

Learning to Share in Kearny County

BY TERRY WOODBURY



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It seems that people have a built-in tendency to compete, to fight and to protect. But to share? That takes work. And time.

In Kearny County this past year, elected officials decided to explore whether their two cities and rural residents might share talents and resources for the sake of building a strong future for their community. Ten months of work have revealed some insights that may be helpful to other counties.

- ▶ A few people were the catalyst for change. The steady decline of most rural communities for 30-50 years has led many individuals and organizations to hang on harder and harder to whatever is left. The fear of losing has trumped their faith in winning. But in Deerfield, Lakin and Kearny County, a handful of people took a risk that new behavior might produce new results.
- ▶ They used an outside facilitator to bring residents together in new ways. Closely knit rural communities foster “ingroups” and “outgroups.” The result is that no one is neutral. So who is able to start us down a new road? Even Jesus couldn’t get traction in his hometown.
- ▶ A credible sample of residents agreed to explore options. Nine people—three each from the rural areas, from Deerfield and from Lakin—committed to brainstorm ways they might share services. Farmers, small business owners, educators, elected officials, healthcare workers: all were at one table. They established one core principle: for an idea to go forward, it had to benefit everyone.
- ▶ They committed to work. This steering group met every three weeks on average for nine months. Plus they spun off 10 other groups (feasibility and design teams) to test options, find other communities with experience that could

help, get honest feedback from neighbors, and do the necessary homework of figuring budgets, considering new employment arrangements, and fielding tough questions.

- ▶ Five possible shared services emerged. Early on, 12 ideas were considered. Nine months and lots of meetings later, five ideas had survived the test: county-wide trash collection, shared cemetery management, road and bridge maintenance, bulk purchasing and a community grant writer. All ideas needed further work. But all seemed doable.
- ▶ They convened the community-at-large. In the 10th month, the steering committee hosted a Community Conversation and invited one-and-all to bring their questions and ideas. Over 100 people came: some excited, some cautious, some fearful. No decisions were made. Lots of energy was generated. And after the dust settled, all five possibilities kept moving forward.
- ▶ The governing bodies of Deerfield, Lakin and the County broke new ground by holding a joint meeting. Just deciding where to meet and who would call the meeting to order was a challenge. The room was full. People were civil. Good ideas and more hard questions were voiced. And the elected officials agreed to meet again with the hope of implementing one or more of the new services.
- ▶ Perhaps most importantly, trust was gradually built where distrust had reigned for many years. Years ago, a friend advised me, “Terry, it’s all about relationships.” The folks of Kearny County, Lakin and Deerfield have confirmed that her advice was on the mark. **KCL**

TERRY WOODBURY founded **Public Square Communities, Inc.** in 2004 to facilitate community development.