

J. D. Cox - Neodesha

This is Kansas Profile. I'm Ron Wilson, director of the Huck Boyd National Institute for Rural Development at Kansas State University.

Sometimes it takes a spark to get something started, such as a campfire. Today we'll learn about a southeast Kansas town which used a Community Development Academy as a spark to start some exciting community initiatives. It's today's Kansas Profile.

J. D. Cox is City Administrator for the city of Neodesha. Neodesha participated in a recent Community Development Academy which helped launch a new community improvement process there.

J. D. and his wife come from rural Kansas roots. She is from Neodesha originally. J. D. attended Independence schools, but he's from the nearby community of Elk City, population 301 people. Now, that's rural.

J. D. had a career in the information technology business which took him to such places as Chicago, Dallas, and Boston. But when he and his wife wanted to start a family, they felt a desire to raise their children in a smaller, Midwest community. In 1993, they moved to Neodesha where J. D. took a position with a local manufacturing company.

J. D. also got involved with the local chamber and the county leadership program. Eventually some people asked if he would run for the city commission – and he said no. But after more encouragement, he agreed to run and was not only elected, he became Mayor and was reelected twice.

In late 2004, the city administrator stepped down. The other commission members asked and encouraged J. D. to take the position, which he eventually did. J. D. said, "I absolutely love it."

In late 2009, J. D. saw a notice about a Community Development Academy that was being held for teams of community volunteers in southeast Kansas communities. The academy was being conducted by a consortium of groups, led by K-State's Center for Engagement and Community Development, K-State Research and Extension, the Federal Home Loan Bank and others, with grant support from USDA Rural Development.

J. D. liked the fact that the academy was intended to bring together representatives from different areas of the community, so he encouraged Neodesha put together a team which participated in the 2010 academy. The team consisted of the executive director of the chamber of commerce, a hospital representative, an involved citizen, a banker, and J. D. He said, "We had really good folks involved with a can-do attitude."

J. D. said, "The content of the academy was really good. It wasn't just one-way delivery, it was a dialogue." The dialogue involved some homework, including an assessment of their community by the team.

J. D. said, "It was a great process to go through. We did it rapidly but as comprehensively as possible. And once the class was over, it provided a framework for us to work on."

That is exactly what the team from Neodesha did. When they got back home, they engaged a number of additional citizens and started thinking about goals and action

plans for the community. Those goals focus on planning and development strategies, community promotion, leadership and community involvement, and hazard mitigation and disaster planning. The team will be going to the City Commission to seek its support for this community engagement process, which would include town hall meetings and more citizen input, leading to a strategic plan and action steps.

J. D. said, “We’re excited. We want to reach as much of the community as possible in small group settings, including schools, civic organizations, and business and industry.” He said, “Our overall goal is to engage the community and encourage participation in setting goals and specific actions for our community’s future.” He said, “The Community Development Academy was the spark that got us going.”

Additional Community Development Academies are now being offered in northwest and northeast Kansas. For more information, go to www.ksu.edu/cecd/cda.

Sometimes it takes a spark to get something started. In this case, the Community Development Academy provided a spark to help the community of Neodesha think strategically about its future. We commend J. D. Cox and all those involved in Neodesha for making a difference by launching this initiative. With that spark to get things started, they are now fanning the flames of community engagement.

For the Huck Boyd National Institute for Rural Development, this is Ron Wilson with Kansas Profile.