

January 24th column/Backroads

By Kim McCully-Mobley

Aurora has been involved with the GRO (Growth in the Rural Ozarks program) through the Community Foundation of the Ozarks for almost five years.

The group was in place before that and was known as an economic development group formed by Scott Pettit, a local attorney and avid Aurora supporter.

Recently, Aurora made the transition to a sort of “graduate” position—where community GRO members will still communicate with the GRO network and offer assistance and mentoring to a variety of the other GRO communities in the state.

Shannon Walker will continue working the Speaker Series and Theresa Pettit, a GRO member and a city council member, has talked about helping to host a quarter workshop or community seminar. Jack Muench, president of First Independent Bank, will keep working to support local businesses and new business interests through Create Here.

Other GRO towns right now include such communities as Buffalo, Hermann and Eldon. Applications are being accepted for the 2022 class.

But instead of just working the monthly reporting rounds and providing updates to GRO consultants, the core group plans to revamp its mission and vision to include more folks, take advantage of some internship opportunities and volunteers and work (smarter/not necessarily harder) to springboard off the momentum already in place with the city and school and the various groups involved here.

The focus will be for leaders to take ownership of their own path as they use the resources and tools given to them through the adept leadership and work of John Paul Lee, Michele Parbury and Scott Pettit—All leaders who have helped us develop credibility and social equity with the projects we love.

Initially, Aurora was a runner-up for one of the GRO community slots in southwest Missouri in 2016, but was soon brought into the fold due to meeting so much of the GRO criteria and being eager to jump in and do the work.

Michele Parbury and I helped write that first grant, with some help from the city. Our initial disappointment at being a bridesmaid didn't last long as we were soon brought into the fold as a new bride.

Brian Fogle is the president of the Community Foundation of the Ozarks and is an Aurora graduate. The local foundation affiliate was active and it seemed the ingredients for the perfect recipe were already in place. The passion was there. The resources were in place. We collected some donations. We wanted to be a part of this vital platform.

The mission for Aurora has been an easy one. A group of core community leaders and their supporters have focused on economic development, school and community partnerships, service, history, culture and quality of life.

The vision has a little more movement. GRO leaders work to consistently provide ways to enhance, showcase and communicate Aurora as the best place to live, work, play and grow in southwest Missouri.

We have written a code of conduct for school and community leaders. We have brought students into the dialogue to help grow the next generation of leaders. We have made shirts and signs. We came up with a mantra: Aurora—One Town. One Team. One Heartbeat.

December of 2021 found Aurora in a place to make the next transition after several months of dialogue pondering the next step. Despite the woes of the ongoing pandemic, citizens here have continually found ways to be successful and resourceful in the Summit City of the Ozarks.

The January 21st meeting was held at Aurora City Hall. Those on hand included Aurora City Manager Jon Holmes, GRO Organizer Michele Parbury, Chamber Director Shannon Walker, Traci Houchin, Jack Muench, Scott Pettit, John Paul Lee, Marsha Egan, Hannah Rader, Tara Robbins, April Sandefer, Tonyha Sumners and myself.

The various leaders went around the room to give updates on Project RISE, Aurora Beautification, Create Here, the City of Aurora, Aurora High School Leadership and Youth Empowerment and the Houn' Dawg Alumni Center, just to name a few.

More importantly, the group started with a blank slate as they talked about where they have all been and began to ponder the next steps in where we are going.

Marsha Egan talked about how everyone there was a "doer."

The next step will be to list all of the team members and their areas of expertise so that new volunteers can decide where their skills and assets best fit the puzzle.

We noted that the GRO Facebook pages and its partners (like Project RISE) had reached close to 1,000 people in January with a minimum number of posts, likes and shares.

The table talk consisted of hopes that the pandemic dies down and more service opportunities, work days and hands-on tasks can be accomplished through partnerships, shared resources, problem-solving and networking.

The group also talked about ways to meaningfully support one another in a streamlined effort. Discussion was also held to continue to look for ways to bring more voices, more hands and more brains into the fold.

Aurora will continue to use the GRO label as the transition to working the program takes on a new look and additional leadership and volunteer opportunities are sought.

Communication, transparency, accountability and vision will continue to be cornerstones for Aurora's GRO efforts. The group agreed the initial leg of the GRO journey had been a beneficial one. Most are anxious to see where the second leg will take them.

The ideas, energy, creativity and humor filled the upstairs council chambers on a chilly Friday morning. My role has been one of community outreach and marketing. I am honored to be included in this journey. I hope you will join us as we fine-tune our map for this next transition.

The next GRO meeting will be held at 8:30 a.m. Friday, February 18th, on the third floor of Aurora City Hall.

We are truly: **One Town. One Team. One Heartbeat.**