

The Timely Stitchwork of Community Development

By Nancy Henderson

“A STITCH IN TIME SAVES NINE.” It’s another one of those sayings about time that seems to have lost its currency. None of us do much mending or sewing anymore—but as I was thinking about time for community development, I was struck at how appropriate the saying is for our sector.

The complaint we most often make and hear from colleagues is that there’s never enough time, and that time is passing by far too quickly. Our work seems to be moving at an ever increasing pace, pushed forward by the technology that has made some things so much easier, but which makes its own insistent demands on our time.

So what, if anything, can we do to slow down time? Perhaps we can take some lessons from the stitching theme.

Conceive your design: Planning is one of the best tools to help use time effectively. This starts with annual cycles of planning and review—as incorporating lessons learned in activities makes for better plans—and includes the more detailed action plans made on a quarterly, monthly, weekly and daily bases. Reviewing plans as they go along allows for taking advantage of emerging opportunities, revisiting priorities and adjusting to available capacity.

Make use of patterns: Original designs are great, but they take time. The more you can create templates of reports, communications tools, applications, *et cetera*, the more time you will save in preparing them. Getting into patterns of activity means you’re less likely to miss deadlines, or accidentally omit something important.

Cut away the excess: Focus your efforts on what’s most important. Ruthless prioritizing, whether by the critical nature of the task or merely the pressing of the deadline, helps to make sure that you’re working on the most important thing at the time. If that means putting other things aside for a bit, it has to be—nobody can juggle everything!

Sew up the details: Do a thorough job on the things you’ve prioritized. See the job through all the way to completion and filin it right off your desk. It might take a bit longer to complete the task, but leaving that last stitch means running the risk of it all unraveling. That’s the stitch that saves nine more!

Our work in community development is important, and when something is worth making, it is worth doing it well. ■