Community development, childcare among topics of interest in SE Kansas towns

K-State extension agents helping to spur community improvement discussions

By Pat Melgares, K-State Research and Extension news service

MANHATTAN, Kan. – Don’t let the size of their town fool you: The residents of Toronto, Kansas have big things in mind.

It’s why more than a third of the southeast Kansas town’s 200 residents showed up recently for a meeting with K-State Research and Extension agents to figure out how to make their quaint community more vibrant.

“We talked about strengths and opportunities, which helped us narrow their focus,” said Tara Smith, a family and community wellness agent in K-State’s Southwind Extension District.

“Toronto has a wonderful community center, and the people have a lot of ideas on how to improve that, but it’s already a neat hub of the community. People are there every morning having coffee, and it is where they vote. Their vision is to make it an even more active part of the community, including adding a playground.”

Smith and Amanda Clasen, a community vitality agent also in the Southwind district, met with the group as part of a K-State effort to host “Community Conversations” in towns where residents were interested in learning how to build ‘capital,’ or the resources and characteristics associated with successful and sustainable communities.

Toronto, located on Highway 54 in western Woodson County, has just one paved road into town. Nearby Toronto Lake is a draw for visitors and outdoor recreation, and the town’s businesses include a market with groceries, a boutique and “some restaurants,” according to Clasen.

“One of the community capitals we talk about is financial capital, which includes identifying banks and other organizations,” Clasen said. “We learned through this conversation (in Toronto) that this little town has no access to money; they have to go outside of the community to access an ATM or conduct bank business.”
According to Clasen, many K-State extension agents around the state have received training to help a community’s residents identify their strengths and opportunities, then apply for grants or other funding opportunities to improve their town’s capital.

“Being successful and sustainable is always a challenge for a community,” Smith said. “But I think because the community members and businesses in Toronto are passionate and are committed to improvement, it’s going to be sustainable.”

Cassidy Lutz, a family and consumer science agent in the Southwind Extension District, has been working with several communities in southeast Kansas to identify opportunities for improving childcare opportunities.

Lutz said she benefitted from training provided by Kansas Child Care Training Opportunities, or KCCTO, in which she became a certified trainer in pediatric CPR and first aid. KCCTO provided mannequins, handbooks and other materials to aid in training community childcare providers.

She took that knowledge and is now hosting community conversations in several southeast Kansas towns, hoping to boost the availability of safe childcare in the region.

“We’ve worked both with people already providing childcare, and those wanting to begin a childcare business,” Lutz said. “We’re learning that more people want to offer childcare but they need to have access to affordable training in order to start a childcare facility.”

More information on community development, childcare or other topics related to improving Kansas communities is available at extension offices across Kansas.

FOR PRINT PUBLICATIONS: Links used in this story
K-State Research and Extension local offices, [www.ksre.k-state.edu/about/statewide-locations.html](http://www.ksre.k-state.edu/about/statewide-locations.html)

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