

## SYP: Sisters community was receptive to program

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Citizens4Community (C4C) nonprofit, asked everyone to find a seat, about a hundred people settled in their chairs, prepared to listen and learn.

"I am humbled, inspired and hopeful by the turnout," Holdman began. She admitted to living in Sisters for 10 years but purposely "hiding out," not getting involved in the community — until now.

Holdman was troubled by the public discord she had been witnessing in public meetings and in letters to the editor in *The Nugget*. Serendipitously, she heard several times about a simple program called Speak Your Peace (SYP), with tools to help promote public civility and community engagement.

At the Economic Vitality Summit last year, Holdman talked with others who were having the same concerns. She contacted the SYP headquarters in Duluth to learn more about the program. Holdman then attended a Sisters City Council workshop with Lisa Dobey, who described for Council her personal experience with the SYP program while executive director of the Truckee-Tahoe Community Foundation. Joining in on the phone was national spokesperson for SYP, Rob Karwath.

Council liked what they heard and encouraged Holdman to proceed, which

she did. She gathered several like-minded locals and together they established Citizens4Community. With a grant from the Ford Family Foundation they were able to bring Karwath to Sisters last week to address a number of group meetings from last Wednesday night through Friday morning.

Karwath's only handout at the meetings was a small business card listing the nine tenets of the SYP program: pay attention; listen; be inclusive; don't gossip; show respect; be agreeable; apologize; give constructive criticism; and take responsibility.

Through a series of stories illustrating how other communities have adopted some version of SYP — to help them get unstuck, or improve community discourse and engagement, or simply improve an already healthy functioning community — Karwath's message began to take hold among the attendees.

For the rest of the meeting, he asked people to break up into groups of six to eight and identify what they thought are one or two issues facing the community and how the nine tenets might help residents to address the issues and make some headway.

The hum of dialog filled the community hall, as friends, neighbors, and complete strangers openly shared their concerns with each other. The level of engagement was obvious when Holdman had difficulty bringing everyone back together. A spokesperson from each group reported

on what they had identified as a difficulty that might benefit from people agreeing to conduct themselves according to the nine tenets.

Not surprisingly, there were mentions of the proposed paved trail between Sisters and Black Butte Ranch. Another group thought an overarching problem lay not in any particular issue, but rather in the way community members respond to conflict — in an "annoying and sharp manner."

Karwath expanded on that point, saying that often "it's not so much about a particular problem but more about the way we engage with one another." If someone feels he has been treated roughly or unfairly, chances are he will withdraw from any further engagement because the environment doesn't feel safe. When that disrespectful treatment is repeated again and again, the result is a community that becomes disengaged and starts to die.

If someone makes a commitment to incorporate and regularly practice using the nine tenets of civility, other people are impacted — and the more people who choose to conduct themselves in a civil manner, the greater chance that the community can heal, re-engage, and move forward.

Besides the Thursday-evening community meeting with about 100 in attendance, Karwath met about 30 town leaders at a Wednesday-night reception. There were three other sessions on Thursday.



PHOTO BY JODI SCHNEIDER MCNAMEE

Rob Karwath laid out the principles of Speak Your Peace.

Kiwanians and representatives of other service clubs, totaling about 60, met in the early morning at Aspen Lakes Lodge.

Kiwanis member Jan Failing said, "I like what he (Karwath) had to say. I thought the tenets were excellent. I think our community could really use this, particularly at meetings."

Mid-morning Karwath met with nine members of the Forest Service staff and at a noon lunch he spoke to about 80 representatives of nonprofit and government organizations and churches. That group broke into small discussion groups like the one in the evening.

Problem areas highlighted included the in-city vs. out-of-city dynamic; the contentious, disrespectful atmosphere at some City meetings; lack of affordable housing; and the antagonism and polarization around a number of city issues.

"I really endorse the principles of the program. My

question is: how do we do it?" asked Sisters resident David Johnson.

Holdman assured Johnson that the C4C would assist people to craft a plan. Karwath offered that the important thing is to get people to the table to discuss the deep issues that are motivating their stance. Then it is possible to get underneath expressed issues to the real meaning, emotions, and fears driving their behavior and words.

SYP is a grass-roots movement that can be modified or expanded to fit the culture of Sisters. Or it can be adopted exactly as written, or not at all. The Citizens4Community have tabulated the results of the surveys filled out at each gathering and will be looking at next steps. (*See related story on page 31.*)

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