

Ready or Wait

Your Community May Be
Calling You to Act

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who care deeply.”

BY ANGIE BAUR



Angie Baur

How does a community decide if it is ready to make positive change?

Many residents may not acknowledge the deterioration of their community streets and businesses. Most may not know what's happening to their county government's reserve funds. Demands on the food bank and health services may be below the community's radar. Some may accept de-population and public apathy as inevitable.

So, deciding whether change is needed, and whether now is the time, is a conscious act that begins with a few individuals who care deeply about their community's future. If these individuals make a deliberate effort, they can identify where negative change is occurring. In turn, this may open ears and eyes to possibilities for positive change.

The alternative is to wait for a crisis. After their devastating 2007 tornado, people in Greensburg said, "We'd been having a tornado for 40 years; we just didn't recognize it."

A year ago, I was invited by a small group in Wellington to help them explore our Public Square community change process. In response to their enthusiasm, the City of Wellington invested in helping them conduct a 90-day assessment of the community's readiness to change. I made community presentations and engaged the four Public Square sectors (government, education, human service and business).

Over these past few months, public interest has built. Yet, questions remained, "Do we need a third party facilitator? Will the Public Square approach work here? Can we get our community to invest time and money? How long will it take?" Wellington, like other communities

exploring our model, was encouraged to learn from the experience of mature Public Square communities.

The committee chose to reach out to Meade County's Economic Development Director, Rodg DeGarmo. In 2009, he had documented his community's slow, steady decline, then convened Meade's first discussion about readiness for change. Now five years into Public Square's facilitated process, DeGarmo revealed a variety of insights: "Change is a process. There is no instant fix. Ups and downs will happen. Positive change takes commitment—of time, of energy, of money. View contributions as investments. All sectors need to invest, not just business."

Finally, DeGarmo posed questions for Wellington representatives to ask themselves: Do we have "spark plugs," folks who have caught a vision and can clearly communicate it? Do we have a crisis, or is it a "slow leak?" Can we facilitate our own community conversation or is a third-party process needed? Do we have the ability to sustain a sense of urgency from the beginning of a process to the completion of projects?

Are you and your community ready? Who might you approach to help you answer those questions? A civic club, your Sunday school, a 4-H club, extension board, electric co-op board, county commission or city council, chamber of commerce, ministerial alliance, school board or economic development committee?

Or, another option is to wait for a crisis. **KCL**

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