

## A SENSE of PLACE energizes the conversation during the ECAP Recap



The North Platte Area Chamber of Commerce and the community of North Platte participated in an entrepreneurship initiative led by Nebraska Extension and funded by a grant from the Rural Futures Initiative. Eight communities were chosen to participate in 2013. In 2015 the conversation continued through a follow up event in York, NE. On March 24th, 2015, representatives from the Community of North Platte participated in a one day “Conversation with ECAP Communities”. Nebraska Extension Educators invited the communities that participated in the Entrepreneurial Communities Activation Process (ECAP) to meet in a central location to gather feedback from each community. Chuck Schroeder, Director of UNL’s Rural Futures Institute was on hand to listen in. Randy Saner, Extension educator for our area, Angela Raby with Mid-Plains Center for Enterprise in North Platte, and Clarine Eickhoff, Property Manager of the Platte River Mall were also present.

### What was gained from the one day conversation?

Clarine Eickhoff observed, “I wasn’t aware that our community was one of the pioneers to undergo the process. This grant funded effort was developed to help revive rural communities. The first four communities in 2013 were asked to participate in the pilot stage of ECAP - Central City, Alliance/ Box Butte County, Elgin and North Platte. The ECAP process changed based on what was learned from the first round of communities. The second round of communities began the process in 2014 - Hartington, Ashland, Thayer County and Gage County. The community populations ranged from anywhere to 1,000 people to 25,000 people. Attendees observed that no matter how small or big your community, similar opportunities for each were present. Improving communication is one, development of partnerships and creating shared vision were others. Others involved in our process from the beginning were impressed of what we were able to accomplish considering some of the obstacles that we faced. There really are innovators in our community embracing local entrepreneurs with fresh approaches.”

Through ECAP, communities learned of eight characteristics that were identified as key characteristics of an entrepreneurial community and each chose an area they felt they could improve on. Each community presented on their progress and answered questions through out the day. Eickhoff presented the progress gained from North Platte by educating attendees on project, StartUpNP, a small business guide for the North Platte area (StartUpNP link can be found at [www.nparea.com](http://www.nparea.com)) which targeted *Entrepreneurial Support Systems*. StartUpNP was a partnership between five systems in the NP area that often times are needing to make contact with the same people. The StartUpNP partnership allowed for creation of one tool that could communicate their message in a joint effort. Also, Eickhoff presented on the 308 (threeOeight) ([facebook.com/the308](https://facebook.com/the308)) gatherings that jumpstarted through ECAP which target the entrepreneurial characteristic of *Sense of Place*.

“It really amazed me how curious the other communities were on our 308 efforts. They kept wanting more information on what we do as the 308. The 308 is so easy, with little structure and the furthest thing from work, exactly what we wanted the 308 to become.” Eickhoff remarked.

Angela Raby commented on Sense of Place, “Building social capital in a community shouldn’t be an after thought in building a Sense of Place for entrepreneurs. The 308 concept is risky in that it has no formal structure or set agenda. All the ECAP communities around the table agreed that it is those types of informal engagements that allow fresh ideas, connections and projects to emerge organically.” Raby added, “Less structured meeting spaces like 308 provide an alternative to engaging people in our community who simply are not enticed by traditional methods – even if it does leave the planner in all of us asking how and why does this work?”

“North Platte chose some low hanging fruit to target our efforts. Baby steps. It really is amazing how simple something can be yet how much momentum and enthusiasm can be sparked by something so small.” Eickhoff said.

Angela Raby and Clarine Eickhoff are willing to have more conversations regarding this topic with others that are interested. Please contact Raby at the Center for Enterprise at the NPCC North Campus or Eickhoff at the Platte River Mall office to discuss. Randy Saner and Connie Hancock with UNL Extension can give you more information regarding the next steps by contacting them at [rsaner2@unl.edu](mailto:rsaner2@unl.edu) or [chancock1@unl.edu](mailto:chancock1@unl.edu).

