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vision for Liberal: “Liberal is a growing community that is embracing its diversity and communicating effectively to educate all residents, which will maximize individual and collaborative potential. Be Liberal with pride!”

Communities either grow or die, says facilitator

By RACHEL COLEMAN • Leader & Times Listening and sharing are two skills most people learn in kindergarten. But a room full of adults at the Seward County Activity Center revisited those basics Thursday evening. Volunteers met for training with Liz Sosa, facilitator for the Public Square Community group. The goal? Form Action Teams to address key issues identified after a year-long process that included interviews, surveys and vision retreats.

“This is not a fast process,” Sosa told the group. “This is a four-year process that your community has begun in order to make Liberal a better place.” Public Square Communities, Inc., is a consulting firm that “identifies, connects and develops community leaders who transform towns, cities, counties and regions into thriving communities which nourish youth, engage citizens and foster partnerships,” the group’s materials say. Seward County hired PSC in 2012.

Sosa shared stories of other communities in rural Kansas that adopted the PSC model after they realized that “either our town will change and grow, or it’s going to die.” Doing something about that requires effort that grows upward, not top-down.

“That’s why we have the Be Liberal group,” Sosa said, “and it has nothing to do with politics or whether a person is conservative or liberal. The vision your community members set for the year 2022 was intentional; every word was chosen with care.”

In a whirlwind presentation that emphasized positive thinking, clear communication and the importance of including every team member, Sosa trained four teams to focus on goals identified by community members:

- Community Communicating
- Youth Facilities

- Youth Mentoring
- Housing/Economic Development.

Convening to work as a team “is more about changing behavior than completing projects,” PSC materials said. “It’s more about process than content, and it is about building a team which engages the larger community.”

In order to start the process, PSC focused on getting to know Liberal and its people through more than 50 hour-long interviews and 650 surveys. Results were presented at the meeting Thursday.

Thus far, PSC learned that more than half of Liberal adults and youth rated the community “excellent” in traditional institutions; sound, well-maintained infrastructure; acceptance of women leaders; a conviction that we have to do it ourselves. Liberal High School students also gave the community “excellent” ratings for strong multi-generational family orientation and problem-solving approaches for healthcare.

The surveys showed there’s plenty of room for improvement. Sosa noted, “but if we only look at what people don’t like, we never get to the part where we talk about what to do next, how to make things better.”

Action team members represented the four sectors of Liberal community: education, human services (including health care, churches and civic groups), government and business. People who are interested in serving on the action teams are welcome to join, said Seward County Administrator April Warden.

“We especially want young people, because they are the future,” she said. “We’re interested in having people join who aren’t already part of a lot of committees or in the public eye. We want regular people who want to have a say about how their community works.”

For more information, contact Warden at 626-3212.

Proud to be in Liberal

In a series of hour-long interviews, PSC gathered information about how Liberal residents see their community. Among the bright points were examples of “good citizen engagement,” which resulted in a list of 27 groups or activities viewed positively by Liberal residents. Topping the list was Kids Inc., “which is a big point of pride for people,” noted Sosa. Other names to make the list included Pancake Day, Bright Futures, United Way, the LEAD program, the After-Prom Committee, Cinco de Mayo Celebration, Crossroads, the Stepping Stone Shelter and many civic and church groups.

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