s the first time they’ve ever been at the public square, and they have no idea how to behave. So, if you want to do something about it, start by re-building your own public square.”

That was 10 years ago. How would you answer that question today? Are your elected leaders in Topeka and Washington people who voluntarily served their local community so effectively that the community nudged them forward to greater public service?

I tested this question again, just last fall, with a gathering of about 100 city and county managers from across Kansas. Unfortunately, their answer matched my experience of 10 years ago: only 15 said, “yes.”

No wonder our grand American experiment—democracy—is at risk.

And to my and our great discomfort, the problem doesn’t start in Washington with a Congress that has only a 10 percent approval rating in national polls. Nor does it begin in Topeka

with legislative bodies that have split into three political factions that are incapable of reaching anything near a consensus on our toughest challenges.

Until we rebuild a cooperative spirit and a shared vision among the vast majority of our citizens—including our newest residents, until our business and education and human service and government leaders purposely build trust among themselves and their boards, until we gain the ability to elect and support local leaders who serve the common good, our democracy is at risk.

I spent two days this week with people from 20 countries, all of whom are working to create or sustain democratic governance in their town, their county, their state and their country.

My last visit was with a woman from Romania who is the only member of her family to move to the United States. After several years here, she returned to Romania. But after a short stay, she came back to live in Ohio. She knows how precious democracy is, and how hard the work of building and keeping it strong can be.

She inspired me to keep rebuilding my own public square and to write these words to you.

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