



Summary of Public Involvement – Small Group Meetings and Surveys (Summer-Fall 2012)

Introduction & Background

To further and diversify our public involvement efforts, in June, 2012 we issued a Request for Proposals seeking applicants for a small amount of funding to conduct small group discussions within their communities to provide additional feedback for the GroWNC process. We were seeking partnerships with organizations/individuals in our region who could help us reach participants who were unlikely to attend public meetings, or who had been previously under-represented in planning efforts. We created a "portable meeting," called a Community Road Trip, that consisted of three simple questions that could be discussed in groups of 8-12 people. The three questions asked were:

- What do you love most about living here?
- What do you think most needs improvement?
- What do you want to see in your community in the future?

Following the application process, we partnered with 15 community organizations and individuals who conducted the small group discussions in their communities. Eighty-nine meetings were held across the counties of Buncombe, Haywood, Henderson, Madison, and Transylvania. In all, more than 800 participants provided insightful input about their communities. Examples of the types of groups that were involved in this process include vendors at local farmer's markets, church groups, senior adults in volunteer programs, 4-H youth, as well as members of the Latino, Russian/Moldovan/Ukrainian, and African American communities. In addition to these participants, 306 individuals completed surveys in response to the same set of questions. Over 1,100 members from these communities across the region provided feedback.

All of the responses gathered from community members have been combined into one database. Each response has been categorized based on recurring themes, including economic prosperity, accessibility, connectivity, and housing choices. With the use of the database, it is possible to compile summaries at the county level. Many community members provided specific suggestions about ways to implement their improvements.



1. What do you love most about your community?

In response to this question, nearly everyone provided input into two major categories. The first primary category was the importance of natural and cultural resources. People found the natural beauty of the area, including the mountains, farmland, and waterfalls, to be of great importance. Respondents appreciated the culture unique to the region, including the value placed in long-standing traditions, the welcoming atmosphere, as well as the wide variety of crafts and music. Individuals also reported that the region encompasses a strong sense of place. Community members reiterated the importance of churches, neighborhoods, and family. The second primary topic area was the concept that the region is viewed as a center for healthy communities. Respondents enjoyed the wide variety of activities they have access to, such as events at community centers as well as outdoor recreation activities.

Some comments received in response to this question include:

- "I love the mountains. Every day they look different, beautiful sunsets and waterfalls."
- "Rich culture, connection to and respect for generations."
- "91 years old, lived here all my life and loved every bit of it."

2. What needs the most improvement?

Several recurring themes were prevalent in response to the second question. The largest number of responses related to economic prosperity as well as access to jobs and services. There was an overwhelming concern about the need for a greater number of high quality job opportunities. Other suggestions voiced within this topic area included the need for local business support, issues related to tourism, and a lack of manufacturing businesses.

An overarching change that was seen as necessary across the board was for more transportation options as well as a better connected overall transportation system to improve accessibility and connectivity with the rest of the community. Included under this grouping were concerns raised about public transportation options. Many individuals expressed the need for a better bus system so they have access to employment, health care services, healthy food options, and schools. Across a wide range of respondents, there was a strong desire to see improvements in safe and connected walking and biking routes. People specifically requested more crosswalks, bike lanes, and greenways.

Other comments included the need for road improvements, increases in access to affordable housing, comments about education, a lack of healthy activities in the more rural areas, as well as concerns over safety in subsidized housing developments.

Some comments received in response to this question include:

- "Don't want to be left behind – need jobs and access to jobs; higher paying jobs"
- "No bus access to healthy food, commodities, or businesses"



- “Wish it were easier and safer to walk and bike”

3. What do you hope to see five years from now?

The last question builds upon the first two, and asked respondents to describe what they would most like to see in their community five years from now. Across the region, residents expressed a desire to have an increase in the number of jobs and employment locations as well as responsible growth in terms of land use. People also wanted to see improvements in access to health care and transportation options.

Some comments received in response to this question include:

- “Growth in all areas”
- “Continue to improve access to good health care and education”
- “Good education to prepare our youth for our global economy”

Conclusion

Overall, residents within the community felt very appreciative of the opportunity to provide meaningful feedback that would be considered by decision-makers. Based on written responses as well as reactions from the facilitators who organized and led the meetings, residents expressed a strong desire to become more integrated in the decision-making process.

The database will likely be a very helpful tool for local officials to easily view specific recommendations, broken down by geography and topic area.

A summary of this input, at the regional and county levels, was displayed in a “gallery” at the fall 2012 Community Meetings. In addition, we developed a similar portable, small group meeting and tools for use with the same set of grantees to complement to Community Meetings. This portable meeting is available to anyone or a small group as an alternative way to provide input. Detailed information about the public involvement process, including a presentation of the results and gallery displays, is available on our website at www.growwnc.org.