

This Recipe Needs a Cook

Rebuilding Community Requires a Process

BY TERRY WOODBURY



Terry Woodbury

Second of three parts

I've read some wonderful sounding recipes, got my hopes up, bought the necessary stuff at the grocery store, then discovered—painfully—that “something” was missing. Blame the recipe, right? Not! Blame the cook.

In last month's column, I shared a down-to-earth recipe for Essential Bread: flour, water, oil and yeast. Then, I offered a recipe for a rebuilding of our rural communities through a new kind of “public square,” one that links the people and talents from all four sectors: Education, Business, Human Service and Government. If you took my Essential Bread recipe, went instantly to the kitchen and starting baking; or if you grabbed my Essential Community recipe, charged boldly into the county commission meeting and proposed rebuilding your Public Square, you likely had a bad day.

Neither recipe was complete. They listed the “what” but barely mentioned the “how.” They gave you the content, but not the process. So, as Paul Harvey says, this column is “the rest of the story.”

For bread, the process is everything. Flour, water, oil and yeast don't produce bread. It's the baker who knows how to mix these ingredients that makes all the difference. The baker knows about texture, temperature, and time.

Texture develops as flour is added to the liquid. How much flour depends on the finished product the baker wants: light or tender or chewy or hearty.

Temperature was a big deal for my mother. She kept all ingredients at about 105 degrees (she knew that temp by feel, not by thermometer) by warming both the liquids and flour, and by baking in the morning and using the hot sun

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through the east kitchen window to warm the rising dough. Absent an east window or the bright-hot high plains sun, I've learned other methods like an oven vent, a steaming tea kettle or a hot water bath.

Judging how much time at each phase is an art form. Mixing whole wheat flour takes a bit longer than white. The first rise takes 45 minutes or more, depending on altitude, humidity and dough temperature. The second rise takes as little as 15 minutes or as long as an hour... until the dough is “just right.” Depending on the size of roll or loaf and the desired crust, baking time varies from 20 to 45 minutes.

Like the baker, the community-builder knows that the process makes all the difference. Plus, each community is unique. So how do I sense the community's urgency to change their course? Or their readiness for new ideas? Or their ability to persevere and do it right?

From working in 18 communities, our staff at Public Square Communities LLC has learned that the answers to these questions emerge in phases. We've identified four phases in “rebuilding the Public Square” (that's our mission).

Phase One is “exploring.” We meet with

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community representatives several times to determine whether people are ready to change and ready to work. That takes about six months. If a diverse, committed group of citizens emerge, we convene representatives of Business, Education, Human Service and Government and officially start the rebuilding process.

In Phase Two, we “build capacity”—learning from other communities, adding confidence, engaging citizens, creating teams, visioning the future, and establishing the discipline to keep us on track for the long haul. This phase takes at least 15 months. Like bread-baking, rebuilding the Public Square isn’t for those who want “fast food.” It takes time to do it right.

Phase Three is when the community takes “ownership” of the process. It’s like when my mother, after three days of teaching—including watching me throw away several bad loaves of bread—looked at me with a kind smile and advised, “Terry, you’re ready to bake for the restaurant.” For the community, this phase means they want to sustain the process they’ve learned: listening to neighbors, holding community conversations and vision retreats, naming

new goals, convening action teams, and helping citizens make progress on long range community goals. During Phase Three, Public Square Communities LLC serves as a coach, advising and assisting as needed, but the day-to-day rebuilding process is now in the community’s hands.

In Phase Four, the community declares it is ready for “accreditation.” This means being held accountable by other Public Square Communities and by regional funding partners. Similar to college or hospital accreditation, a team of peers from other communities come to “taste the bread,” that is, to see and hear and judge if this re-building effort is solid and lasting. It’s not about being perfect, but about being a community dedicated to a process of improvement that never ends.

Six communities in Kansas are now accredited. Next month I’ll tell you some of their rebuilding-the-Public-Square stories. **KCL**

TERRY WOODBURY is President of Public Square Communities LLC, currently working with 15 Kansas communities and one in Missouri.



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