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**helps establish community vision statement**

By EARL WATT • Leader & Times When a local group of citizens from a variety of backgrounds mobilized to begin a reconnection of the community, they chose to call themselves BE Liberal. That was not a political statement but a commitment to becoming a part of the community. That began a year of what the group called mobilization, and it involved community surveys, focus groups, a community conversation and ended with a vision retreat of about 50 Saturday at Seward County Community College/Area Technical School. The entire process will take four years, but with the completion of the first year, the grassroots effort has identified four action areas and developed a vision statement that will help the community create a common identity and use its strengths to help develop other areas.

Community Square engages four different sectors of a community — business, government, education and social services — and brings them together into one common discussion. By doing so, the group receives a variety of input from circles they may otherwise never hear. The four action areas that came out of the group were facilities, housing, mentoring and communication/collaboration.

Local citizens from the four sectors discussed the results from the community surveys and the community conversation to determine the action areas.

One common issue was the challenge of communication throughout the community. April Warden sat in on the action discussion, and she said their task was to try to come up with some ideas that would help a task force address the issue.

“We broke it down in to small goals to major goals,” she said. “(The facilitator) asked us to set two goals from our main goal. One of those was a community calendar, how can we reach out and have one location to find out what is taking place, but to make sure the information is updated. The action team will be working on that.”

The idea was a web site where a variety of different community entities could provide their information. Currently, each group has their own calendar, but those trying to explore the community as a whole would have to surf to a variety of sites to compile a community schedule.

“This helps with planning,” Warden said. “The night we had community conversation there was a political forum and a Valentines banquet. There are many things going on. One community calendar might have been a better way to schedule.”

Their second goal was to establish a welcome wagon so that newcomers could become engaged in the community.

“We tried to ask, how do we reach new people coming in to feel welcome and how they can become involved, how to serve,” Warden said. “When I lived in Stillwater, our realtor gave us a packet of information put together by the Chamber, but realtors gave it to you. It listed all the community boards and how to become engaged if you were interested. It had little knick knacks to make you feel a part of the community. A jar opener, yardstick, it outlined information about the community.”

Warden said having a welcome would be a good way to get newcomers to Liberal engaged quickly by letting them know what organizations we have, who to contact to get involved, and what services are available, such as Kids Inc. and more.

“Even for the people that rent,” Warden said. “When they sign leases, management of apartments would have that information to give to people who rent.”

The second year of the program will focus on implementation and support for the action teams as well as seeking regional funding partners who will mach local investors in the program.

EDITOR’S NOTE — This is the first in a series of stories on the Community Square Vision Retreat. Future stories will include the three other action areas including housing, facilities and mentoring.

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