# Looking for Answers

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A year ago, we promised that Pathways would offer stimulating discussion about some of the most stubborn social problems facing San Angelo and the Concho Valley. Since then we shared core facts and viewpoints on issues like child poverty, child abuse, grandparents raising grandchildren, health care, and immigration.

Recent columns focused on two out of five different community-indexing projects that we produce at ASU's Community Development Initiatives (CDI). Pathways for June reported results of the Women's Index for the Concho Valley and July's article spotlighted findings from the San Angelo Index of Elders. The latest results for all five CDI index projects are available for downloading at http://www.angelo.edu/dept/cdi/projects.php.

The CDI indexing projects track more than 100 key factors about the development of the local community and its quality of life. We report some of these key data points in Pathways and provide all results to the public to help inform discussions and processes working to improve the community.

Of course, not all community members see the value of tracking statistical information on local development and quality of life. In July when we reported the gaping differences the San Angelo Index of Elders reveals in the lives of seniors, for example, one reader snapped back: "Is this news - Santa Rita is a wealthy neighborhood and Blackshear is a poor neighborhood? What a waste of time and resources."

Others tell us the index numbers help take the pulse of the community and some of the important changes occurring within it. Many use the results in some of the data-driven decisions that guide their organizations and services in the community.

These divergent reactions to the simple act of reporting data about the local community tell us that we need to do much work to advance our original ambition to introduce ways to help move toward solutions to the tenacious issues we write about in the column. Indeed, readers have noted many times that Pathways provides insightful and powerful sketches of problems, but they say it is short on solutions.

Each of us is familiar with the reactions this creates. Many university students leave classes with perhaps more than they want to know about social problems, but also with deep frustration at not having learned a surefire solution. Still, neither students nor the readers of Pathways could actually be satisfied with our preferred solutions to deeply challenging problems like the fact that the risk of violent crime in the Blackshear-Downtown section of the city is about 22 times greater than in the Bentwood-Nasworthy area.

We also doubt that readers could be overly impressed with our particular way of solving the complex problems and risks related to the fact that some 70 percent of housing in the Reagan neighborhood is 50 years or more in age. Or, that about one of every two households in the Rio Vista area has housing costs that burden more than 30 percent of the household income.

We think our inclination alone, no matter how elegantly it might be argued, would contribute very little to improving a situation like the condition in Lake View where per capita income grew by only 12 percent over the last decade and the number of children living in poverty-level households increased by 22 percent.

These and many other challenges to progress in the community deserve more than advocacy declarations using rhetoric to push a one-sided solution over other possibilities. Indeed, polarized debate locking opposing sides into combat without end has become fashionable in politics. It can be exciting, dramatic, and entertaining at times. It becomes tiresome, however, when such debate fails repeatedly to solve problems.

The essential reason divided politics fails is that communities are unable to move meaningfully to solve complex issues without mobilizing the good spirits of the people. Only under this condition will citizens "own" community problems in a way that views poverty, public health, education, violence and abuse, a stagnant local economy, or any of countless other conditions as shared challenges. The drool of one-sided political rhetoric makes it too easy to see every community problem as someone else's issue, and civil discourse that is needed to support community initiatives is replaced with offensive scornful hissing.

In the absence of the crucial requirement for a sense of ownership and shared challenge by citizens, communities spend huge sums of money, create numerous agencies and organizations to specialize in various issues, and find that progress is fleeting at best. That is a key reason why, when possible, Pathways spotlights contributions of community-based coalitions like the Retired Senior Volunteer Program, the Hunger Initiative, the West Texas Organizing Strategy, the Chamber of Commerce, or the CARES Drug Free Communities Coalition.

These are some of the groups that thrive on citizen engagement, recognizing that solutions to complex problems require an array of organizations representing businesses, churches, government, nonprofit agencies, and schools to reach out to those willing to share challenges and resources.

These community-based groups know that solving our most serious problems demands institutions and agencies that stretch past their specialized concerns to participate in ways that multiply capacities for action on community needs and interests.

We know it too! Moreover, by sharing Pathways to Progress, we ask you to join in!