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BATTLE LAKE JOINS WITH 2 OTTER TAIL CITIES FOR BLANDIN RETREAT

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By Heather Rule

Twenty-four representatives from three cities – Battle Lake, Henning and Ottertail – met for a retreat in Grand Rapids where they trained to become better leaders who can build healthy communities. The Blandin Community Leadership Program (BCLP), is provided by the Blandin Foundation, a private foundation based in Grand Rapids whose mission is to be a trusted partner to strengthen rural Minnesota communities.

The program consists of a series with the retreat and two workshops. The group completed the retreat successfully in March 2020 right before COVID-19. The follow-up workshops will be rescheduled.

The core principals of BCLP are threefold: building relationships, developing good messaging and effectively mobilizing or engaging the community. Casey Ward, a nursing home administrator from Battle Lake, attended the retreat and said that building relationships with others in neighboring communities was one of the best parts.

"I don't think anybody had the relationships going into it that they had coming out of it," Ward said.

It's all about relationships, he added. That way you can identify the right people to work together and serve as resources.

"So I think that was the most important part," Ward said.

The retreat also focused on helping people better understand themselves and identify the skills needed to get work done in their communities. Ward liked the way Blandin provides a very specific structure for identifying, and subsequently doing something about, community issues. That includes work to bring a community together to overcome whatever the particular issue might be.

Participants were taught how to frame a problem and then have the community, or a group of people, put their heads together to come up with a solution. Ward could see the learned skills get put to use in the workplace or other facets of life.

The program was full of education that has broad applications for everyone, according to Ward, because anyone can "really grab onto it" and get something out of the retreat that helps improve and build a community.

Everybody left that retreat with what Ward called a "renewed sense of hope and optimism for what the future could hold," as well as new energy for the tri-city relationship. The

retreat helped create significant relationships among the participants, Ward said.

“I think that is a good starting point, especially for the communities to work together to get something done,” Ward said.

The retreat was a mix of classroom time with speakers and then pairing that with various activities used to reinforce those educational pieces. They put the learned skills into practice throughout the week.

By the end of the week, participants put all the new skills together for a shared vision for success. Ward has had his share of leadership training, but what made Blandin unique is that it focused “primarily on community leadership” and making the community better.

“I think the group is optimistic and ready to make some things happen,” Ward said.

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