

DeSoto County *Coming Together*

Unleashing the
Community's Potential



PREPARED BY THE HARWOOD
INSTITUTE FOR PUBLIC
INNOVATION IN PARTNERSHIP
WITH THE PATTERSON
FOUNDATION

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The Harwood Institute for Public Innovation is a nonprofit, nonpartisan organization that equips people, organizations, communities, and networks with the tools to bridge divides, build capacity, and tackle shared challenges. The Harwood Institute's work is rooted in a philosophy of Civic Faith and the practice of Turning Outward. Founded in 1988, the Institute's approach has spread to all 50 states across the U.S. and 40 countries around the world.



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The Patterson Foundation strengthens the efforts of people, organizations, and communities by focusing on issues that address common aspirations, foster wide participation, and encourage learning and sharing. Strong communities work together to achieve shared aspirations and can even thrive in the face of adversity. Support through the thoughtful use of assets takes time, intention and a collaborative philosophy.

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Scan for more information about the initiative
in DeSoto County.



Letter from The Patterson Foundation

As we reflect on the essence of DeSoto County—a unique, peaceful, and caring community—it is clear that both long-time residents and newcomers cherish the small-town atmosphere, especially in times of adversity. However, like many communities, DeSoto County faces challenges that push us all to consider its future direction and the roles that we will play in creating that future.

At The Patterson Foundation, our mission is clear: to strengthen the efforts of people, organizations, and communities by focusing on issues that address common aspirations, foster wide participation, and encourage learning and sharing. We believe in the power of collective action to bring about positive change, and we are dedicated to supporting efforts that strengthen community bonds and uplift common goals.

This mission resonates deeply with the aspirations of DeSoto County. We recognize the potential within this community to confront current difficulties and cultivate a shared vision for the future where everyone's input is valued. Every person has a part to play in creating positive change.

The DeSoto County Ahead Initiative embodies this vision. It is not merely a project but a commitment to fostering community resilience, civic culture, and

vibrancy for all. This initiative builds upon the rich history and spirit of DeSoto County, aiming to harness residents' collective knowledge and energy. In particular, this report is meant to illuminate the county's strengths and key issues that matter to people to catalyze action that charts a course toward sustainable progress.

As we embark on this journey together, let us draw strength from the experiences and perspectives of each resident. This initiative with The Harwood Institute is an opportunity to amplify community voices, nurture local leadership, and co-create solutions that reflect our collective aspirations. Let us commit ourselves to meaningful dialogue, bold action, and unwavering support for one another. Together, we can unleash DeSoto County's potential.

With appreciation,



Debra M. Jacobs

President/CEO, The Patterson Foundation



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Preface

DeSoto County is a peaceful, unique, and caring community. People love the small-town feel and step up to care for each other, especially in times of crisis. But the area is dealing with an array of challenges and is facing a fundamental choice: Will the community remain stifled and separated, or will it come together and tap its shared capacity to build a brighter future?

Communities can shape their own futures. Yet not all communities work together to engage people, address hard issues, and tackle shared challenges. They don't always come together to create a greater sense of shared purpose. Even though conversations and actions related to various challenges take place, they may not address the issues that truly matter to people.

When you listen to the voices of DeSoto County, what becomes clear is that people believe the community can do better. They want to figure out how to move forward by tackling shared challenges together. In a time of growing national division, this community yearns to overcome its separation to shape a brighter future. This report doesn't prescribe specific solutions to meet particular challenges; instead, it seeks to illuminate a path forward that enables people across the community to bridge divides, generate shared purpose, and discover ways to move forward together.

During my more than 35 years of doing this work, I have seen what it takes for communities to move forward. Enough people must make the intentional choice to step forward, Turn Outward toward one another, and set in motion meaningful actions that spread throughout a community like a chain reaction. New initiatives and programs may be necessary, but they are not sufficient. They cannot be our sole focus. In fact, how we do the work is as important as what we do. DeSoto County must forge stronger relationships, networks, and norms for working together—a stronger *civic foundation*—upon which positive actions can take root, grow, and spread over time.

Our country needs more examples of communities coming together to forge a common future, especially amid people's real differences. To achieve this, people must show up, see and hear each other, and work together to shape the future.

Here in DeSoto County, the opportunity is ripe to build on the good while creating new ways to move forward together.



Richard C. Harwood

President and Founder, The Harwood
Institute for Public Innovation

A Guide to this Report

The longstanding partnership between The Patterson Foundation and The Harwood Institute for Public Innovation, formed in 2012, has focused on strengthening the civic culture of communities in The Patterson Foundation's four-county region. In 2023, discussions began about how to further strengthen DeSoto County. As a down payment on this long-term effort, The Patterson Foundation asked the Institute to help them learn more about the community by identifying strengths to build on and things to address moving forward. This report, *DeSoto County Coming Together*, presents what we found. This report is only the beginning. Later in 2024, the Institute will partner with The Patterson Foundation to hold a Public Innovators Lab for DeSoto leaders and residents who wish to develop new ways to work together on issues that really matter to people.

This report is not intended to be a scorecard on the community; nor does it prescribe specific solutions for moving forward. Instead, it is intended for the community to better understand how people across the county see and experience life in DeSoto County, and to offer key areas for strengthening the civic culture so the *community* can come together to determine how best to move forward.

To introduce this work, in January 2024, The Harwood Institute held 10 roundtables with groups of leaders, along with a public keynote event. Then, over a six-month period, The Harwood Institute held a series of 24 conversations with residents across DeSoto County. Each conversation was held with cross-sections of an average of 12 people. We held three conversations with high school students, three conversations in Spanish, and one conversation in Haitian Creole. Conversations took place with citizens from across DeSoto County, including in Arcadia, Southwest Arcadia, Nocatee, Pine Level, Brownville, Hull, Fort Ogden, and Lake Suzy.

The Harwood Institute also conducted 36 in-depth interviews with community leaders, which included elected officials and leaders from nonprofits, neighborhoods, education, religious institutions, healthcare, business, and other areas. There is one additional point to be made about how the report was done: Each individual quote was selected only if it represented larger patterns found in the research. The selected quotes come from across all of The Harwood Institute's interviews and conversations.

Here are the sections of the report that follow:

Introduction

This section provides an overview of the report and outlines four main themes that emerged from the conversations and interviews in DeSoto County.

Our Voices

In this section, you will hear people in DeSoto County describe how they see and experience the community alongside their hopes and concerns about the future.

DeSoto County's Public Capital

This section is a snapshot and analysis of the fundamental structures, networks, and norms of DeSoto County through the lens of The Harwood Institute's Public Capital Framework, which has been developed through the Institute's on-the-ground work in communities in all 50 US states. DeSoto County's Public Capital snapshot reflects what it takes for the community to work together effectively.

Building the Community's Civic Strength

This section offers key recommendations for DeSoto County to invest in and develop its civic capacities alongside a frame for how to think about creating sustainable change.



Introduction

DeSoto County is home to resilient people. Neighbors step up to take care of each other, especially in times of crisis. People love the area's unique, rural character. The community is diverse, faith-based, and built on deep relationships.

Yet many people struggle day-to-day just trying to survive. And the community as a whole struggles to come together to forge a shared path forward. Amid pressing challenges, the community can feel stuck.

People across DeSoto want to find ways to move forward, but they face fundamental questions, such as: How does a community that feels stuck gain a sense of possibility that progress is possible? How can people move from focusing on individual survival to coming together to create more hope? How does a community with limited resources unleash its full potential?

Today, DeSoto County faces a fundamental choice: Will the community remain stifled and separated, or will it come together and tap its shared capacity to build a brighter future?

Where the Community Stands

When listening to the voices of residents and leaders, it is clear that people cherish DeSoto County's small-town spirit. People forge close-knit relationships with those closest to them.

But these close-knit pockets—and the reality of people operating in survival mode—have led to separation between different groups and parts of the county. Community efforts tend to be fragmented. Outside of crises, the community does not have a shared purpose. Yet the pressing challenges facing the area today demand a shared response. They cannot be tackled by one

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DeSoto County faces a fundamental choice: Will the community remain stifled and separated, or will it come together and tap its shared capacity to build a brighter future?

individual, entity, group, or organization alone. For DeSoto County to unleash its potential, more people and groups must get beyond their close-knit circles and work together.

Our interviews with leaders and conversations with residents, educators, and students throughout the county revealed four overarching themes, each of which needs the community's concerted attention and action. The community needs to:

- **Come together.** People across DeSoto County say people are engaged in close-knit groups, but often remain separate from the larger community. Leaders and pockets of residents tend to operate in their own orbits, and people largely remain separate based on geography, race, or ethnicity. People say the community must come together in new ways to deepen shared responsibility and tackle shared challenges.
- **Focus on what matters to people.** Residents and leaders consistently raised a collection of issues throughout our conversations. They include roads and infrastructure, housing, education, limited opportunities for youth, and missing communication. While action has been taken in some of these areas, people say more must be done

to fundamentally address these challenges. People want what matters to them in their daily lives to be the focus of shared action in the community.

- **Build momentum.** The community has key ingredients to build on, including deep relationships, an ethic of helping each other, a foundation of faith, and strong networks. Furthermore, DeSoto County is seeing increased collaboration after Hurricane Ian and in some new initiatives. But having key ingredients is not the same as building momentum. More of the community must get in greater motion to build together and create a new trajectory of hope.



- **Grow civic capacities.** Throughout this report, it is evident that DeSoto County must strengthen its civic capacities. This includes developing a greater number of leaders and more leaders who are turned outward toward the community; more authentic conversations that enable the community to work through hard issues; more networks that function in inclusive and connected ways; and more organizations and groups that focus on catalyzing and supporting shared action. Growing the community's civic capacities is essential to making progress moving forward.

In one of the interviews that informed this report, a leader said, “DeSoto County is very underdeveloped, but there’s so much potential.” Unleashing this potential is the opportunity before the people of DeSoto County.

Which Path Will We Take?

This report illuminates that residents and leaders in DeSoto County want to find a way to move forward together. It won’t be easy, but it is possible. One leader put it this way: “Sometimes change doesn’t happen because it’s hard to go from good to great. But if you’re in a challenging situation, you can marshal resources and make serious improvements happen. So I see that as an opportunity.”

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More of the community must get in greater motion to build together and create a new trajectory of hope.

Real, concerted action is needed to take this opportunity and forge a new path moving forward. It will require engaging with one another, making more room for each other, and taking shared action. If the community wants to take a more hopeful path, it must consider these questions:

- How can the community get in motion on areas that are ripe for action and progress?
- How can the community generate a stronger sense of momentum on issues that matter to people?
- How can it ensure that all people are included and that people do not get left out or left behind?
- What will it take to strengthen the civic capacities of the community and to catalyze and support more progress?
- How can the community seize opportunities to proactively manage change and growth?



There is no clear-cut way forward. Instead, there are choices and trade-offs to be made. People are calling to engage in that work, together.

Moving Forward, Together

Over the past 35 years, The Harwood Institute has learned that people must face reality if they are to create something different.

And yet, too often, those seeking positive change reflexively embrace old habits. We choose a path of comprehensive, highly-coordinated plans, where we attempt to bring as many people and groups together as possible. But such efforts often stall out, or fail outright, due to the unwillingness or plain inability of so many groups to work together. What's more, too many community efforts do

not truly know, or choose to ignore, what the community actually wants. We gravitate toward a one-size-fits-all approach, often imported from a different community with a different history and needs. Solutions are imposed upon communities, leaving change undelivered and people feeling that they've lost control over their own lives and futures. There is a failure to understand and account for the community's context.

At the root of such approaches is an assumption that communities need to be "fixed"—as if people and communities are seeking to have someone fix them. As if the persistent challenges reflected in this report can somehow be easily solved.

Communities move forward and thrive by *growing themselves*. They unleash a chain reaction that begins with single steps and expands over time. Such actions, when they are strategic, address the community's fault lines and needs and honor people's shared aspirations. They are designed with the explicit intention to strengthen the community's civic culture: the relationships, norms, leaders, organizations, and networks that enable a community to work. Over time, these expanding steps strengthen the community's civic confidence and belief in itself. Indeed, as communities grow themselves, a sense of possibility and hope grows, too.

Such hope is not based on wishful thinking; nor is it a false hope, made up of unrealistic expectations or utopian visions. What is needed is *authentic* hope—a hope built upon realistic promises and concrete actions taken and emerging over time.

The time is now for DeSoto County to come together to unleash its potential. ■

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The time is now for DeSoto County to come together to unleash its potential.





Our Voices

Listen to the voices of people who make DeSoto County their home. Residents express great affection for the community, its neighborliness, and its special qualities. As you listen to these voices, you can also sense a desire for the community to come together to work through its challenges so that people can thrive, not just survive. What follows is a series of themes that emerged from our conversations with residents and leaders from across DeSoto County. Keep in mind that each individual quote was selected only if it represented larger patterns found across the conversations.

A Peaceful, Unique, and Caring Community

People across DeSoto County describe it as a “small, peaceful place.” Arcadia, the county seat, is regarded as a tranquil small town with other parts of the county—Nocatee, Fort Ogden, Hull, Lake Suzy, Brownville, and Pine Level—described as “quiet.” The community “has a great deal of respect for its history” and deeply appreciates the area’s natural beauty. The Peace River, characterized by one resident as “one of the most beautiful rivers in the state of Florida,” flows through part of the county, which is also home to numerous cattle farms and citrus groves.

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“Everybody knows who their neighbors are, and they take care of each other.”

“There are churches on every corner. We’re a very church-based community,” explained a resident. The community takes pride in its “hospital, a college, a nice library, the Turner Center for community events, and many organizations that help,” said another. Some residents cherish Arcadia’s historic downtown district, which has been “revitalized in recent years” and features the renowned Heard Opera House alongside “antique stores, boutiques, restaurants, and bars.” Another part of the community’s character is “The Granddaddy of ‘Em All”—the Arcadia All-Florida Championship Rodeo that draws numerous DeSoto County residents and visitors to the community.

DeSoto has “incredibly wide demographics,” including generational families, immigrants, transplants, and many retirees. The community has sizable White, Hispanic, and African American populations, plus a small

Haitian and Jamaican presence. Amid this diversity, people share common values of family and faith. Pockets of the community are “close-knit,” with people bonded by shared lived experiences or “generational relationships and family connectivity.” Neighbors show up for each other, especially during crises like Hurricane Charley in 2004 and Hurricane Ian in 2022. After Ian, “we all went from yard to yard, house to house, taking care of one another,” shared a resident. Across the community, “everybody knows who their neighbors are, and they take care of each other,” said a resident.

A Separated and Segregated Community

DeSoto County is made up of “many communities that are very different,” which tend to remain separate. For example, Arcadia residents rarely connect with those “further out.” Many residents from outside of Arcadia report feeling “really isolated from the rest of the county.” One resident shared, “I couldn’t tell you how people from other parts of the county feel.” Even within Arcadia, separation persists, in part due to “cultural barriers.” A resident said, “While there is some coming together, there is significant separation along ethnic and racial lines.” People across the county note the prevalence of “distinct population groups.” A Black resident from Southwest Arcadia said,

“While there is some coming together, there is significant separation along ethnic and racial lines.”

“They really don’t care what’s going on over here. They just look at it as ‘the Black section.’ They’re not going to come across.”

Separation is often talked about in the context of the area’s historical segregation. “I remember when downtown was segregated. You would never see Whites and Blacks intermingling,” said a resident. Another said, “Segregation hasn’t changed for years. Where certain groups live has



not changed.” Many residents noted that segregation is most apparent on Sundays. In the words of one resident, “Hispanics go to the Hispanic churches, Blacks attend the Black churches, Whites go to theirs.” One leader did note recent improvements on this front, saying, “I don’t think we’re as segregated anymore. We’ve made some progress in that area and we see diversity in the same spaces where that might not have happened before.” Still, the prevailing attitude is, “Communities tend to stay within their communities.”

The community’s separation also cuts across generational lines. “We have retirees and older people, and we have young families with children,” said a resident. Even just within the older generation, another resident noted, “We have a lot of snowbirds. There’s a disconnect between people who live here full-time and part-time.” Further separation exists between leaders and residents, as leaders tend to operate in separate orbits. “Our leaders are not making themselves present and available to us,” said one resident. Meanwhile, leaders say residents are focused on their own lives and stay away from dealing with larger community issues. One said, “Our community looks at the leaders as the ones that are supposed to make things happen, as opposed to, ‘This is all of our community and we should all be making things happen.’”

Survival Mode

Even when residents are not dealing with the aftermath of a natural disaster, many are stuck in survival mode. DeSoto County has one of the highest poverty rates in the state of Florida. Many people, including this resident, report “barely making rent and putting food on the table, and not getting benefits.”

Many people leave the county for work in order to survive. One resident said, “My son is living in Sarasota; that’s the only place he could find some decent money.” A resident who now works outside of the county said, “There wasn’t a decent paying job here in DeSoto that allowed me to support myself.” Another shared, “When I did get jobs in Arcadia, I was working three jobs. I got two to three hours of sleep just to survive.”

Those in our conversations who have steady jobs still said providing for their families is a major challenge. A high school student explained what life is like for their family: “We’re in the middle

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Even when residents are not dealing with the aftermath of a natural disaster, many are stuck in survival mode.



class. My mom makes too much to do government housing, but we don't make enough to be able to pay for all of our bills and for our food. We have to balance having nutritional meals that month or paying the bills."

Beyond individuals and families, DeSoto County as a whole is in survival mode due to limited financial resources. One resident said, "We need the industry to raise the tax base." People say the area's economic struggles result in underinvestment in areas like education and infrastructure—a pattern that many see as an inescapable cycle. A long-time resident said, "I have been here 40 years, and I've seen the same problems: wastewater, infrastructure, our children leaving, and our low reading scores." DeSoto is in "a tough situation," explained a resident. "I don't envy anybody in charge. If jobs aren't there, then the tax money isn't there, so you have to pick and choose what gets done."

Change and Growth

DeSoto County is experiencing heightened tension around change and growth. A resident reported the two dominant viewpoints by saying, "Half wants growth and half wants to stay exactly the same." Those who are pro-growth, like this leader, believe, "The development of our community can help us move forward positively." One resident said, "If you don't have any growth, the town will die," while another said growth is key to ensuring "enough opportunity for young people." Meanwhile, some people mention a fear of "losing our small-town feel." Others worry about how growth will change the

“Half wants growth and half wants to stay exactly the same.”

county's physical landscape. "Land is disappearing quickly," a resident said. A high school student explained, "Some people don't like DeSoto starting to expand because they think it takes away from the natural beauty."

In previous decades, the community experienced "the closure of many businesses in Arcadia" and the loss of major employers like a large manufacturing facility and mental health institution. The recent decline in agricultural crop yields due to disease has further weakened the job market. "Agriculture has been our mainstay. It's suffering due to the problem with orange groves," said one resident. Another noted, "Everyone is looking for jobs." Still other residents hoped for "companies with higher-wage jobs" or "a major industry" to come into the community.

The Mosaic Company's proposed phosphate mine could bring new jobs to the area, but it too is a source of tension due to environmental concerns. "There are two groups," a resident noted. "One in support of mining and the other that does not support it." In the meantime, some new chain restaurants and retailers are providing growth and new job opportunities. "It was a really big deal to get a Publix here," shared a leader, because now people "don't have to go outside the community for a lot of the things that they need." But seeing

places like Culver's or Wawa pop up led one resident to ask, "How many fast food restaurants do we need?" Besides fast food, few other new businesses are coming to town.

Amid these tensions, people across DeSoto widely express that they want change and growth to be proactively managed. A resident said, "A lot of us want growth to be controlled. We need to not be willy-nilly about things. We need to have a plan and have the infrastructure in place." One leader added, "We need to be very careful about how we grow." Being more proactive means the community must wrestle with the trade-offs of change and growth. "Our motto needs to be, 'Choose the change you want to see,'" offered one resident.



Pressing Issues

Residents and leaders across DeSoto County consistently raised a set of key challenges they believe must be addressed in order for the community to thrive. While people say that action is being taken on many of these, they assert that organizations, leaders, and residents will need to come together in new ways to more effectively tackle the issues that matter most to people.

ROADS AND INFRASTRUCTURE

Roads and traffic consistently came up as an issue that frustrates people in their daily lives. “The infrastructure is just not where it needs to be, and it makes it difficult for people to get around safely and efficiently,” explained a leader. People largely agree that current construction is necessary because “county roads are in desperate need of help.” Yet many want upgrades to



“The infrastructure is just not where it needs to be, and it makes it difficult for people to get around safely and efficiently.”

move more quickly or else they worry traffic is “going to become more of an issue.” One resident lamented, “Traffic is getting so much worse. It shouldn’t take 30 minutes to go like five miles.”

The community’s various infrastructure projects, including replacing water and sewer lines and investing \$30 million in wastewater system upgrades, are also top of mind for people. While these improvements are welcomed, some wonder if it will be “enough to prepare for growth.” A leader expressed doubt, saying, “It’s scheduled to be incremental improvements here, but I don’t know that it’s still going to be enough.”

Others worry new infrastructure may not be hurricane-proof. A resident said that during Hurricane Ian, “one of the big issues was the lack of proper infrastructure” and emphasized the importance of “investing more in our infrastructure to be better prepared for future hurricanes.”



HOUSING

DeSoto County's housing situation is consistently rated as a critical issue by both residents and leaders. Many specifically note the sizable homeless population living in the community. A resident said, "I can take you to four different spots in Arcadia with 40 or 50 people living there." Along with the community's addition of low-income housing complexes, DeSoto County and DeSoto Cares Homeless Services are supporting the construction of a Tiny Town. But many people believe more is needed to fully address problems of homelessness.

Housing is also a problem for middle-class earners. "The new housing is not for teachers, firemen, or nurses," said one resident. For this population, housing affordability is an increasing concern. "The price of houses rose. It's hard to buy a house now," shared another. Even existing homeowners feel new cost pressures. "Insurance is doubling," explained a third resident. "If your insurance is tied to your mortgage, then when your insurance goes up, your mortgage goes up."

MISSING COMMUNICATIONS

"We don't have a great communication mechanism, a news channel, or even a daily newspaper," said a leader, "so it's really hard to communicate." Given the limited options, a resident said, "If we want to publicize an event here, we use The Shopper or Facebook, sometimes email and texts." But even though it is free, "The Shopper is not distributed to local families." Further, "One of the biggest challenges we face is ensuring that everyone has access to reliable internet," according to one leader. "Especially in rural areas, this can be a significant barrier to education and employment opportunities."

The lack of widespread and accessible communication stops people from getting involved in community life. "There are things out there going on, but you don't find out until it's happening or after the fact," said one resident.

“ The lack of widespread and accessible communication stops people from getting involved in community life.

Another attributed low attendance at events at the Turner Center and the Heard Opera House to "a lack of communication of the opportunities happening here every weekend."

Non-English speaking populations are especially affected. A resident said, "I don't know if they're always aware of what's available to them because information in Spanish is limited." The Haitian community reports similar issues with minimal information distributed in Haitian Creole.





EDUCATION

"Our schools are in a bit of a crisis," said a resident. Another added, "Kids lack opportunities that prepare them for college. But on top of that, we're one of the lowest in the state in third-grade reading scores and eighth-grade reading scores."

Many people attribute widespread educational challenges to a teacher shortage paired with low teacher quality. DeSoto County is struggling to attract quality teachers because of "pay and housing issues," explained a resident. Retention is also a big issue as teachers are underpaid and under intense pressure. A high school student explained, "Our teachers that do care about us have been pushed to the limit. Eventually they quit because of the bad behaviors and kids not caring."

Meanwhile, emphasizing low teacher quality, one resident noted, "Kids are being taught by high school graduates and substitutes."

Several leaders say the lack of active parental support for education contributes to teachers' and kids' struggles. "Almost 20% of our student body last year missed 20 days of school or more," shared a leader. Another leader said the school "does not have the parents' buy-in." One teacher reflected on the lack of partnership between parents and teachers, saying, "I have never seen parents come together to talk. On parent night, no one comes to talk to me."

“Our schools are in a bit of a crisis.”

Notwithstanding these real concerns, people are beginning to see a “growing commitment to making educational improvements”—including early-grade-level reading, after-school programming, hands-on learning opportunities, mentorship, and more—spearheaded by various groups and organizations. One resident said, “The biggest common goal that I hear from people is education.” Importantly, people say this must be a community effort rather than something schools must solve alone. Another resident said, “I think it’s all of us getting involved and working together for young people.”

YOUTH: “THERE’S NOTHING HERE FOR US”

Both DeSoto’s youth and adults consistently report a lack of stimulating things for young people to do. A student explained, “There’s not a lot to do here. You want to do anything fun as a kid, you got to go out of town.” A leader echoed, “They do not have parks and rec or a pool to go and swim and do their thing.” Some parents and high school students tout programs through Links2Success, the Boys & Girls Club, and the library. Yet youth still say the community lacks both activities “on the academic side” and “programs that put you in a work setting.”

In addition, youth broadly express that they do not see a future for themselves in the community. One explained, “Kids

“ Kids graduate and we leave because there’s nothing here for us.”

graduate and we leave because there’s nothing here for us.” Another said, “It’s nice to see that we have more stuff, but a gas station and a couple food joints are not enough to say, ‘This is going to be something one day.’ I need to actually see businesses, places to go, and things to do.” Many adults say they know that youth feel dismayed by the lack of a secure future. One explained, “Kids feel like they have no agency and can’t make a difference with the choices they make.”





Potential to be Tapped

Many people across the community express a desire to address shared challenges by tapping into DeSoto's existing strengths. One leader said, "Times of tragedy bring the community together. We need to harness that same focus to tackle other issues proactively." Leaders and residents alike believe the community's "bond" and "willingness to

help each other" provide a foundation to build on. The community came together "through challenges with poverty, COVID, and the hurricane," said a leader. "We are resilient because of the challenges." Another leader said, "Because we've all been through so much together, we see everyone as, 'These are Arcadians and this is DeSoto County.'"



Community leaders and residents also share an aspiration for youth success, which is another area to build upon. People are enthused by potential plans for a new high school, and the Boys & Girls Club and YMCA coming to town recently demonstrated the community's ability to rally around youth. "Seeing people work together to carry the torch, raise the funds, and get community leaders behind it," inspired one leader. Today, the community has an opportunity to forge new pathways for youth. Another leader said, "I want youth to come back here once they finish four-year school and make a big difference." They want to develop a narrative that "Good things can happen in Arcadia."

Beyond youth success, residents implored each other during community conversations to work together in new ways to tackle the community's challenges. "We got to work together rather than complain. Let's see what's going on and make our community better," one resident declared. A leader said, "At the end of the day we all want a community that is safe and thriving and has opportunity for everyone." Importantly, one leader named how success can create a ripple effect over time. They said, "I think more shared successes would help the community. When people see positive outcomes, they are more motivated to get involved and work together." Finally, yet another leader said: "There's so much potential in DeSoto County for it to be great." ■

“There’s so much potential in DeSoto County for it to be great.”



DeSoto County's Public Capital

The Harwood Institute's research and on-the-ground initiatives in communities across the U.S. and elsewhere suggest that for a community to work effectively, it needs a web of fundamental structures, networks, and norms. "Public capital" is what we call this rich, complex system. Nine factors make up The Harwood Institute's definition of public capital, each of which a community can actively develop.

In this section, we offer a close look at DeSoto County through the lens of public capital. This framework should be thought of as a touchstone—not a scorecard—for understanding the current conditions of the community and how to strengthen it so it can tackle its challenges and create a greater sense of possibility and hope.

While trying to picture how public capital works, keep in mind an ecosystem that exists right outside your door—or put more simply, think about how our air, water, land, and habitat interact daily. On their own, each of these factors seems quite simple and isolated at times. Indeed, each is often talked about as an independent element. Yet what makes an ecosystem work is not only the robustness of each element, but the healthy relationships between and among them. Public capital operates in much the same way. The nine factors are both independent and highly interdependent. It is the rich, complex interaction between them that makes a community work.



Public Capital

An Abundance of Social Gatherings — that enable people to learn about what is happening in the community and begin to develop a sense of mutual trust.

Organized Spaces for Interaction — where people can come together to learn about, discuss, and often act on common challenges. These spaces help a community begin to identify and tap resources to address concerns.

Catalytic Organizations — that help engage people in public life, spur discussion on community challenges, and marshal a community's resources to move ahead. These organizations help lay the foundation for community action, but do not necessarily act as the driving force.

Safe Havens for Decision Makers — where a community's leaders can deliberate and work through community concerns in "unofficial," candid discussions.

Strong, Diverse Leadership — that extends to all layers of a community, understands the concerns of the community as a whole, and serves as a connector among individuals and organizations throughout the community.

Informal Networks & Links — that connect various individuals, groups, organizations, and institutions together to create the cross-fertilization effect of experiences, knowledge, and resources. People carry and spread ideas, messages, and community norms from place to place.

Conscious Community Discussion — where a community has ample opportunity to think about and sort through its public concerns before taking action. People play an active role in helping decide how the community should act.

Community Norms for Public Life — that help guide how people act individually, interact, and work together. These norms set the standards and tone for people's engagement.

A Shared Purpose for the Community — that sends an explicit message about the community's aspirations and helps reinforce that everyone is headed toward a common goal.

An Abundance of Social Gatherings

An Abundance of Social Gathering Places—that enable people to learn about what is happening in the community and begin to develop a sense of mutual trust. These are usually seedbeds of trust, though they can also be ways in which people stay within their own circles.

WHAT'S GOING ON?

Food brings people together.

"Mom-and-pop restaurants are gathering places for the community," explained a leader. Another said, "Downtown cafés and restaurants are definitely where everybody gets together." People frequently mention gathering at a "handful of small-town restaurants" with several touting

"really good Mexican restaurants."

Beyond restaurants, delis, and coffee shops, food brings people together in neighborhoods. One leader mentioned "monthly potlucks called porch talks" in the historic district. Many others noted running into people regularly in grocery stores, at food trucks, or at the farmers market, which are all key social hubs.

Outdoor activities connect people.

Rodeos held at Mosaic Arena are regarded as "the big draw" and a "huge attraction" for residents and visitors. Local parades are big events, and the county fair also draws a significant crowd "with its array of events supporting the youth" as one resident noted. A leader added that the fair "brings people together from all walks of life and provides a sense of unity and celebration." Throughout the year, sports leagues and parks bring



people together. "Community ball games are a good gathering place," explained a leader. Movie nights at the Tree of Knowledge and Saturday Night Lights are also important community gatherings. Another added, "There are several parks around the community," though some expressed concerns about their physical conditions.

Churches knit the community's social fabric. "People are faith-based in the area, so they gather in the churches," explained a local resident. This sentiment is echoed by community leaders who emphasize the central role of churches in social life. "A lot of people's social life and the way they stay up on what's going on is through their interactions at their church," noted one leader. Some churches even provide social gathering places for youth through "youth programming and summer camps." Beyond serving as hubs for social interaction, churches are key to community outreach and "a good resource to get information out," as a leader said.

Some residents gather in downtown Arcadia. Some people described downtown Arcadia as a hub for social interaction. "There are always people downtown, local people and people from out of town," noted a leader. Another described how Arcadia's "charming antique shops line the streets and offer a glimpse into its unique



past." Recent changes have begun to revitalize the downtown district. "Now we have two boutiques and a coffee shop," explained a leader. Additionally, the Heard Opera House is a community center, music venue, and "centerpiece of nightlife." While downtown is slowly changing and "people are bringing things in," some people still rarely go. "You still have to get people willing to come out," one resident said.

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"A lot of people's social life and the way they stay up on what's going on is through their interactions at their church."

WHAT LIES BEHIND IT?

People get together in pockets with those they know. Residents and leaders mention a pattern of gathering within “homogenous groups.” A leader shared, “There isn’t a lot of cross-pollination” across these pockets. People even report experiencing resistance when they attempt to go outside of their usual groups. A high school student explained, “People do not like it whenever you try to befriend somebody within their little circle. It’s not just in school. It is clique-oriented everywhere.” Residents reflected that separation is especially apparent on Sundays. One said, “Hispanics go to the Hispanic churches, Blacks attend the Black churches, Whites go to theirs.” Separation goes beyond Sundays too. One resident explained, “On a normal day, it is very cut and dry, this is who is with who.”

There used to be more places for youth to gather. Many in the community lament the lack of activities for young people, noting that there used to be more for youth to do. A community leader explained, “There is not a lot for kids. There are some parks here and there, but not all children are in clubs or participate in school sports programs.” Several residents spoke nostalgically about amenities that used to exist in the community. One recalled, “We used to have a skating rink, water parks, and a bowling alley.” Today, “There is really

“It is clique-oriented everywhere.”

nothing for the younger folks to do,” another resident mentioned. A high school student echoed this sentiment, saying, “I would like to have more things to do than just places to eat. DeSoto County needs more entertaining places.”

Organized Spaces for Interaction

Organized Spaces for Interaction—where people can come together to learn about, discuss, and often act on community challenges. These spaces help a community begin to identify and tap existing resources to address common concerns.

WHAT’S GOING ON?

Some organized spaces for interaction exist. The Chamber of Commerce and Economic Development Advisory Committee both bring together “various members and businesses across the whole county,” shared a leader. Other organizations convene spaces focused on common interests. For instance, “Team Arcadia, Arcadia Main Street, and the Opera House work together” to improve downtown,

explained a leader. Spaces around health also exist, including a space led by the Health Department that “invites different organizations to spotlight what they can do for the community.” Additional spaces are convened around homelessness and the Community Health Improvement Plan. Various groups—including the Historical Society, Ministerial Association, Rodeo Association, County Fair Association, Cattlemen’s Association, Rotary Club of Arcadia, and others—convene spaces for leaders to connect and discuss common concerns.

The hurricane catalyzed the creation of Hope DeSoto and other spaces.

After Hurricane Ian, “nonprofits and community organizations seized the opportunity to gather virtually and discuss the community’s needs,” a leader shared. Hope DeSoto was “put together” and it played a crucial role in organizing disaster response. This initiative promoted sustained dialogue, often going “beyond relief to address long-term needs,” explained leaders. Hope DeSoto and other organizations continue to convene leaders around

the “long-term needs of community members,” said a resident. Notably, a leader added that this space includes “a broad cross-section of participants making efforts to make things happen.”

Existing organized spaces do not include residents. While some existing organized spaces bring leaders together, those spaces tend to operate in “isolation” from the larger community. “Residents are not included,” explained a leader, and many residents feel leaders are not representing their views. A resident said, “Those making decisions don’t hear those who struggle. They think they have the best ideas.” Black and Hispanic communities feel especially left out. One Black resident said, “The Black community is used to being left out and left behind.” Additionally, fear among undocumented residents discourages participation, as another leader shared, “The people who need the most support are afraid to come out because they are undocumented.” The bottom line according to one resident: “We don’t have a way for people to know what’s going on.”





WHAT LIES BEHIND IT?

Organized spaces need to bridge silos to better drive action. Existing spaces “happen in silos where only a certain group of people or certain community organizations are coming together,” shared one leader. Another explained, “By working together instead of in silos, we can learn from each other and address needs more effectively.” In addition to existing spaces needing to be more inclusive and effective, one resident said the community needs new organized spaces to “lead the charge and keep efforts organized.” One leader bemoaned, “There’s not one connected piece that gets local nonprofits and groups around town working in concert.”

A resident added, “There’s not much coming together with the city and county government.”

Existing spaces rarely cut across the community’s pockets. “Sections of the community don’t intertwine,” said a resident. As a result, spaces rarely bring people from different parts of the community together. A Nocatee resident explained, “Disconnection from other parts of the county limits understanding of what people in other

“People stay within their language, culture, and community.”

areas prioritize.” Another Nocatee resident said, “People stay within their language, culture, and community.” In southwest DeSoto County, Lake Suzy residents report rarely being included in community spaces. One resident even professed that they “thought Lake Suzy was a part of Charlotte County because of proximity.” Further, people from different generations rarely come together. A resident said, “We have two distinct population groups. We have retirees and older people, and then we have young families with children.”

Residents speak different languages.

Overall, “Communication has been a struggle for the Hispanic community,” said a resident. Leaders “don’t know how to involve Hispanics because of the language barrier.” In turn, some people are left “feeling disconnected from the community” and are not included in some spaces. The language barrier affects local Haitian residents too, many of whom speak Haitian Creole. For example, a leader noted, “The Ministerial Association does not include Hispanic or Haitian Creole pastors.” One Haitian resident explained, “We don’t speak English and we don’t speak Spanish. If we don’t have someone to translate for us, we feel like it’s a burden.” This prevents many Haitians from engaging in wider community life.

“By working together instead of in silos, we can learn from each other and address needs more effectively.”

Catalytic Organizations

Organizations—that help engage people in public life, spur discussion on community challenges, and marshal a community’s resources to move forward. These organizations help lay the foundation for community action, but do not necessarily act as the driving force.

WHAT’S GOING ON?

People point to a handful of catalytic entities.

Catholic Charities stewards after-school programs and resources to support the Hispanic population and were key in establishing Casa San Juan Bosco, which is “an entire housing community for farmworkers.” All Faiths Food Bank “engages and brings together community groups around resources, food, and shelter,” shared a leader. Meanwhile, DeSoto Cares Homeless Services works with Arcadia Housing Authority and others on a “structured approach” to address homelessness. Hope DeSoto spurs discussion on long-term disaster recovery with a focus on rebuilding

homes. And Arcadia Main Street and Team Arcadia “spearhead downtown revitalization efforts.” In addition, people frequently point to the efforts of The Patterson Foundation, which is widely known for “making events happen, bringing the community together,” and supporting youth engagement and educational initiatives.

Other organizations provide important services and support.

The community is supported by a collection of organizations whose initiatives, services, and programs improve the community’s well-being. DeSoto Memorial Hospital, The Health Department, and MCR Health serve as the county’s medical backbone. Beyond healthcare, the Chamber of Commerce and the Economic Development Advisory Committee play a vital role “bringing together local leaders to drive growth.” Downtown, the recently restored Heard Opera House provides space for community gatherings, the DeSoto Arts Center promotes art, and

SPARCC supports victims of domestic violence and sexual assault. Meanwhile, an array of organizations are dedicated to enriching the lives of the county’s children and youth, including DeSoto County Library, the Boys & Girls Club, and Links2Success. Moreover, Habitat for Humanity and Goodwill both play important roles in providing housing and employment, respectively. Leaders mention the United Way Suncoast’s “vital role in supporting local initiatives and helping to address some of the key challenges in the community.” Other key funders mentioned include The Patterson Foundation, William G. and Marie Selby Foundation, Community Foundation of Sarasota County, Charles & Margery Barancik Foundation, and Gulf Coast Community Foundation.

Churches are foundational. “Churches play a role in communicating what is going on in the community through their congregation,” said a resident. Another noted how, “Volunteering in the community happens through churches.”



They often connect to and support “collaborative” community efforts, with one leader noting, “Churches are part of a broader network that includes MCR Health, Goodwill, and Catholic Charities.” Other partnerships enable churches to help address poverty, hunger, housing, and educational needs, including “after-school tutoring and youth programs,” explained another leader.

WHAT LIES BEHIND IT?

Organizations play a critical role in DeSoto County. DeSoto County’s organizations are a lifeline for the community. “They’re all hands on deck. They know there’s need and they want to see things happening,” a leader said. People across the community tout organizations’ crucial impact. For example, regarding healthcare organizations, one resident said it is “tremendous for a rural town to have the doctors that we have and the facilities we have.” Moreover, while many organizations operate in particular niches, one leader noted, “A lot more nonprofits are beginning to work together.”

Organizations struggle with a lack of resources. While organizations have numerous ideas to strengthen the community, they say they are constrained by a lack of resources. For example, “There are several private entities that



wanted to start after-school programs but failed for lack of funding,” shared a leader. Another said, “We have so much need and such a limited amount of resources.” Even DeSoto Memorial Hospital, one of the largest employers in the county, struggles with a lack of resources. As a result, the hospital “does not have a birthing center there or a lot of support for those who are pregnant,” explained a leader. Across the community, resource constraints are pervasive and deeply challenging. An organizational leader said, “We are just having a hard time right now trying to get things through. It’s always the funding issue. We are always strapped for resources.”

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DeSoto County’s organizations are a lifeline for the community.

Fragmentation and competition

undermine efforts. Organizations in DeSoto County “protect what they got because of limited resources,” explained a leader. “Each group has their own mission and vision that they work toward accomplishing,” said another. In the religious community, one faith leader said, “Everyone views things through their local congregation rather than their role in the community.” Amid “turf battles and fragmentation,” some people complain about a lack of “cohesiveness with services.” A resident said organizations are “piecemealed” and tend to “stay in their lane,” while a leader said, “The isolation and competition is the drawback of being a small town.”

Safe Havens for Decision-Makers

Safe Havens for Decision-Makers—here a community’s leaders can deliberate and work through community concerns in “unofficial,” candid discussions.

WHAT’S GOING ON?

Some leaders find safe havens to connect with each other. Some church and organizational leaders report having unofficial meetings to work through concerns. “You can speak more frankly when you’re meeting with someone in an informal setting,” one leader

“The isolation and competition is the drawback of being a small town.”

shared. These informal meetups often happen over meals. A resident noted, “You’ll see the movers and shakers of the county out eating together in the different restaurants.” Meanwhile, one leader pointed to how safe havens with “six or seven leaders have initiated some connections.” Another said those small, intimate conversations cultivate “personal relationships where people are not just numbers.”

Existing safe havens support shared learning and action.

Leaders describe how existing safe havens create a helpful shared space. One leader explained, “We get together for coffee every so often to discuss what works and doesn’t work and maintain open communication.” For one leader, safe havens are “invaluable” because, “You deal with change and issues that bubble up and leaders from different parts of the community can help resolve them.” Another noted how the safe havens they are a part of are like “accountability groups that keep me focused on what I need to do and on the right path.”



WHAT LIES BEHIND IT?

Leaders tend to connect one-on-one. While some leaders utilize safe havens, leaders said they tend to be infrequent. Instead, many report “calling one another on the phone on a regular basis.” One explained, “One-on-one word of mouth is how a lot of stuff gets done.” Another added, “If I wanna sit around and brainstorm I just say, ‘Hey man, come in my office.’ And we just sit down and talk.” “A lot of real discussions happen over coffee. You see leaders meeting one-on-one in cafés, just talking things through,” a third leader remarked. Some leaders mention having conversations when they “break bread or have a cocktail” or even when they go hunting or fishing together.

Leaders need to connect more candidly. Leaders identified the need to come together more frequently in candid conversations to work through

community concerns. One leader said getting together in these spaces is important because “we are going to be open and comfortable when we’re in the same room.” Leaders talk about the value that can come from more candid connections with others in different parts of the community, including “synergy in relationships,” “being more diverse and integrated,” “learning from each other,” and “addressing needs more effectively.” Another leader shared that, “It is very important to have a space where leaders can speak openly and honestly without fear of judgment. That’s where real progress happens.”

“One-on-one word of mouth is how a lot of stuff gets done.”



Strong, Diverse Leadership

Strong, Diverse Leadership—that extends to all layers of a community, understands the concerns of the community as a whole, and serves as a connector among individuals and organizations throughout the community.

WHAT'S GOING ON?

There is a small cadre of leaders named repeatedly. A small group of leaders were repeatedly named across conversations for being “empathetic,” “fair,” and for “going above and beyond.” A leader shared, “I know some of them that will go that extra mile ‘til hell freezes over.” Sheriff Potter and Marshal Quinn Jones are widely regarded as “caring” and “involved.” Ashley Coone was lauded for being “very invested in the community.” And Arcadia City Administrator Terry Stewart was praised as “a prime example of commitment, instrumental in many community projects, and always available to lend a helping hand.” Some county leaders—particularly Mandy Hines, Penny Pringle, Sondra Guffey, and Elton Langford—also received mentions. Asena Mott is recognized for her leadership on the school board and at the DeSoto Campus of South Florida State College, while Carol Mahler “runs the Historical Society and is everywhere.” Finally, the Hispanic



community highlighted the leadership of Clara Alvarez of Casa San Juan Bosco and religious leaders, while the Haitian community mentioned Kethia LaFleur.

Leadership circles are tight. Leadership roles are predominantly occupied by a few “well-connected individuals,” said a resident. According to one leader, this means “limited opportunities for broader community involvement.” Underscoring the commonly-held view that power is concentrated among a few well-connected leaders, one resident remarked, “When things have not happened, it is because those in charge don’t want it to happen.” Another resident shared, “We have no control. They have control and a lot of people won’t speak up about it.”

There is a disconnect between leaders and residents.

Residents across DeSoto County express a lack of connection with their leaders. “There’s a disconnect between the community and its leaders,” a resident stated, which leaves them “feeling unheard and disregarded.” Another resident said, “We just don’t have a voice.” Even when residents make efforts to get involved, they said they still feel like “leaders don’t listen to anybody.” One resident said, “You go to meetings, voice your concerns, and nothing changes.” Another elaborated, “Some mean well, but still stick with the good ol’ boy system.” Residents routinely expressed a need for leaders who genuinely listen, with one stating, “I think we really need to have leaders making choices to listen to people.”

WHAT LIES BEHIND IT?

DeSoto County needs more leaders.

Residents and leaders alike agree that DeSoto County needs more leaders.

“ Residents and leaders alike agree that DeSoto County needs more leaders.

A resident said, “The leaders we have are not in the community.” Another noted, “We need more people to get involved.” They went on to highlight the burden on existing leaders, saying, “Community leaders are wearing so many hats. They’re people who step up and do all the things.” A leader mentioned, “It would help to have more leaders who care about the community and want to see us move forward to be gathered together in meaningful and helpful ways.” Some leaders note efforts to bring younger people into leadership roles. One shared, “We are trying to pull youth into boards. If we can pick their brain and they can pick ours, why can’t the future prosper?”





Existing leaders struggle with a lack of resources. Across the community, “leaders do the best that they can but they’re very limited with their budget,” explained a resident. Leaders repeatedly mention difficulty sustaining efforts due to resource constraints. One said, “While we may be able to pull something off one year, we don’t have the resources for sustainability so then we can’t do it again the next year.” This extends to city and county leaders’ “struggle to provide infrastructure for growth.” Further, resource scarcity is problematic for educational leaders. One said plainly, “The school would be better if we had more funding.”

Many leaders are exhausted. Leaders in DeSoto County are often trying to just get through the day-to-day. “Everybody is working so hard with what they have,” said a leader. “You have to be exhausted because you do all the stuff. Nobody is stepping up to do what needs to be done,” another leader lamented.

Frustration also comes from the lack of community engagement. “The organizations that I’m involved in, we try to get families involved but they don’t listen,” shared a leader. “They don’t have the time.”

Informal Networks and Links

Informal Networks and Links—that connect various individuals, groups, organizations, and institutions together to create a cross-fertilization effect of experiences, knowledge, and resources. People carry and spread ideas, messages, and community norms from place to place.

WHAT’S GOING ON?

Churches are hubs for networks. In DeSoto County, churches are more than just places of worship. They serve as vital hubs, connecting people and ideas across the community. As a leader put

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DeSoto County has an array of civic clubs that foster connections around particular interests and contribute to the community's social fabric.

it, “The church is the center of this little small town. People are at church every Wednesday and Sunday.” Pastors play a key role in these networks. A resident explained, “When a pastor talks to his congregation about getting involved, they listen and spread the message.” Beyond forging strong networks among congregants, some churches provide physical infrastructure for other community networks. One leader noted, “Five or six different homeowner association groups meet at church.”

Civic groups forge important networks. DeSoto County has an array of civic clubs that foster connections around particular interests. The DeSoto County Chamber of Commerce “gets businesses connected with each other” and also forges a strong network of emerging leaders through its Leadership DeSoto Program. Further, “The Arcadia Rotary Club was my way of getting involved with certain people in the community,” shared a leader. Meanwhile, the Arcadia Garden Club “reaches out to the community with their plant sales, speakers, and their overall efforts to make Arcadia and DeSoto County

better.” A resident added, “The library brings people together in the arts and book clubs who would not necessarily meet otherwise.” Future Farmers of America, 4-H, and the Farm Bureau are key agricultural networks, while other civic organizations like the Kiwanis Club, Historical Society, Elks, Moose, VFW, Lions Club, Woodworkers, and more also contribute to the community's social fabric.





Key networks exist within neighborhoods. Across the county, people report forming meaningful connections with neighbors. Highlighting the closeness that exists, a resident said, “Your neighbors here are your family too. That’s prevalent here and not everywhere else.” One leader shared, “There is a lot of closeness between families in DeSoto County. A lot of people know each other. Their kids are in school together and they go to events together. The extended family beyond your immediate family is there.” A few neighborhood networks take the form of homeowners associations. For example, “The Homeowners Association in Lake Suzy is very strong,” shared a leader. Overall, residents prize these proximal networks, with one noting, “People take care of each other, they take care of each other’s children.”

WHAT LIES BEHIND IT?

Some networks mobilize to address issues. Some DeSoto County networks spring up around certain issues or challenges. Regarding controversial plans to bring phosphate mining to DeSoto County, “Two groups have formed—one in support of mining and another called People for Protecting Peace River,” a resident shared. Meanwhile, some existing networks support action in other areas. Church networks provide volunteers and support for various community initiatives, while business networks formed through the Chamber come together to “influence” and “find partners for collaboration.” Further, civic groups support educational programming and initiatives. Residents mentioned “the Elks’ free summer camp for kids,” “the Moose Club’s book drive,” and “the Rotary Club’s scholarships,” among other things. Across the community, networks enable “family, friends, and neighbors to get involved,” shared a leader.

“Your neighbors here are your family too. That’s prevalent here and not everywhere else.”



Networks of diverse populations operate separately from one another.

"People stay in their own spheres," said a leader. A resident added, "While there is some coming together, there is significant separation along ethnic and racial lines." A leader said, "Rarely do you see a mix. We're kind of segregated. The Hispanic community sticks together, the African American community sticks together, and then the agricultural Caucasians sort of stick together." Due to network fragmentation, many people wonder if a shared purpose exists. A leader said, "You have such diverse groups that it's very hard to find commonality." A resident said, "Everyone has their own areas of interest. In the church, we have shared goals, and in the Rotary Club, they have shared goals, but they might not be the same."

Conscious Community Discussion

Conscious Community Discussion—where a community has ample opportunity to think about and sort through its public concerns before taking action. People play an active role in helping decide how the community should act.

WHAT'S GOING ON?

Some opportunities for conscious community discussion have emerged recently. "In recent years, people have come together and talked about what they want to see," shared a resident. People mention The Patterson Foundation as a key convener of community "focus groups and roundtables." One resident said, "The

Patterson Foundation is so instrumental because they are not just saying, 'We are going to fix this for you.' They are asking questions." While a leader noted, "In the past, it was just folks complaining about what we don't have," a resident said that some recent conversations have been "calling for the community to make things happen." As a result, a resident described "a bubbling hope being shared."

Overall, there is not a strong ethic of authentic discussion. Few opportunities exist for residents to discuss issues that matter to them. "You might have a town hall, but it is isolated to a single topic," one noted. Despite living in close proximity, residents often experience

a significant lack of communication and interaction with neighbors. One said, "I might not talk to my neighbors, even though they live right next to me." Furthermore, leaders often fail to create an environment where people can safely raise concerns. A leader explained, "A lot of people should be involved in coming together, but they're shot down." A resident added, "Officials will grind you to the ground."

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Few opportunities exist for residents to discuss issues that matter to them.



Social media fuels negative talk.

"We have these pages that are very negative and people like to jump on that bandwagon. Even if you're not jumping on the bandwagon, you're reading it," said a resident. Another said that some people online "feed off the negativity" and "just want the bad." A high school student added, "There are so many negative things that people just focus on. They just want to sit and complain about it instead of working towards fixing it."

WHAT LIES BEHIND IT?

Many residents doubt engaging will lead to change. Beyond expressing that they rarely hear of opportunities to engage, some residents express doubt that conversations will lead to any action on their concerns. "When I've asked people when they bring issues to me why they don't come to the meeting, they say, 'Nothing is going to happen,'" a leader shared. "Folks feel like they're not going to be listened to with the suggestions that they have. No change will take place." A resident explained, "There's no follow up. It just becomes a conversation that goes nowhere."

Some people fear speaking up. A leader explained that "getting your feelings hurt" and "a fear of failure" prevent some people from putting ideas out there. "A lot of people want to complain, but nobody wants to come

“Folks feel like they’re not going to be listened to with the suggestions that they have. No change will take place.”

up with a solution," said a resident. Others in the community "are afraid to voice their real opinion because of the backlash they may receive," explained a resident. When discussing potential changes in the community, a resident said someone could "follow the money trail because there are people in leadership who stand to benefit." But they said they're "not comfortable saying it out loud." Another resident explained, "That's just how it works. A lot of people won't speak up."

Some people feel they can't make time to engage. As noted, many people in DeSoto County are "in survival mode." A leader explained, "People's lives are centered around working, childcare, all of the things in their life that don't give them time to breathe." Regarding people engaging with other community members, a leader said, "It's not that they don't care; they just can't make it part of their routine." Leaders know parents have bandwidth challenges. "We try to get families involved but they don't

have the time and money,” said a leader. “If they want to go out, they’ve got to get somebody to watch the kids.”

Communication of opportunities to engage is weak. Most residents said they are not aware of opportunities to engage. One resident said, “People are not participating because they don’t know it is happening.” Another resident

highlighted the communication issue: “If I don’t know what’s going on in the community, how can I participate? And when you don’t have the internet or cell phone, it’s even worse.” The lack of awareness is further compounded by the loss of the local newspaper. “Communication of good information to the masses is missing now worse than ever,” shared a resident.



Community Norms for Public Life

Community Norms for Public Life—that help guide how people act individually, interact, and work together. These norms set the standards and tone for civic engagement.

WHAT'S GOING ON?

People help each other. DeSoto County is a “community that cares for one another” according to both residents and leaders. “We have a good sense of community,” a leader shared. “We notice it the most when a disaster happens. Tragedy brings us together.” For instance, after Hurricane Ian, one resident noted, “Many of us were without basic necessities, but the community helped each other.” Yet care for one



“The community’s kindness extends beyond crises. You have a lot of kindhearted people that want to help.”

another is hardly limited to crises. One leader said, “The community’s kindness extends beyond crises. You have a lot of kindhearted people that want to help.” A resident echoed that, stating, “The community supports whoever needs it.”

Faith shapes people’s way of life.

“There’s great strength in a community that’s filled with believers,” shared a leader. Much of the community shares “a Christian value system,” explained a resident. Another said, “The community shares a love for God and love for people.” Many also noted how faith is behind the ethic of care and support in the community. “People help each other as an expression of their faith,” a resident said. Furthermore, faith provides many people with comfort as they deal with stress and hardship.

Food is a bridge builder. People in DeSoto view food as a key way to connect with others. “People run into each other casually at restaurants and food trucks,” said a leader. Moreover,



gatherings centered around food often bring the community's diversity together. One resident said, "When I go to eat, I interact with different cultures." A teacher described attending a community event, saying, "I saw so many of my kids. Their parents were selling food there at a food truck or a food table." Highlighting food's role in fostering "unity," another resident quipped, "Let the meetings continue, and bring food."

Survival is the focus. Many people in the community, especially those experiencing poverty, are focused on survival. A resident explained, "Many people are impoverished. They have difficulty finding employment, housing, or any resources." Another said, "People

are scraping by just so their kids can have a better life." This emphasis on subsistence leads some to say, "There is no hope." The struggle to just survive is felt by many organizational leaders too. One explained, "It's hard to tackle anything when you're worrying about everyone's livelihood and their daily necessities." This in turn leads many leaders to feel "worn out by not having the resources to implement suggestions."

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“People are scraping by just so their kids can have a better life.”

Leaders and residents tend to turn inward. Survival being a key driver causes many leaders to turn inward instead of focusing on the wider community. One resident said, “Leaders do the best they can, but they’re very limited with their ability, their budget, their support.” A leader explained, “Collaborating outside of your organization takes a little extra effort and flexibility. Not everybody is in a place where they want or can do that.” Meanwhile, residents also noted their tendency to turn inward. One said, “We need to participate more in the community. We would be stronger. But we don’t.” A high school student explained why engaging is a challenge for many: “People feel like they have a big to-do list and just can’t do enough to matter or don’t have time to do as much as they want. It’s a challenge for people to realize that even small contributions make a difference.”

WHAT LIES BEHIND IT?

Fragmentation is common. “I don’t see how very isolated communities and organizations are ever going to be able to come together in a cohesive system,” one leader said. Regarding the ways their organization worked with others in the community, a leader noted, “I don’t think we have done a good job partnering with other members of the community. We were kind of isolationists.” A third leader described

how a “good old boy network” also influences current fragmentation: “There is a group of people that are connected to one another. I don’t want to call it self-contained, but you’re not gonna be invited into those conversations.” Overcoming current fragmentation, according to another leader, will take “people who want to see us move forward gathered together in ways that are meaningful and helpful.”

People are in a reactive mode. When an urgent situation emerges, “everybody just runs a million miles an hour in all different directions trying to take care of everything,” said a leader. The challenge is finding ways to be more proactive when there’s not a disaster. One leader stated, “We don’t need to wait for another natural disaster to come together and do something. It has to be part of our daily lives.” Others echoed that leader’s desire for a more proactive approach. One resident applied this principle to growth. “A lot of us want growth to be controlled,” they said. “We

“We don’t need to wait for another natural disaster to come together and do something. It has to be part of our daily lives.”

need to not be willy-nilly about things. We need to have a plan and have the infrastructure in place.”

More people need to step up and work together. Both residents and leaders highlighted that only a “limited number of people are involved” in moving the community forward. One leader pointed out, “90% of the work is done by 10% of the people, and in this community, you’re just talking about a few dozen when you get down to that number.” The result is, “There’s not enough leaders to go around,” according to another leader. In turn, both leaders and residents are calling for more people to get involved for the good of the community. There’s an opportunity for the community to “come together, learn from each other, and address needs,” in the words of one leader. A resident added, “New leadership with fresh ideas and perspectives is crucial for our town’s progress.”

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A Shared Purpose for the Community

A Shared Purpose for the Community—that sends an explicit message about the community’s aspirations and helps reinforce that everyone is headed toward a common goal.

WHAT’S GOING ON?

People have shared purpose in times of crisis. People in DeSoto County respond to crises with a collective spirit. Reflecting on Hurricane Ian, one resident shared, “After the hurricane, many of us were without basic necessities, yet the





community banded together.” Across conversations, residents and leaders noted it was “inspiring to see how everyone pulled together.” A leader said, “The community’s response was incredible. There was a real sense of unity and determination to rebuild.” Another mentioned, “What stood out to me during the hurricane was how the community came together. People helping each other, neighbors checking on neighbors, people sharing resources.”

Outside of crises, there is no sense of shared purpose. After the hurricane, “everyone was all in,” a leader explained, “and then one month goes by and the next, and everyone starts dwindling and going back to their lives.” Another reinforced that, outside of disasters, “There has not been success energizing the population as a whole to make the community better.” A resident added, “I don’t think there’s a common goal and purpose.” Reflecting on this lack of

shared purpose, one leader explained, “In our community, we look at the leaders as the ones supposed to make things happen as opposed to we should all be making things happen.” Overall, “getting people to work together on a common cause” repeatedly came up as an area in need of attention among both leaders and residents. According to one leader, this will require “truthful discussion about the community as a whole, where we want the community to go, and how we’re going to get there.”

“In our community, we look at the leaders as the ones supposed to make things happen as opposed to we should all be making things happen.”

The spirit for a shared purpose exists.

In DeSoto, “People have the spirit to help,” said a leader. Another said, “A lot of people in the community want to help others. The common goal is to help people.” People repeatedly shared examples of community members “stepping up to the plate” to care for each other, especially within “close-knit” families, churches, and neighborhoods. For example, a resident noted, “People help others pay their rent just to get ‘em back on their feet.” Emphasizing how people show up for each other during tough times, a resident said, “We do fight sometimes, but whenever we face adversity, everybody holds hands and moves forward like a family.” This spirit for a shared purpose can be built upon moving forward.

Youth is the one place where there’s an emerging shared purpose.

“People in this community are all on the same page as far as helping the children and helping education,” said a leader. Yearly Remake Learning Days—organized through The Patterson Foundation’s Suncoast Campaign for Grade-Level Reading—create “more unity as a community, because people are supporting each other and having fun together.” Across the community, people see increasing momentum and a “growing commitment to making educational improvements,” a leader shared. Many people point to new initiatives through Links2Success,

“People in this community are all on the same page as far as helping the children and helping education.”

United Way Suncoast, the Boys & Girls Club, the YMCA, and Big Brothers Big Sisters as examples of progress. One leader connected to these groups said, “The needs for education, safe spaces for youth, and providing resources to be successful are high priorities across the board.” Furthermore, groups are fundraising to support education, including the DeSoto County Education Foundation, which is “making inroads and gaining support,” shared a leader. While education is a widely shared priority in principle, more action is needed to ensure young people succeed.



WHAT LIES BEHIND?

People are buried in their own

concerns. Being focused on individual concerns prevents many people from engaging in a deeper shared purpose. A leader explained that, "People are investing their time and effort in feeding their kids and putting clothes on their back." Another said, "People get involved when it directly affects their life. There's not many involved for the sake of the community." Residents are often so focused on familial matters that their community involvement "is almost nonexistent." A leader said, "It's important to find some way to reach those people." Leaders too admit that their entity or organization is often so focused on their own work that they struggle to engage in a broader shared purpose. A faith leader said when they get together with other faith leaders, "It was a lot of, 'This is what my church is doing and this is what your church is doing.' It was not collaboration." When discussing leaders, one resident said, "Most of them care, but they don't work together."

People live separate lives. In DeSoto, "communities tend to stay within their communities," one resident said. Another noted how "people have their own cliques or groups." They continued, "You're in a church across the street, I might not talk to y'all. Y'all might be my neighbors, but I won't talk to you."

Yet another resident added, "You get with your own people. It's not going to be, 'Let's all get together. Let's pull people out from different places and get them together.'" Many people build strong relationships in neighborhoods, networks, and churches with those they feel comfortable with, but they remain separate from others outside of those groups. Overall, "People in the community kind of stay in their own lane," said a leader. Separation among people makes engaging in shared purpose difficult.

People feel overwhelmed by the community's challenges.

The magnitude of pressing issues facing DeSoto County can feel overwhelming and stymie people's efforts. "There are a lot of people that have a lot of really good intentions, but they don't know where to start," a resident said. "They don't know how to eat the elephant. They don't even know what bite to start chewing first." Another resident said, "When you don't know what to do, sometimes you do nothing because it is so overwhelming." Leaders also often

“There are a lot of people that have a lot of really good intentions, but they don't know where to start.”



feel unequipped to address issues to the extent needed. One said, "People in roles of responsibility are stretched thin, pulled in so many different directions, trying to do so many different things." Another added, "Ultimately we come to the point of, 'Do we have the resources? Do we have the people in place to be able to assist us?'"

Many people feel isolated and ignored. "The general public gets the sense that when things are done, only the influential people are really invited and will have a say," said a leader. People across the community confirmed this sense. One resident shared, "There's a lot of people who

get left behind and their needs don't come into play." A leader added, "Not everyone is represented." People feel neglected and even ignored—based on factors including race, ethnicity, language, geography, age, and newness to the community—which furthers disengagement and contributes to the community's lack of shared purpose. Many residents shared that leaders do not actively engage them. One resident said, "I don't think the people in power see people who are impoverished and homeless. I don't think they notice." A Hispanic resident added, "Leaders don't come near our community because we are not of interest to them." ■

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Building the Community's Civic Strength

DeSoto County Coming Together is about how the community can come together around a shared purpose and cultivate a sense of authentic hope for a better future. But let's be clear: There's a difference between false hope and authentic hope. False hope is rooted in wishful thinking and setting unrealistic expectations that fail to deliver results. Authentic hope is created when people see real action on issues that matter to them. As people work together and see meaningful progress, civic faith is renewed and positive narratives begin to take root, grow, and spread.

In order to go beyond survival, DeSoto County must grow its civic capacities and pay attention to how change happens. This section outlines critical levers for accomplishing each. Doing one without the other will stifle the community's ability to move forward. Challenges will mount. Mistrust will deepen and calcify. Hope for a better future will diminish.

To unleash its potential, the community must create a new trajectory of hope. That starts with growing civic capacities and paying attention to how change happens.

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In order to go beyond survival, DeSoto County must grow its civic capacities and pay attention to how change happens.

Growing Civic Capacities

DeSoto County must grow its civic capacities in order to get on a more hopeful, productive path. Absent this necessary work, the community will remain in cycles of economic insecurity, poor education outcomes, and separation from one another. DeSoto County's civic capacities cannot be grown by one entity; no single organization, leader, or group can do this on their own. Nor is simply launching new or expanding existing strategies, initiatives, and programs the answer. Communities need strong civic capacities to effectively move forward. Nothing can replace these.

The good news is that building DeSoto County's civic strength is actionable, doable, and achievable. The people of DeSoto County must:

– **Focus on shared aspirations.**

Throughout this report, people told us that close-knit groups are largely separate from one another. They also revealed a disconnect between leaders and residents. To build its civic strength, DeSoto County must develop more ways for people to see and hear each other. This happens when we authentically engage people around their shared aspirations for their lives and the community. Such engagement allows people to build relationships and discover what they hold in common, even amid their real differences. It also enables



“ To build its civic strength, DeSoto County must develop more ways for people to see and hear each other.

a community to move away from focusing on “problems” that seem unsolvable, or utopian visions that are unattainable. But engaging people on their shared aspirations cannot be a one-time thing. Instead, leaders and residents must develop an ongoing ethic of creating space to engage, authentically listening to one another, finding areas of agreement, and taking shared action.

- **Develop new norms for getting things done.** People across the community name pressing issues that the community needs to address. Yet today, people describe DeSoto County as struggling to take action on these concerns due to a lack of resources and fragmentation between leaders and organizations. While people in the community take care of each other individually, that is not the same as working together to move forward as a community. Moving forward productively will require DeSoto to develop new

norms of working together that focus on building strong relationships, developing greater trust, working through hard issues, and taking shared action.

- **Cultivate leaders who are turned outward.** DeSoto County needs a greater number of leaders. Too much work is left to too few people. But simply having more leaders is not enough. DeSoto County also needs more leaders who are turned

outward—who focus on the shared aspirations and concerns of all residents and consider different viewpoints in their decision-making. Mistrust, division, and frustration fester when communities do not have enough leaders who are turned outward. DeSoto County must cultivate existing leaders and develop new ones who hold a mindset of being turned outward toward the community and each other.





- **Enlist more community members as builders.** Residents throughout DeSoto County have ideas and capabilities to offer in helping the community move forward. Such community members do not necessarily lead organizations or have official titles, but they do have energy, relationships, innate talents, and deep affection for the community. By engaging people as builders, the community will develop stronger connections between and among people, a new sense of possibility for moving forward, and a deeper belief that they can get things done together.
- **Build more catalytic, boundary-spanning groups.** Many organizations, churches, and groups provide critical support services to DeSoto County. They should be lauded and their work supported. So too should the handful of organizations that are laying the foundation for broader community action. Yet leaders and residents both report that existing organizations and groups are not doing enough to spur discussion, marshal the shared resources of the community, and catalyze action on shared challenges. All communities need catalytic groups that spark engagement, action, and innovation. DeSoto County is no exception. This is a critical area for development.
- **Develop stronger communication channels.** The lack of reliable communication between and among people across DeSoto County reinforces current separation and

prevents deeper connections between groups. The community needs more inclusive, widespread communication channels that inform people about what's happening, share opportunities to engage with one another, and spread positive stories about community efforts. A strong information ecosystem is part of the lifeblood of any thriving community. It helps people see and hear one another, creates a stronger sense of connection, and acts as the seedbed for trust and shared purpose.

- **Make the invisible visible.** Civic confidence and belief grows from people seeing that progress is possible. But far too often, the progress that is being made remains invisible to the wider community. Sometimes it is even obscured from those who are helping to create progress. Making the invisible visible enables people to see that progress is possible and that *it's happening*. Doing this requires intentional efforts to identify where progress is being made in DeSoto County and where new actions are being taken. Then, it means lifting up and spreading those stories. One caution: Overstating results or glossing over challenges will undermine authentic hope. The work ahead is difficult. Finding allies for support and persevering through resistance are both imperative.

How Change Happens

How can DeSoto County—a community facing separation and pressing challenges—come together and begin to move forward? It starts by rethinking how change happens. Too many change efforts begin with a comprehensive plan or a utopian vision. They may start with great fanfare but too often they fizzle out, leaving frustration and cynicism in their wake.

Instead, positive change in DeSoto County must start by taking small, concrete actions that are rooted in the community's shared aspirations and make a difference in people's lives. These initial actions restore civic confidence by demonstrating the community's will and ability to come together and get things done. They are also a down payment on fostering shared purpose and creating a new trajectory



of hope. But small actions alone are not enough. The goal is to unleash a chain reaction of actions and ripple effects that take root, grow, and spread like a positive contagion. This is how DeSoto County can build momentum and strengthen the way the community works together over time.

One final thought on how change happens. *Where* to start is just as important as *how*. Recall the words of the resident who said: “There are a lot of people that have a lot of really good intentions, but they don’t know

where to start. They don’t know how to eat the elephant. They don’t even know what bite to start chewing first.”

To avoid getting stuck, it is crucial to focus where the possibility—indeed, the probability—for forward motion is high. This can include complex issues like education, housing, and economic development. But the emphasis must be on creating initial wins.

The time is ripe for DeSoto County to come together to unleash its potential. People are calling out to engage in this work, together. ■

“ The time is ripe for DeSoto County to come together to unleash its potential.





