

Community Development is our main goal at Rural Prosperity Nebraska. Defining that issue is quite difficult sometimes. Each of my colleagues come from different backgrounds and we all have our own unique way of looking at Community Development. My past experiences working at a city office as the community development director and as a small business consultant make me lean towards government and business issues. Some of my colleagues lean towards cooperatives, rural, urban, agriculture, community groups, or healthcare. We all have our unique perspectives and sometimes that makes finding a single path forward difficult.

All those unique perspectives are also a strength. More than likely, we have someone who has experience with any issue that a community is facing. If we don't have that experience in the RPN team, we have contacts with other groups throughout the state that can assist.

There are groups throughout the state that help communities at no cost, or at a very affordable price. It is interesting to see that many of the communities in my area don't take advantage of those services. Many work with engineers, but fail to work with organizations that will work within the community. The reasons for this vary but many times it is because they have tried in the past to work with someone, and it hasn't gone as anticipated.

Perhaps there was a community meeting, and the outcome wasn't expected. The city council expected the citizens to want a splash pad, but citizens really wanted a library. Since the meeting didn't come to the 'desired' conclusion, it obviously was a failure in the eyes of the council. Having a community meeting that brings the community together for a discussion is never a failure, it's an opportunity to learn. In city government it is easy to talk to the people who show up for board meetings, or to those in your social groups, but sometimes when you get everyone else involved, the issues change. Changing priorities is difficult, especially if significant time or money has been spent pursuing a different priority.

A large community meeting can be a great boost to your community, or if handled badly, it can damage a community for years to come. The RPN team has been trained in facilitation techniques that can help to guide community meetings to great outcomes. Those outcomes aren't predetermined, but we can help keep a meeting on task. A meeting about swimming pool amenities will not change to a meeting about recycling. Meeting facilitation is a little bit science and a little bit of an art. To prepare for a community meeting, we would spend several hours in the community gathering information, and then several hours preparing our

‘facilitation toolbox’ so that we have many options available as we work with the meeting attendees. Meeting facilitation is much more than showing up and guiding a discussion. Then after the meeting we would continue to work on presenting the discussion back to the community.

It is easy for community boards or members of the community to think...running a meeting is easy, I’ll just do it, or writing a grant is easy, I’ll just do it. Sometimes that is the case, and sometimes it is not. There are many organizations throughout Nebraska that are available to help communities. Some of them are very specific in their assistance, such as those who only help with childcare issues. Rural Prosperity Nebraska can help with many different issues and help you to contact the correct organization if we aren’t the proper group to assist you. Reach out to someone, rural communities aren’t alone in the fight for survival, but rural communities have to reach out and ask for assistance.

If your community could benefit from any of the Rural Prosperity Nebraska ideas that I’ve discussed in this column, please reach out to me. I’d love to speak to your community about these topics. You can reach me at jason.tuller@unl.edu or at the Thayer County office at 402-768-7212.

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