

# The Possibility of Community Progress

Consider Four Steps to Restore Your Town's Vitality

BY LANCE WOODBURY



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“Leadership is an activity, not a position.”

**Recently, I was speaking** with a rural community resident, and his outlook on the future was bleak. His community, he felt, lacked a sense of vision about its future. Residents focused too much on their school and health care rivalry with a neighboring town. They lacked consensus about how to bring young people back or how to better integrate Hispanic families. The larger community in the region pulled shoppers away from local businesses, and previous ballot initiatives to invest in the town's infrastructure had failed. He felt, in a word, defeated.

Sound familiar?

At Public Square Communities, we are often asked to help. And while we have some ability to serve as a catalyst for change, the real opportunity for change is found not in experts, but in the process of coming together as a community. Consider these four areas when you are ready to make things better.

► **Gather the right people.** The citizen mentioned earlier is not the only one feeling defeated. But he lacks, as do others in his town, a way to go beyond the coffee shop and talk about the issues in a way that leads to positive momentum. Find a network of similarly concerned residents who intend to do something, not just whine from their booth at the C-store. Even a small group of four or five residents committed to positive interaction can spark the rest of the community.

► **Network with other communities.** Do some research on communities who appear to have solved some of the problems you face. Reach out and go visit them. Organize a dinner meeting

with their leaders. The same solution they used may not work in your community, but it will likely inspire you to modify or adapt an idea to fit your local dynamics. It will also give you confidence to begin the journey.

► **Look beyond institutions for leadership.**

We often look to the same people for involvement in community initiatives: A few business owners, the school superintendent, hospital CEO and elected leaders. Leadership, however, is an activity, not a position. Broaden the lenses used to evaluate who might serve. Think about young people. Consider newcomers to the community. Look inside churches, invite school faculty, call mid-level managers in businesses and hospitals. Go beyond the regulars to include new faces and discover a fresh source of energy.

► **Keep the process going.** Do you ever finish trying to make a community better? It's an ongoing process, and the momentum to keep it going is based on recognizing your progress. Commit not just to regular meetings and planning, but start those meetings by acknowledging the progress—however small—you are making. Celebrating the wins provides the fuel to tackle bigger challenges.

Improving a community is hard work, and much of it involves volunteer labor. Surround yourself with the right people, network with other communities, cast a wide net for participants, and keep at it. Those ingredients are the best for moving toward triumph in your town.

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