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Community Conversation Series to serve as forum on deep topics

By NANCY MADSEN nmadsen@stpeterherald.com

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Skinner



Conners

Facilitated conversations will give local residents the chance to talk and think through some sweeping issues.

A series of Community Conversations begin Sept. 13. Each one will be at 6:30-8 p.m. at the St. Peter High School commons, 2121 Broadway Ave. The cost is \$3 and registration is through Community & Family Education.

The topics for the next three months are: living soil on Sept. 13, food security on Oct. 9 and mental health and well-being on Nov. 13.

"Community Education embraces the belief that everyone in the community has a right and a responsibility to be involved in determining community needs, identifying community resources, and then linking those needs and resources to improve their community," Community and Family Education Director Tami Skinner said in an email. "The goal is to provide opportunities for local citizens to become active partners in addressing education and community concerns, so this series really aligns with our mission."

Skinner worked with the city Department of Recreation and Leisure Services and Senior Center in their joint Learning is ForEver program. The facilitators will be students in the Public Deliberation and Dialogue Program from Gustavus Adolphus College.

Skinner, former Recreation and Leisure Services Director Jane Timmerman and Senior Center Coordinator Gabriela Roemhildt chose the topics from available ones through the program.

Communication Studies professor Pamela Connors said her students developed the framework for the guided conversations. There are other topics available through the Kettering Foundation's National Issues Forum, whose methods Connors' students followed.

"It's exciting," Conners said. "This is the first time to do this in St. Peter."

The students are trained facilitators, who will "invite different perspectives, listen to them and grapple with them."

"It's structured so the small group discussions don't meander," Conners said. "The groups talk through different options and the advantages and disadvantages of each of the options. No option is ever perfect."

The groups will likely find something that's shared, such as values, even if they can't agree on the best solution. Conners said there is no prescribed outcome, such as agreement on an option or next steps.

"There is no obligation before or after," she said. "There's not a particular action that the deliberation prescribes."

The soil conversation will occur before the Nobel Conference on the same topic in October. It draws on "real and present concerns in the community," Conners said.

Food security seems somewhat related; Conners said that draws on a sense that St. Peter cares about where food comes from and ensuring all have sufficient access to food.

"Participants in this discussion will examine ongoing issues and actions to help ensure that people get the food that they need," Skinner said.

Finally, mental health and well-being are timely, headed into cold months, Conners said.

Community members will talk about what schools do and what seniors can do to help stay healthy and involved, she said.

The fall series will likely not be the end. Conners and the LIFE program managers are talking about more topics for the winter and spring.

“We are looking for topics that come from the community itself,” Conners said.

Reach Associate Editor Nancy Madsen at 507-931-8568 or follow her on Twitter.com @SPHnancy.

Nancy Madsen

Nancy Madsen has written for newspapers in Watertown, N.Y., and Mankato, as well as for PolitiFact Virginia at the Richmond Times-Dispatch in Richmond, Va. Nancy is a graduate of Wheaton College in Wheaton, Ill., and Syracuse University in Syracuse, N.Y.