First Friday speaker outlines ‘7 Essentials’ for community development success

Griffiths says engaging residents is key to community buy-in

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

MANHATTAN, Kan. – Through a life of working in farming, teaching, politics and community development, Canadian author Doug Griffiths has seen towns small and large try a whole bunch of strategies for boosting their economy.

Some have worked really well. Others? Not so much.

Griffiths was the featured speaker during the Aug. 2 First Friday e-Call, a monthly online series hosted by K-State Research and Extension that helps to nurture small businesses and inspire entrepreneurship in Kansas. The online discussions, which routinely host dozens of Kansas citizens from the public and private sectors, are available free each month.

His message to a group of nearly 100 viewers of the live session was simple: “Too often when we’re working on rural community development strategies, we’re working on economic strategies – we’re trying to make sure our communities are successful. But we’re utilizing strategies that maybe worked in the 1980s. Well, the world has changed dramatically since then, and it’s always changing.”

Griffiths’ book, 13 Ways to Kill Your Community, is now in its second edition. He said he’s also working on a complementary book that outlines 7 Essentials for successful community development.

He said that engaging with residents and accurately assessing the community’s strengths are the first two ‘essentials’ in building a successful community development strategy.

“You have to engage the public, and there’s only four choices,” Griffiths said. “You can do things with people, to people, for people or in spite of people. If you do them with people, they own it and it’s powerful, and then they’re part of the solution.”

“But if you do things to people, they’ll resent you. If you do things for people, they’ll depend on you to do it forever. And if you do things in spite of people, they will hate you for that.”
Griffiths said community engagement is about leading people along a path toward success, not just getting their opinions. “It’s about educating them on what the challenges are so that they buy in and are part of the process,” he said.

Another challenge, Griffiths said, is getting a community to fully understand its strengths and identify.

“If you don’t understand who you are, then you’re going to fail,” he said. “As residents of a community, do you know who you want to be. If you pick something that you’re not good at, it would be kind of like saying you want to be a skiing community, but you’re located in western Kansas.”

“Most people are afraid to identify who they really are and commit to being really good at it. Most businesses are trying to be too many things, instead of being really good at one thing. And communities need to be really good at what they’re really good at, and double down on it.”

Five more essentials for community development, according to Griffiths include forming a cohesive community strategy – informed by engagement with residents and a fair assessment of the communities’ strengths – as well as establishing a budget to drive development; establishing a brand and culture (and sticking to it); marketing the community’s strengths; then re-evaluating the plan often, especially as leadership in the community changes.

“You need to have a story and a vision for your community that everyone shares,” Griffith said. “And you need to be specific about what it is that you’re going to spend your time and money and energy on so that, as a community, you can stay focused. We don’t have enough resources to do everything.”

Griffiths grew up on a ranch outside a small Canadian community, later taught junior high students, then served four terms as an elected member of the legislative assembly in the Province of Alberta. He retired from politics in 2015 to pursue his passion of helping communities enhance quality of life for their residents.

His website, 13 Ways, was established with the mission of fostering thriving communities where residents not only want to reside, but also thrive.

Griffiths’ full talk and other First Friday presentations are available online from K-State Research and Extension.

-30-

FOR PRINT PUBLICATION: Links used in this story
First Friday e-calls, https://ksre-learn.com/entrepreneurship

13 Ways (website), https://www.13waysinc.com

K-State Research and Extension is a short name for the Kansas State University Agricultural Experiment Station and Cooperative Extension Service, a program designed to generate and distribute useful knowledge for the well-being of Kansans. Supported by county, state, federal and private funds, the program has county extension offices, experiment fields, area extension offices and regional research centers statewide. Its headquarters is on the K-State campus in Manhattan. For more information, visit www.ksre.ksu.edu. K-State Research and Extension is an equal opportunity provider and employer.