Community Impressions

How can we make our community more attractive to new businesses and residents? This question is uppermost in the minds of many rural community and economic development professionals.

Sometimes we’re so familiar with our surroundings that this effort requires a fresh, outside perspective to provide a glance through another lens. Also, politically, an outsider’s view may be more palatable in some smaller communities.

Perhaps a community exchange can help. With a community exchange, members of two communities tour each other’s community and provide nonbiased feedback. A community exchange can provide valuable information.

With this realization, LinkND (a group of community and economic development professionals) has developed and is piloting a community exchange program for North Dakota based on a successful program developed at the University of Wisconsin. Once the pilot is complete, the program will reside within the North Dakota State University Extension Service’s Center for Community Vitality.

The LinkND Community Impressions (CI) program pairs two similar communities that are at least 200 miles apart. Each community assembles a delegation of five to eight individuals. They may be involved with community and economic development, nonprofit organizations, Extension, the downtown business community, manufacturing, primary sector (such as ag or energy), etc. The delegation also could include members of various ages. This diverse team offers a broad perspective as it tours the host community.

The primary steps involved with the CI program are:
1. An orientation is held in each community to educate team members about the CI program and plan for the exchange visit.
2. The tour is a fact-finding visit. The visiting team rates the host community on topics such as access to health care, education, housing, tourism, business community and recreations. The visit is conducted discretely to negate bias.
3. For the report step, the host community invites the visiting team to present its findings. The team presents (in a nonbiased manner) what it sees as community assets and opportunities. This event typically is open to the public.
4. The planning stage is when the report action items are tied to assets and opportunities. The goal is to implement easy-to-achieve results, and incorporate the more difficult actions into the community’s strategic plan.

We will provide an overview to CITYScan as we take each of these steps to chronicle the CI pilot.

To date, the CI program pilot has completed the orientation step. Orientations were held in Bowman and Carrington April 29 and May 6, respectively. A morning was spent in each community. The teams started with introductions, followed by a scenario planning exercise known as the Futures Game.

The team was split into two groups. The teams competed against each other as they managed a fictitious community during a 20-year period. This is a great icebreaker and gets participants thinking about how their decisions shape the future.

After the exercise, the team was educated about the workings of the CI program. Time was left at the end of the orientation for the teams to plan their visits. The next step in the pilot will be the community tours, which are slated for June.

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