

Lessons Learned

By Leslie Chmielewski

I was assigned to meet with communities that had participated in the Healthy Communities Partnership (HCP) program administered by the Initiative Foundation. The program works with communities to develop the capacity of citizens to create a locally shared vision and plan, and to mobilize local and regional assets to implement that plan. The communities receive training, technical assistance, resource referral and an initial grant of \$10,000 to \$15,000 from the Initiative Foundation. On my visits to 12 rural communities, I was able to meet with people who have been trying to initiate revitalization in their community. I learned about the changes that were happening in each community and the challenges they had to face and inevitably overcome to accomplish their goals. In analyzing my conversations with the communities I learned two main lessons that are essential for rural revitalization to happen and for small towns to be successful.

(1). A community needs a dedicated and motivated group of volunteers and at least one “champion” leader. Volunteers should be recruited from various sectors of the community and should include youth and retired individuals.

In communities where projects and community improvement goals are being accomplished, they made a conscious effort at recruiting and retaining a diverse group of volunteers. The City of Staples has such a dedicated group of volunteers. I was surprised to hear that when one project was completed, volunteers are known to join another group and task force. By having a group of volunteers that are willing to reorganize themselves after projects are completed, the recruiting efforts in the community are minimized. While visiting Crosslake, it was mentioned how the retired population was eagerly joining the task forces. Communities need to remember that the youth and retired population may have more free time than most and are often willing to volunteer and get involved in groups. Sometimes all it takes is a personal phone call or invitation to ask them to join a group and get them involved.

(2). Find something unique in your community and promote it. It can help attract people to your city.

Every city has something unique about itself that it can promote that will attract people to visit. We all know people who have visited communities that are the “Home of the Biggest (insert object here)”. Unique community features could include something environmental (lake, river, trails, mines, etc..), a historical aspect, tourist shops, etc... In the Cuyuna Range area located in Crow Wing County, there are numerous deserted mine pits that have filled with water and are now used to attract people to this area. I found out that scuba diving is a popular activity in the mine pits because no earth sediments drain into the lakes resulting in crystal clear waters. For these communities located in the Cuyuna Range, they are creating an area in Minnesota where various trails and recreational activities are available and more people are choosing this area as a vacation destination. The area is also known for its antique shopping.

While visiting with the City of Annandale, I found out that the Snooty Fox Art Gallery opened as a result of one individual realizing the talents of local artists and the opportunity to open a business selling their products. The Gallery opened in the City’s old library building that was slated to be demolished at one time. With the support of community members to raise money to buy the building, Annandale now has a unique store showcasing and selling local artist’s work.

I believe there are three skills rural communities must possess in order to revitalize themselves. **They need to be resourceful, efficient, and self-sufficient.** I learned that small communities must utilize resources in new and creative ways out of necessity. Community members know their town better than anyone else and in order to accomplish community improvement projects, they need to be involved in the hard work that produces changes.

In reference to changes happening in rural communities, they can come quickly or they may take a long time. For some people, it is hard to see change in their life or in their community in which they have deep roots. Rural revitalization happens best when everyone understands that sometimes they have to change what they are doing in order for the community to revive itself. What I learned about the changes and challenges facing rural communities in Central Minnesota has made me more aware of how I can make a difference as a professional in the field and as a citizen in my own community.