City CONVERSATION

BY TAD LONG

Tad Long is Director of Business Development for the NewCities Institute.

NewCitizen Kentucky partnership focusing on leadership

As the mantle of leadership for Kentucky's local communities passes to a new generation, many cities and counties are asking themselves, "Where will these new leaders come from?"

The 21st century has brought fundamental change to local communities as well as the nation as a whole. More than ever, people are disconnected from global events, choosing to lock themselves in their homes at night and watch reality television to escape the "real" reality.

As they disengage, people are also turning away from public service. Recent local elections found some communities without enough candidates to fill the ballot.

"Where will these new leaders come from?"

The challenges of invigorating skeptical citizens to engage in public discourse and service prompted three Kentucky organizations to form a strategic partnership: "NewCitizen Kentucky." Its mission is to "raise the bar of civic participation across the entire Commonwealth of Kentucky."

In the fall of 2005, Dr. Michael McCall, president of the Kentucky Community & Technical College System, and Sylvia L. Lovely, executive director/CEO of the Kentucky League of Cities and president of the NewCities Institute, convened a small group of staff members to discuss ways their organizations could address the growing disconnection between citizens and their communities.

KCTCS, with its 16 colleges and 65 campuses, has a statewide reach into most communities in the state. The Kentucky League of Cities, with its 380 members, represents more than 90 percent of the state's cities. The NewCities Institute, created by KLC in 2001 as a nonprofit educational foundation with an international outreach, brings practical experience in community-building and citizen engagement to the table through its 12 Principles of Community Building.

McCall and Lovely believe that community participation through public service should again become part of citizens' everyday lives. Citizens working together to find innovative ways to improve their communities is as important a contribution as working on a specific project.

In other words, being an engaged citizen is more than volunteering once or twice a year. Although volunteering is vital to a strong community, civic engagement in creating community solutions is critical to the survival of our democratic ideals.

NewCitizen Kentucky is foremost about citizen involvement in community life. The initiative includes several elements targeting students, community leaders and citizens.

The first initiative of NewCitizen Kentucky is Leadership KCTCS. The goal of Leadership KCTCS is to give students an opportunity to interact with local leaders, observe community leadership at work and initiate an activity within their own communities.

Geared toward select students from each of the KCTCS institutions, the program will give participants practical experiences and learning

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BELL, ORR, AYERS & MOORE, P.S.C.
Attorneys at Law

1010 College Street
PO Box 738
Bowling Green KY 42102-0738
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opportunities in communities throughout Kentucky that are built around the four broad themes of the NewCities Principles: people, perspective, place and prosperity.

The seven-month program will bring together academic and community leaders who will share their leadership experiences with the students. The students will then observe or initiate an activity that embodies the principles they have been taught. Participants will also shadow community leaders to learn about and observe the decision-making process that affects their lives and will write a paper reflecting their own observations about leadership.

NewCitizen Kentucky will also provide a safe harbor for local leaders to discuss regional policy issues. KCTCS facilities provide a neutral setting for local officials, citizens and business leaders to work toward a common understanding of and solutions for problems that are sometimes difficult to discuss.

KCTCS presidents understand local challenges. As conveners of forums to discuss these challenges, they can offer their services and facilities to encourage constructive conversations that will lead to community solutions.

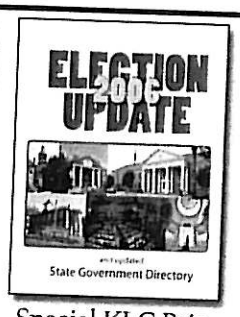
The Kentucky League of Cities offers local officials and municipal employees many educational opportunities to improve their leadership skills. One of the challenges in delivering timely training programs is the distance that trainers and local leaders must travel to attend seminars and workshops.

Many locally elected officials serve their communities in a part-time capacity. They have full-time jobs elsewhere and must take time from work to receive this training. KCTCS provides KLC members an education and training delivery system that will substantially reduce the distance that city officials must travel. The expected result will be better informed public servants who are equipped to lead our communities in facing the challenges of a global economy.

One of the most important aspects of NewCitizen Kentucky is the ability to benchmark and track results over time. The success of the initiative will be measured in several ways, including the number of participants in various programs; whether any of the participants decided to run for office or serve in local government; whether they became involved in local civic organizations; what local problems were identified or resolved; and whether voting increased among participants.

If only an additional 1 percent of Kentucky's population becomes involved in public dialogue, local leadership or public service as a result of this initiative, NewCitizen Kentucky will have had a significant impact.

Where will leadership for Kentucky's communities emerge? NewCitizen Kentucky is predicated upon the belief that leadership can spring from anywhere. And isn't that an innovative concept?



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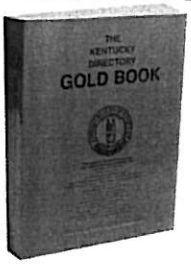

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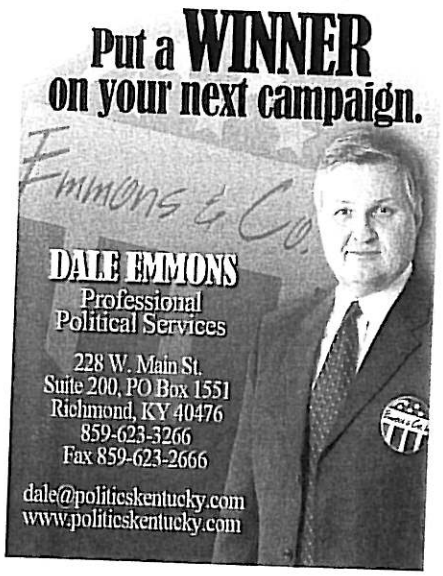
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