WHERE IS YOUR COMMUNITY?

By Rich Harwood*

Sit back for just a moment and imagine yourself traveling throughout America, making your way from one community to the next, listening intently to the people you meet and watching carefully their efforts to rejuvenate their communities, grow them and expand them.

As you crisscross the nation, you will undoubtedly find different communities pursuing different paths — some announcing a so-called visioning exercise, others launching new downtown development plans or maybe a riverfront mall, and still others promoting a kind of civic boosterism, claiming that renewal “is here” on bus signs and from banners hanging from the street lights, long before such signs of life even genuinely appear.

Some of these initiatives will spark something important within a community. But too often you will hear people say that such initiatives came to town with great fanfare and left without leaving a lasting legacy. They will say that far too many efforts undertaken in the name of moving their community forward simply do not add up to anything meaningful. And they often will lament the fact that the direction and feel of the community remains the same—despite, or in spite of, the actions—and that people are losing faith and hope.

The Harwood Institute’s work in communities reveals that there are stages of a community’s life and that each stage has deep implications for understanding your community and what it means for moving forward. These stages echo the development of all living things, such as a person or a plant or an ecosystem.

Only if you know and understand the stage in which your community rests, will you be better able to figure out what kinds of approaches, strategies and timing best fit for seeking to move your community forward. Each stage brings its own set of challenges and opportunities. A community can accelerate its movement through the stages, but it cannot violate, or simply pass over, the hard work that needs to be done.

The problem in many communities is that too often we do not think about stages of community life, or are even aware of them, much less approach them strategically in terms of what they mean for our actions.

* This piece was excerpted from the Introduction to “Community Rhythms: Five Stages of Community Life,” a Harwood Framework Report.