

Anytown Branch Library Community Conversation – Sample #2 Notes

(Assumption: Conversation leader did a good job of drawing out detailed answers.)

March 2, 2013

N. Fester, Conversation Leader

J. McCune, Note Taker

Profile and # of participants: 12 people; primarily library patrons from Civic Hospital Neighborhood; ages approximately 35 to 65 with one teenager; equal mix of Male/Female but few People of Color

What Kind of Community Do You Want?

- We want a community that is safe (crime free and drug free) and aesthetically pleasing so that residents can walk safely at any hour and have places to meet and congregate. “When you feel safe enough to walk outside, people become more neighborly.”
- Clean environment, peaceful environment – meaning not being “targeted” by police.
- Police “nag nag nag. We’re tired of being treated like kids!”
- Police have not been harassing lately, but still “intimidating.”
- *Note: Frustration with police resonated with the entire group. It was a major theme of the meeting. Conversation leader paused group here and reminded them to focus on kind of community they want. This seemed to energize the group.*
- Want people living in that community to feel empowered to “be part of the strength of the neighborhood.” Feel like they truly live here; be comfortable with being here.
- Would like to see people who come to worship from the suburbs have a more “genuine connection” with the neighborhood and a “more complex understanding than the stereotypes.”
- Churches would like to not need to lock their doors, as they feel it limits community access.
- The refugee population in the neighborhood is “outdoorsy” and wants to be outside, walk and bicycle everywhere. The community should feel safe for their children. They want a sense of security.
- Some of the phrases used when talking about aspirations for the community were “Connectedness,” “Communication,” “Engage,” “Empowering the community” “Cultural Competence”
- “Are we in it, or are we of it?” (*Note: Lots of head nodding here – resonated with the group!*)

Given what we just said, what are the 2-3 most important issues or concerns when it comes to the community?

- Attendees hang out in the park to catch up on news of events in the community and fulfill desire to socialize and get out of the house. “When we can’t hang out in the park, we loose touch with what’s going on” “We miss being able to meet neighbors and get out of the house.”
- Attendees would like there to be a police presence, but not be harassed.
- When we can’t hang out in the park, we loose touch with what’s going on.
- The feeling is that poverty levels are getting worse in the community. (*Note: expressed as “more people are losing their jobs,” “the food bank seems to be busier than usual,” “we seem to have more people wandering the streets day and night”*)
- People are getting “stuck” in entry-level positions. Referred to it as a “steel ceiling.”
- Jobs and training to put people to work, will keep them busy and instill pride.
- Increased income would attract services such as restaurants, cafes and shops.

Note-Taker: People who brought up negative issues with police in Q1 brought them back up here. At this point the group decided to focus on safety as the issue for the balance of the conversation.

What concerns do you have about this issue?

- Parking is an issue at night – it is not safe to park on the street and have to walk home.
- “Yeah, this is a pretty scary place at night, lots of hookers and drug deals going down in the park.”

- People go for walks for exercise early in the morning when there is a police presence. Otherwise it is too risky. “We need the police but at the same time they are part of the problem. They treat everyone like they are bums or suspicious... what’s the deal with that?”
- People hang out when they don’t have any work or are shelter dwellers that have to leave the shelter during the day.
- There are training programs and a police substation but people don’t know what is available to them. These programs don’t seem to reach the people in the neighborhood and they don’t seem to have the connections to get into these programs.
- Large number of apartments – difficult to communicate with people. Easier to reach people in single family dwellings because you can knock on the door or leave information in a mail box.
- Someone noted that there are many supportive housing residences in the area and that the majority of residents are single man, many of whom are unemployed.

Note-taker: People give the impression these are long-standing problems. No sense of a better/worse - more like “it’s always been this way.” People were quick to add examples and build from one point to the next. The park seems to be an example the participants could all relate to.

How do the issues we’re talking about affect you personally?

- It was expressed that the conversation which took place was not one that would have normally happened among this group of people.
- Several attendees of the meeting are maybe late 30’s to elderly. They claim that they self-police the park - When younger people cause trouble, they kick them out.
- There is one officer who does not give the locals trouble. The officer even says that they can hang out in the park.
- Other police say that they cannot hangout in the park and threaten to arrest them. They are told to go to a different park. There’s no consistency.
- They talked about the same thing being true at Williams (a store). They say we can hang out behind the store, near the park. Police say we’re “coming on private property and are trying to turn the store [William’s] against us.”
- The store is telling the people one thing and the police another. Store does not want people loitering, but does not want to offend its customers.
- “I have a young family. I want to be able to take my kids to the park to play. Now I take them to the Field House where it’s safer.” (another neighborhood)

When you think about these things, how do you feel about what’s going on?

- Three people in the room had their cars stolen.
- “Police are basically telling adults to stay inside. It’s discouraging.”
- Harassment by police makes some attendees feel less comfortable dealing with them in other situations. “Makes us not want to talk with police.”
- Attendees would like there to be a police presence, but not be harassed.
- Attendees like to see activities in the park. People don’t want people to “plop themselves down” but there is never anything to do. “Isn’t a park a place to hang out?” (*Lots of head nodding here.*)
- “I want to stay in this neighborhood but sometimes I think it’s just too much work to get people working together – I tried a few things but don’t seem to get much support. Honestly I feel like giving up.”

What do you think is keeping us from making the progress we want?

- (*Very quiet at first. Had a hard time with this question to start.*)
- Habitat, as an organization, feels they need to do a better helping new homeowners to actually transform the communities in which they live; ownership. Right now there is very much a sense that volunteers “come in” to do the work and then leave to go home to their suburban communities. (*This seemed to get people started.*)
- “Lots of people come to the neighborhood to “do good” and then leave. But it’s inconsistent. Leaders like the mayor come when there is a shooting but then we don’t seem him for another year.”

- “We have lots of transients here – renters, people in the group home. Then we have people who own their own home and want this to be a nice place to live. We want different things.”
- “You know, we said we wanted to connect with one another... that’s on us to get to know our neighbors.”

When you think about what we’ve talked about, what are the kinds of things that could be done that would make a difference?

- People are concerned about drinking, smoking, urinating, and drug use in the park. This makes others uncomfortable going to the park. If these behaviors were to stop, so would the negative police attention.
- Need for more public toilettes is expressed.
- Park also needs more garbage cans.
- One person said the reason for excess garbage is that the park is closed for the season and the cans are therefore not being emptied. Collection will resume when the park reopens.
- Someone mentioned “night walkers” (prostitutes?) bringing more police attention.
- Suggestion that there should be more entertainment in the park – something to look forward to.
- Lighting to make people feel safe and aware of the surroundings
- Regular police should be a proactive deterrent and not just be reactive.
- Attendees would like there to be a police presence, but not be harassed.
- Community gardens that can be maintained by local residents – work with Bread Basket, Ashton Parks and Food Coop to develop sustainable food supplies.
- Communications that reach people – not just electronic venues – technology makes it difficult to reach out to people, especially if they don’t have access.
- Front Lawn beautification projects work on streets that have single family dwellings – encourage pride in ownership and cooperation.
- Need something to encourage same feelings in apartment dwellers – how to bring them together.
- Things are getting better but we live in a city so there will always be city problems

Thinking back over the conversation, what groups or individuals would you trust to take action on these things?

- “Maybe the United Way can help us.”
- Attendees like that the neighborhood association (Anytown Neighborhood Association) are engaging the community to have these conversations.
- Habitat is doing a lot of good work here.
- Need to encourage Boys & Girls Club and seniors to take advantage of the park – that will deter criminal element if the residents take ownership of the park

If we came back together in 6 months or a year, what might you see which would tell you that the things we talked about tonight were starting to happen?

- Six months is “ample time” for the community and police to change.
- Suggestion that we could connect with the person whose job it is to oversee activities at the park.
- One person said they know there is someone like that, although they don’t know if they are doing a good job or not. He’s willing to check into it.
- We need consistency – be there over and over, again and again. “One-offs” feel good but it’s not enough without consistency.
- We have to trust ourselves to get it done as best as we can and hope that the city, police and corporate partners do their part.

Now that we’ve talked about this issue a bit, what questions do you have about it?

- *Note: The group really seemed to enjoy having their input valued. Thanked leader.*
- What will you do with the information from this meeting?
- We will make sure what you have shared gets shared.

Post Conversation Highlights from N. Fester and J. McCune

- *Group quickly became quite negative but responded well to instruction to start with aspirations; later on lots of frustration – Impasse? Waiting Place? Check against next conversations.*
- *Even though just 1 teenager, he seemed to agree with the adults – would be worth having a conversation with teens to check this out*
- *Worth talking with police to see how they see the park activity – seems to be a lightning rod/metaphor for participants – lots of attention during the conversation on the park itself*