

Finding Community Leaders

by M. Eileen Hennessy

Leadership is an issue I hear about wherever I go these days. The success or failure of a community project often seems to hinge on the presence or absence of good leadership.

What is leadership? In the business world it is often the CEO who plots a successful course for his or her company, creating a strong work environment while building capital. But what does leadership mean in our communities as we look at planning for future development, protecting resources, getting things done? Where do we find it?

Some communities lament the lack of leadership needed to get projects off the ground. But there are many communities where there is a support system that creates an environment conducive for people to speak out, take risks, run with a project — in other words, become leaders.

I have experienced both. In one town there was such a feeling of ill will and mistrust, that there was no presence of enlightened self interest, and no sense of working together. This town, in the mid-1980s, was rapidly evolving from a rural community to a bedroom suburb. The speed and conflict that arose created an atmosphere where the old, traditional leadership was “dying out.” But there was no supportive atmosphere for new leadership to grow. Although the town prepared comprehensive plans and approved subdivisions, there was no true sense of future. Not surprisingly, the comprehensive plan was largely ignored.

In contrast, I’m familiar with a rural county where strong leadership came from a planning commissioner. He did not hold grandiose ideas, and there was no specific project that he promoted. But he was a constant presence, a calming influence, and a fair and honest dealer. Through his perseverance, his willingness to share his knowledge, and his ability to teach other volunteers who became visible, elected

leaders, he created an environment for the county to deal with serious conflicts and major changes to its economic structure in a productive way.

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Sometimes it takes just one person to step forward, take the reins, and begin building coalitions to make something work. In one small southern city I know, with an unemployment rate over sixteen percent, and a reputation of being the “armpit of the county,” one business woman, with no “apparent” leadership skills, no political clout, and no heavy hitters backing her, led other citizens to take downtown revitalization from a general concept to a successful reality. Out of enlightened self-interest as a property owner, belief in the future of her community, and a willingness to work unflaggingly over several years, she helped make her community healthy again. And yes, to paraphrase our former President, it was the “vision thing.”

So, what does this mean to volunteers trying to start a project or beginning a planning process? It means that leadership, an intangible, hard-to-describe thing, is a key ingredient to strong communities. But it does not mean you give up if, while

you’re sitting around the table planning a project, you cannot identify readily visible, well-known “leaders.” Leadership can come from unexpected places, from several different people — and can be disguised (as it often is) as steadiness and perseverance. The key is giving people a chance to develop. You might be surprised. ♦

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