

Decatur Tomorrow explains project in Hoxie

By JAN KATZ ACKERMAN
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Six representatives of the Decatur Tomorrow strategic planning group shared ideas with Sheridan County residents about the community-building process sponsored by Terry Woodbury of Kansas Communities LLC.

"A community cannot survive if a small group of people do the work day after day," Paul Shields, a leader of the Decatur County group, told more than 30 Hoxie business people at a community leaders meeting at the Indian Country Cafe.

Mr. Shields, along with Jesse Carter, Dr. Beth Sliter, Gary Anderson, Greg Lohofener and Doc Franklin, talked about the first 18 months of the process which Decatur County has worked through.

The Kansas Communities process is sponsored by Mr. Woodbury, a consultant, who lives in Kansas City, Kan., and Leoti. The process prompts people to get together, and hopefully inspires them to lead and manage their communities through what Mr. Woodbury calls "the public square." The square is made up of schools, health and human services, business and government.

Mr. Woodbury is working with groups in Decatur, Sherman, Wallace and Greeley counties, as well as six cities across Kansas, including Greensburg, which started at the request of Gov. Kathleen Sebelius. Unable to attend



PAUL SHIELDS OF OBERLIN (left) and Charles Ayers of Leoti talked with Jessica Spresser, Hoxie City Clerk and interim director of the Sheridan County Economic Development Corp., and Michelle Foote, a board member, after a meeting of 40 Sheridan and Decatur County residents and business owners last Tuesday in Hoxie. —Staff photo by Jan Katz Ackerman

Tuesday's meeting, Mr. Woodbury asked Charles Ayers, also of Leoti and chairman of the board of Sunflower Electric Power Co., to facilitate the meeting.

Mr. Ayers said that by Decatur County representatives sharing their

experience of the Kansas Communities process, they were holding themselves accountable.

"Public accountability of sharing the Kansas Community project plan is like a marriage," Ayers said. "You are making a public statement about

your plans for the future."

Mr. Ayers noted that Sheridan County has not yet committed to using the Kansas Communities process, and the evening was designed to allow them to learn about the process.

Mr. Shields, Mr. Carter, Dr. Sliter, Mr. Anderson, Mr. Lohofener and Mr. Franklin spoke briefly about the five action teams the Decatur Tomorrow groups developed to move the county forward.

Key projects to surface over the past 18 months as part of the Kansas Communities project have included restoration of Sappa Park east of Oberlin, expansion of Oberlin's airport, plans for a countywide web site, development of a team to create intergenerational interaction, marketing the county's economic development corporation, promoting mission work within the county and maximizing existing facilities.

As part of the park project, he said, several junk cars, hundreds of used tires and 20 dump trucks of trash were hauled to the landfill. Volunteer groups throughout Decatur County, including high school students and Pheasants Forever members, started plans for a wetlands area and camping sites at the park.

Mr. Shields said what started with small groups learning Mr. Woodbury's philosophy that communities must keep themselves alive, has grown to include a steering committee which meets with Mr. Woodbury each month.

"We keep this going, but we don't run the action teams," he said. "The best thing about this is the positive approach. You don't focus on your failures, but build on your assets."

Dr. Sliter said as part of the Mission at Home team, she has watched Decatur County teens grow to help older residents throughout the community. She said projects the team has undertaken have included scraping and painting an elderly Norcatur resident's home and scraping and painting Oberlin's historic band shell.

"We want the Decatur County area to thrive so our youths will want to come back after they finish their education," Dr. Sliter said. "We give them wings, but do we develop their roots?"

Jessica Spresser, Hoxie city clerk and interim director of the Sheridan County Economic Development Corp., spearheaded bringing the two counties together. Leanna Sloan, president of the development board, said the directors plan to retain Spresser as interim director, and at the present, have made no plans to hire a full-time director. The development group reimburses the city for time she spends on economic development during city business hours.

About 40 people, including representatives from Sheridan County's development corporation and residents of Hoxie and Selden, attended the meeting. Among them were County Commissioners Ron Schamberger and Doyle Kauk; Hoxie Mayor Lori Horesky, and City Commissioners Jim Erwin and Troy Dewey; and Selden Mayor Jacques Boultinghouse.

Oberlin taxes will go up some next year

By CYNTHIA HAYNES
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The Oberlin City Council approved a 2008 budget of nearly \$5 million on Thursday after discussing projects including a new water treatment plant, an improved airport runway, street repairs and upkeep of the electrical system.

The forecast is for tax and rate increases to pay all the bills, with increases in water and power rates and property taxes.

The city's portion of the county dispatch system also came up for discussion, but council members agreed they need to pay the bills because they don't want the city to do its own dispatching.

The new budget will allow the city to spend \$4,823,878 to keep all facets of the government running, up almost \$735,000, or nearly 18 percent, from expected expenditures this year of \$4,088,969 and \$3,991,589 for 2006.

The budget will require a tax increase of 4.845 mills, from 73.645 to 78.033, which should bring in \$527,200. That's almost \$24,000 more than in 2006, when the 73.645 mills brought in \$503,466.

The front page of the budget is published on Page 7B of this week's paper, but anyone who wants to see a full copy can get one from the city clerk at The Gateway.

A budget hearing will be held at 6:30 p.m. Monday, Aug. 6, during the next council meeting.

The council held an 80-minute budget workshop Thursday during a recess in the regular council meeting, coming back into session later to approve the budget. Members discussed increasing electric rates half a cent per kilowatt hour to start a fund to rebuild city streets. Some streets have been sealed so many times they have humps in the middle, said Councilwoman Marcia Lohofener.

Because of pressure from the federal government, the city has already decided to put in a water treatment plant, and that will have to be paid for out of increased user rates and state and federal loans and grants.

The city would have a shortfall of more than \$90,000 in revenue over expenses next year if water rates aren't raised, council members learned, plus the government will require the city to raise rates about \$10.20 per customer per month to help cover the cost of a treatment plant and repay a federal loan.

The city also plans to build a new runway at the airport to allow Bus and Coach International and other businesses to land small jets here instead of using McCook.

Although there will be some local responsibility, the city is hoping to get money from the state or federal government for the project, Mr. Shike said. Since the project will take some time and costs aren't yet known, it isn't included in this year's budget.

Payment for the county dispatch system is, however.

The city pays for 30 percent of dispatch costs, and the bill has gone from \$66,000 this year to an estimated \$68,000 next year.

Council members thought this

was too high for city taxpayers, who also pay county taxes, but agreed that they didn't want to take over the service. The dispatch office takes care of radio calls for the city police, ambulance, fire, sheriff and county bus. Steve Hirsch, who serves as both city attorney and the elected county attorney, pointed out that most of the dispatch expense is salaries, since it runs 24 hours a day.

Oberlin residents make up about half the county population, he said, so they use the ambulance, fire department and county bus the most.

"It's just that we have to pay for it twice," Councilman Ray Ward said.

The two units of government need to work together on this one, said Mr. Hirsch.

"It would be very difficult for the county to do this one on their own," Mr. Hirsch said. "It would also be difficult for you to do so."

He said that the fire phone used to be answered at the power plant and in some counties the police and sheriff's calls go to someone's home after hours. While those solutions work, he said, they aren't ideal.

The council said they understood but still felt the city was being overcharged.

"I don't like it and you don't like it," said Councilman Rob McFee, "but I think we should pay it."

Dr. Elizabeth Sliter, the only member of the public to attend the meeting, said that she appreciated all the time and thought the council members put into the budget.

"I appreciate that you're taking all these concerns so seriously," she said. "I just wish it was easier and cheaper."

Picnic planned at park

It may be hard to believe that the end of the summer is almost here, with only three weeks left before classes start in the Oberlin School District, but that means it is time for the annual Back-to-School Picnic.

The picnic, sponsored by the Oberlin Business Alliance, Decatur County Chamber Area Chamber of Commerce and the school district, starts at 6:30 p.m. Wednesday, Aug. 15, in City Park. In case of bad weather, the picnic will move to the high

school cafeteria.

The picnic, started by the Chamber a few years ago, provides a time for people to meet new staff in the school district and hear from the high school coaches.

Anyone who wants to attend the picnic needs to call the Chamber office at (785) 475-3441 by Friday, Aug. 10. Everyone is asked to bring a salad or dessert to share and their own table service.

The picnic is free.

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