COMMUNITY BUILDING
STRENGTHENING SENSE OF COMMUNITY

A sense of community is an intangible yet vital component of a healthy community. It encompasses elements such as image, spirit, character and pride, along with processes such as communication, inter-group relations, and networking. In many communities across the nation, people are losing their sense of community. With current trends of out migration, sprawl, rural-flight, urban decay, and increased mobility, many community members do not feel strongly connected to their communities.

A sense of community is at the core of all efforts to strengthen and build community. It is needed for a majority of community members to view a community's issues of concern to everyone. It arises from a clear sense of collective purpose that values diversity and uniqueness. It prevails over divisions caused by competition over scarce resources, conflicting goals, and historical quarrels, allowing communities to move ahead to solve shared problems.

Many times a sense of community has deep historical roots. It is centered around a place, building, or event – village green, church, 4th of July parade – which has been in the community for generations. But not always. Some communities come together around a crisis or an opportunity, and find that a shared purpose, intent, or vision – protecting children, preventing crime, helping the needy – creates the foundation from which a sense of community is readily built. A sense of community can also come from a collective vision, where community members are asked to participate in creating the vision versus being told what their vision is.

Ease of mobility and increased ability to communicate mean that today many people have decreasing loyalty to their community of place. Many regularly uproot to follow economic opportunity. However, for an increasing number, quality of life is an important factor in their decision to relocate. As well as good schools, clean air and water, and low crime, a sense of community is increasingly a key factor. And for those people, communities that welcome newcomers, invite their participation, and value their residents, will surely attract those willing and active individuals, adding to the strength of the community.

Building a sense of community requires fostering a sense of connecting among citizens and developing a sense of civic provide. Open communication and networking are key ingredients in fostering a sense of community. It also takes involved citizens. A sense of community involves joining together to work on community issues, celebrate, listen, vision, plan, problem solve, and make decisions.

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Cooperative Extension

A community is made up of different people with different interests, experiences and backgrounds. These characteristics may divide a community into natural groups but there must be cooperation among them if the community is to work well as a unit. A strong community values the uniqueness of these groups and their traditions, but also recognizes their interdependency.

Increased communication and understanding of different perspectives among groups and within the community as a whole is an important factor in establishing a sense of community. Strong communities connect the different groups within them, and their members to each other and to the civic life. They find ways for people to connect and contribute within the entire spectrum of community life. Involve all groups. Value differences and see diversity as a strength.

Villages, towns, and cities with a sense of community include those where all members

> ➢   contribute to and hold a common vision for the future
> ➢   respect and celebrate their heritage, diversity, and resources
> ➢   share information; and
> ➢   develop and sustain an abundance of social networks and relationships

As a community, they have a strong, positive identity, uphold a shared set of values, rights and responsibilities, foster an atmosphere of civility, trust, and respect, and sustain norms of networking, shared information and active participation.

Resources:
Building Citizen Involvement: Strategies for Local Government. Mary L. Walsh. ICMA, Washington, DC, 1997.