

Democracy at Risk?

Two-Way Dialog is Essential For
Community Development

BY LIZ SOSA



Liz Sosa

The recent primary election triggered a casual conversation with a friend over lunch. It wasn't long before we were discussing, and disagreeing civilly, about what the results meant for Kansas. The intense discussion led to my friend's announcement that we should agree to disagree and "avoid talking politics" for the sake of our friendship.

If I cannot partake in a candid conversation with a trusted friend over the future of our democracy, then with whom can I have this important conversation?

With fall comes the changing of leaves, cooler temperatures, and, every other year, mailboxes stuffed with enough candidate flyers to keep our fireplaces fed all winter long.

Yes, folks, it's that season, when we try balancing a day's hustle and bustle with a plethora of opportunities to learn about individuals—local, state and federal—vying for enough votes to become your and my elected representatives.

Furthermore, we live in a democracy which means the decision is ultimately yours and mine!

The lack of civic leaders—including people who have been local community leaders before being elevated to state and federal office—was a primary driver in creating Public Square Communities 10 years ago. We believe people with deep community roots bring a greater sense of "the common good" to state and federal government.

Building a strong community—whether in our neighborhood, Topeka or Washington—demands building consensus among individuals, versus dividing into angry factions. It requires careful connecting of various perspectives. In other words, we are tasked with aligning our personal values with public decisions that serve the

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community as a whole.

So how do you and I as individuals participate in constructive communication that helps us evaluate both the issues and those contending for our vote?

We listen carefully, we gather opinions beyond our own, and we follow through with an informed "x" in each box on the ballot.

The Public Square model encourages us to create and to urge positive conversations rather than mudslinging contests. Civil, two-way dialogue that honors differing, even conflicting opinions is essential for community development in general.

In the end, we must follow through and vote if we wish for a strong community. Unfortunately, only 20 percent of eligible voters followed through in this fall's primary election. It took only one vote over half of all votes cast (just over 10 percent in this case) to select the finalists that we will vote on come November.

To me, this lack of participation says our democracy is at risk at every level.

If we can't talk civilly with our neighbor about difficult issues, and if such a small percentage of society is picking our government leaders, what sort of democracy have we created?

Over the next month, my challenge to myself and to you is this: engage a civil discussion with one who differs from you, learn how your candidates have served their local community before seeking higher office, and follow through on November 4 with an informed vote—your vote. **KCL**

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