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Minden, Broken Bow, Lincoln Groups to Partner with JISC in Strategic Communications Design Program

OMAHA — The Joslyn Institute for Sustainable Communities (JISC) has announced partnerships with groups in Minden, Broken Bow and Lincoln in its new grant-funded program to help foster and facilitate targeted communication strategies and deliberative, democratic decision-making surrounding specific issues in which each community is now involved. The two-year program, funded by the Nebraska Environmental Trust, is headed by Dr. Jay Leighter, Associate Professor of Communication Studies at Creighton University and a member of the JISC board of directors.

“Our inquiry is entirely collaborative,” said Leighter. “It is based on these local leaders’ desire to investigate their typical communications processes—everyday interactions between citizens and their city government, for example—and to how communications strategies can lead to both improved communications and more sustainable conditions and outcomes.”

After a series of discussions about the aims of the project with leaders and stakeholders across the state, these three communities agreed to join JISC as collaborators in the project. The three communities—Minden, Broken Bow, and Lincoln—have distinct geographical and demographic differences, with different sets of issues and with varying capacities in place to address such issues.

“Because the challenges we will be addressing in each community are different,” said Leighter, “we want to be able to understand and evaluate the local communication. We hope by doing so, we will be able to develop new communication strategies that will have an impact on sustainability outcomes. What we want is innovative practices that drastically improve decision-making capacity on sustainability issues in a given community.”

In Minden, JISC will work with the City of Minden and City Administrator and Finance Director Matthew Cedarburg to address citizen concerns about high electric utility rates. This recurring issue is an opportunity for communication strategy facilitation, according to Leighter. How residents understand the concept of energy has bearing on how receptive they are to accessing the programs that may benefit them most.

JISC's project is also attempting to connect with ongoing sustainability efforts in the region. Minden is already a participant community in a Nebraska City/Council Management Association (NCMA) project seeking funding to assess opportunities for low-energy housing. If funded, the results of Joslyn Institute's partnership will give Minden a jumpstart on projects such as the one led by the NCMA.

In Broken Bow, JISC, in partnership with WasteCap Nebraska, will work with Broken Bow's Green Coalition as it works to build support for Zero Waste in the community. What does the community regard as waste and how can its residents be persuaded to begin to understand waste as a resource? The goal of the partnership with WasteCap Nebraska is to facilitate community-wide education on waste streams and, potentially, begin to implement long-term waste reduction plans. If successful, this program also has the possibility of being utilized in other Nebraska communities.

Lincoln already has a robust, priority- and outcome-based budgeting process, Leighter said. Six years ago, the City of Lincoln began a long-term commitment to move toward an outcome-based budgeting process. The 2013 Taking Charge Budget final report, which had input of citizens, identifies and assesses priorities and performance criteria that will provide a basis for the City's biennial budget decisions.

In addition, a 2012 effort to develop Lincoln's first sustainability plan, led by the City's Blue Ribbon Leadership Team, identified a series of sustainability indicators and measurable targets, many of which complement outcomes sought in the Taking Charge budget process. In developing the sustainability indicators and targets, the team and Milo Mumgaard, Senior Policy Aide for Sustainability for Mayor Chris Beutler's office, were influenced by JISC's SustainometricsSM and EcoSTEP[®] methodologies for design and planning in sustainable ways.

"Mumgaard and Mayor Beutler have been leaders in sustainability and facilitating community participation," Leighter said. "We hope to build on their success of citizen engagement and help design a way for citizens to have more say in how sustainability indicators are reflected in the city's budget."

The Rural Futures Institute (RFI) at University of Nebraska–Lincoln (UNL) is working with JISC in the strategic communications program in Minden and Broken Bow. Dr. Randolph Cantrell, Extension Professor, is spearheading the effort for RFI. His experience in working in and with communities throughout Nebraska has provided strong insights into the varied issues faced by rural and urban populations, geographic and demographic differences, and also what common threads and interconnections exist among them.

"Sustainability issues are found in both large urban and smaller rural communities," said Cantrell. "However, the communication that occurs around those issues is likely to be very different for two reasons.

"First, while urban centers such as Lincoln are likely to have administrative departments committed to an environmental or other sustainability issue, rural places are not," he explained. "In rural places, those communications are

much more likely to fall to an individual or group—often volunteer—with limited resources in time and expertise to commit to the task.

“Second,” he continued, “while communication regarding sustainability issues in an urban setting most often come from the work of more or less anonymous individuals, communications in rural places are likely to be associated with individuals for whom biographical information is readily available. In rural places, the biography of an individual can have a dramatic effect upon the way in which communications are viewed.”

Leigher agreed, saying, “Each problem/opportunity in the quest for sustainability is a local matter and thus requires a distinctive understanding of what will work in a particular place at a particular time.” He anticipates the program will result in innovative and robust best practices that may help to build capacity for deliberative, democratic communication that increases understanding and enhances positive community attitudes in towns and cities across Nebraska. That, he said, would go a long way in determining how communications influence sustainability.

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Dr. Leigher and Dr. Cantrell are available for interviews. Please contact Katie Torpy, Cecil Steward or Diane Wanek with questions or to arrange an interview.