

Together, Three Towns Pursue the Positive

In Meade County, They're Turning 'Me' into 'We'

BY LANCE WOODBURY



Lance Woodbury

The “C” word—consolidation—is mentioned often in rural America these days in light of budget cuts and shrinking populations. But there is another “C” word—collaboration—that is becoming more frequently heard in the south-west Kansas communities of Fowler, Plains and Meade.

In February of 2009, a group of citizens from across Meade County were invited by economic development director Rodger DeGarmo to a conversation with Public Square Communities, LLC about the future of their community. Concerned about the negative attitude that so easily develops in struggling rural towns, how could they reinforce and sustain a positive outlook within and between their communities? As members of the group—representing all

three communities—continued to meet, their official name, “Positive Pursuits,” was born of a desire to bring all three (historically competitive) towns together to identify and build on the strengths of each community.

A change in community direction, focus and attitude!

Their 13-member steering committee—four residents from each town plus one at large representative—designed a new Positive Pursuits business card that captured their dream in a simple tag line: turning Me into We.

To exemplify their focus on helping all three communities thrive, Positive Pursuits rotated monthly meetings between the towns. In some cases, residents from one town had never seen or used the meeting facilities in the next town over, despite being life-long county residents.

“‘Positive Pursuits’ was born of a desire to bring Fowler, Plains and Meade together to identify and build on the strengths of each community.”

People began working together to raise local funds that they could invest in the community building process. And over time, participants in this cross-county group developed new personal friendships that had not existed before.

As Positive Pursuits gained momentum, they hosted a community conversation in Meade. The goal was to engage the broader public in thinking about the role of the public square—the four sides of which are education, government, human services and business—in developing the community at large. They asked residents about their future dreams, about strengths of the community, and about people who serve as visionaries and “bridge builders”—those who cross boundaries and mediate conflicts.

A month later, Plains hosted a vision retreat for Positive Pursuits to develop goals that would benefit each community, thereby strengthening the whole county. As they imagined a hopeful future, a shared vision emerged:

**MEADE COUNTY:
MOTIVATED FOR TOMORROW
UNITING COMMUNITIES BASED ON TRUST
WHERE OPPORTUNITY THRIVES.
“A PLACE CALLED HOME!”**

At roundtables, citizens from all three communities hammered out four goals: Youth Employment, New Business Development, Countywide Beautification and Affordable Housing. Then they populated each goal’s “action team” with a cross-section of residents from all towns and all sectors to ensure county-

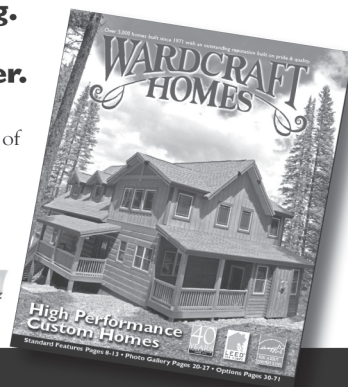


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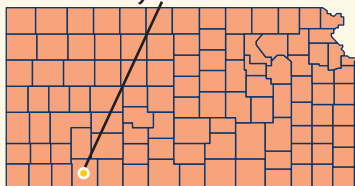
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Meade County



wide ownership.

By March of 2011, seven months after the vision retreat, Positive Pursuits was ready to host their second county-wide community conversation—this time in Fowler—to update citizens on the action teams' progress. Jeanne Roberts, from Plains, noted after the conversation that "it will take awhile, but when we see that we're all working toward the same goals, it's very positive. One town's survival is more likely if the neighboring town survives."

Boyd Orr, county commissioner and a farmer from Fowler, observed that "this process has brought new hope and a glimpse of what's possible if we roll up our sleeves and work together."

So the next time you hear about consolidation, recall the efforts of Positive Pursuits in Meade County and remind the speaker that collaboration also starts with a "C." **KCL**

LANCE WOODBURY consults with family businesses and serves as a colleague of Public Square Communities.

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