

Democracy in Action

Trio of Communities Work Together to Mold a Future

BY TIM STEFFENSMEIER



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“People came together and worked for the common good.”

At first glance, the communities of Conception, Conception Junction, and Clyde appear unnoteworthy. Approximately 500 people live in these northwest Missouri towns that are connected in the shape of a triangle. Only a handful of businesses dot their main streets, municipal government is minimal, and the county seat (Marysville) seems like a distant relative.

Upon a second, deeper look, a different image appears. A band of citizens organized under a “Tri-C” banner of “partners for progress,” work on behalf of the common good. The steering committee often meets at Conception Abbey, an active Benedictine monastery.

Tri-C started in 2010 when a small group of people engaged Public Square Communities, LLC about wanting to keep the area a viable place for future generations. Mary Lee Meyer, who co-leads the Tri-C steering committee with Father Daniel Petsche, attributes the ongoing effort and success to the group’s vision: A healthy community working toward a common good—building on untapped gifts, full potential of youth, a sense of pride, and economic opportunities, pulling together for future generations.

Tri-C is democracy in action. People came together and figured out if there was “a common good” that might sustain the long work, there would be progress. That’s a different move compared to initiatives that assume “the common good” is known and shared by all. Tri-C created its vision through a series of resident interviews and conversations with people from all sectors of the public square. That too differs from initiatives that are organized and managed by a primary institution, such as a school, business or hospital.

While Tri-C used a third-party facilitator (Public Square Communities) to initiate and facilitate the first two years of the process, Tri-C

is in year four of being led and financed by volunteers.

Their approach has yielded early fruit. For example, at the community conversations residents lamented having so few businesses. But an action team on economic development went door-to-door and discovered 37 active businesses, most operating out of homes. Publicizing that fact generated public support of those businesses and communicated to entrepreneurs that it is possible to make a living in the Tri-C area.

Another action team took aim on enhancing the natural beauty of these communities nestled in fertile, rolling hills by organizing a community-wide cleanup. Repeated annually, while getting rid of trash and junk, it noticeably enhanced community pride. Moreover, during the cleanups, organizers heard of residents wanting to recycle but thinking there were no practical options. The action team found solutions, and flyers are distributed at the dumpsters. Not surprisingly, recycling is on the rise.

Besides co-convening Tri-C’s steering team, Mary Lee capitalizes on her network of former English students by penning a community blog on Tri-C efforts. “We try not to take on big things we know we cannot complete, she says.” That’s reflected in the successes Tri-C has logged in five-plus years.

Could it be that Tri-C is reviving the genius of our American society? When rural communities come together to build a preferred future, they are trumpeting an idea that animates our times. It’s our core belief in the power of the citizenry. It is democracy in action. **KCL**

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