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Civility project credited with fostering respect, interest in local government

By Nathaniel Shuda
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As members of the Community Foundation of Greater South Wood County's citizen-led Speak Your Peace project get ready for the first of four public presentations March 31, officials from one Minnesota city said a similar project has been a great asset to their area.

"I do think that there is much more citizen engagement than there was before the civility project started," said Sharla Gardner, a member of the Duluth City Council. "It has encouraged engagement; our city is much more vibrant."

In 2001, the Duluth-Superior Area Community Foundation launched its Speak Your Peace Civility Project, which then became the model for the Community Foundation of Greater South Wood County's program.

Based on the ideas of Johns Hopkins University Civility Project co-founder P.M. Forni, author of "Choosing Civility: The Twenty-Five Rules of Considerate Conduct," the project changed the atmosphere of public discourse in the Duluth area, Gardner said.

"When it isn't used, I think we have bad government," she said. "I've experienced the disrespect. All it does is create frustration and gridlock, and nothing ever comes of it."

A city known for its high voter turnouts -- it had the highest voter turnout of any U.S. city in the 2004 presidential election -- Duluth voters turned out in record numbers in the state's last gubernatorial election, with 95 percent of registered voters casting their ballots. In addition, the city's last mayoral race saw 12 candidates running for the position.

Duluth City Council President Roger Reinert attributed this, in part, to the concept of civility presented in the Speak Your Peace project.

"Speak Your Peace is about changing the tone of conversation. Communities can no longer fight until someone wins and someone loses," Reinert said in a statement.

"We must be able to hold each other accountable to collectively address our complex issues, and we must do that in a civil way that builds lasting working relationships."

Before the project, Gardner said, she remembers attending government meetings during which local officials would roll their eyes and sigh as members of the community would talk during the allotted time for public comment. Now, however, after making an effort to adopt the program, things have become more accepting and open.

"We still have problems, but at least now we have a better way to sit down and talk about them ... and speak out about them," Gardner said.