
The Next Montgomery County

A Community Conversation about Quality of Place

**WABASH
COLLEGE**



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**A Community Conversation about Quality
of Place**

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This report presents a summary of the conversations and the preferred actions generated by participants at the community conversation events on February 28 and March 3, 2015. It is *not* meant to be a complete representation of the public opinion of Montgomery County on quality of place. Using table notes, post-event facilitator surveys, and pre- and post-event participant surveys, the authors of the report have strived to create an accurate and complete portrayal of the most frequent themes and supporting arguments, while also identifying less dominant but still significant topics.

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Background

The community in Montgomery County, Indiana, is actively working to enhance its quality of place. A quality of place is more than just physical components—it is the perceptions of a person and groups of people experiencing and interpreting the buildings, people, and activities within a community.

In response to this ongoing effort, Dr. Sara Drury and the Wabash College student Democracy Fellows worked to research and develop a community conversation plan regarding the quality of place in Montgomery County. The project was supported by Wabash College's Wabash Democracy and Public Discourse (WDPD) initiative, an Indiana Humanities grant, and material support from the Wabash College Lilly Foundation IPOTEC-III mini-grants for experiential learning. Several local officials and organizations also expressed support for the project.

The goals for the events were:

1. to bring together community members to discover a more complete picture of the current quality of place;
2. to brainstorm areas for growth and improvement in Montgomery County's quality of place;
3. to engage in public discussion about and prioritization of improvements; and
4. to encourage future actions to improve Montgomery County's quality of place.

Focus Groups

To prepare for the community conversation events in February and March, the research team conducted 8 focus group interviews with community members, including elected and appointed public officials, nonprofit leaders, religious leaders, and educators. These conversations helped to highlight the desire for the community to have a public place to come together and discuss the current quality of place, but also brainstorm the quality of place possible in Montgomery County's future. The focus groups aided the creation of the conversation guide, which focused participants on discussing four qualities of place: people, places, policies, and things.

Event

The Next Montgomery County community conversations were public deliberation events that took place on two days, February 28 from 10am-12:30pm, at the Montgomery County 4H, and March 3 from 6pm-8:30pm at the Crawfordsville District Public Library. The conversations were open to the public, and advertised in the local newspapers, fliers to businesses, and various email listservs. The conversation plan was the same at both events, though the content differed based on participants.

When participants arrived at the Quality of Place community conversation, they were given a folder with information about the process, a framing guide, a pre- and post-event survey, and a contact card. Before the event started, participants were invited to fill out the pre-event survey if those chose to. The total number of pre-event surveys was n=46. There were 10 tables across the two events. Key demographic information is shown in Chart 1.

CHART 1 - Demographics

Average Age of Participants	55.71 years
Gender of Participants	25 male; 21 female

Additionally, Chart 2 shows the responses to the pre-survey questions, demonstrating that community members who participated in the event considered themselves involved in the community and fairly well educated on issues. The highest average response was to a question about the importance of having people with diverse opinions involved in public decision making, suggesting that the community members assembled would value the public deliberation process they were about to take part in, since it would bring forth multiple viewpoints about the quality of place in the community.

CHART 2 – Pre-Event Survey

Ratings: 1=Strongly Disagree, 2=Disagree, 3=Neutral, 4=Agree, 5=Strongly Agree; 0=no response

	Average Rating
I often do my part to make my community a good place to live.	3.717
I believe it is important for people with diverse opinions to be a part of community decision-making.	4.021
I take part in public discussions about issues that affect our community.	3.630
I consider myself well qualified to participate in politics and community affairs.	3.761
I seek information about issues that affect my community.	3.870

Attendees expressed their reasons for coming to the event in response to an open ended question in the pre-deliberation survey, and also communicated it at their tables as part of beginning the conversation. The vast majority of attendees came to this event because they were motivated to improve the local community, aware and concerned about local issues, and committed to working on collective solutions. For example, one member wrote that they came because they “love this community, and want to take an active role in making it GREAT!” Another shared that they “think it is very important to support every effort to enhance Montgomery County as a great place to live and work, to raise families, and attend school.” Some participants shared that they were interested hearing ideas and perspectives from other community members. A few participants noted that they wanted to support the community conversation efforts of Wabash Democracy and Public Discourse (WDPD) and/or made reference to past conversations run by this organization. Finally, there were several elected officials and active community organizers who expressed their desire to see progress in Montgomery County.

Montgomery County’s Current Quality of Place

After introducing themselves and sharing why they came to the community conversation on Quality of Place, the facilitators then led participants through a discussion of Montgomery County’s current quality of place. To focus this discussion, the quality of place was broken into four categories: People, Places, Policies, and Things. For each category, the conversation identified strengths already present in our community—what contributes positively to quality of place—as well as areas for growth and improvement in the future. Participants were given a guide with a few suggestions for each of the four

categories and a large amount of blank space to encourage brainstorming additional strengths and areas for growth and improvement in the four categories. A complete list of strengths and areas for growth is available in Appendix A of this report.

Across the two events, the most cited strengths in the community included:

- Places: Museums (9); Wabash College (8); the Library (8); protected natural areas (7)
- People: Diversity in age, culture, and religion (5); educated community members (3); Wabash students (3)
- Policies: Improvements to residences in the county (2); street cleaning (2); tax abatement policies (2); old buildings being torn down or renovated (2)
- Things: Town gatherings and festivals (7); swimming facilities (3); schools (3)

Participants also brainstormed areas for growth and improvement in Montgomery County. The most prevalent items mentioned included:

- Places: New businesses (7); beautify downtown (7); Public transportation (6); bike lanes (6), better infrastructure including sidewalks and potholes (4); preservation of natural areas (4)
- People: Improving anti-drug and rehabilitation programs (8); Lack of high school career center (7)
- Policies: Renovate older buildings (4)
- Things: Communicating assets within and outside the community (4)

Note: When items are listed above as having been discussed across multiple groups, the wording may not have been exactly the same in all groups, but the themes were consistent.

After brainstorming the breadth of the strengths and areas for growth and improvement in Montgomery County's Quality of Place, the facilitators then led their tables through a discussion of priorities: which areas for growth and improvement were most important? Each table submitted 2-3 areas to the deliberation moderator. The areas were compiled and projected on a screen so that everyone could see them. Then, participants voted using clickers to identify their top 2 priorities for discussion. For a complete list of prioritized areas and the vote, see Appendix B.

Analysis of Deliberative Conversations

After the top priorities were identified—two that would be considered by *all* tables, and one topic that each table could choose to consider—the facilitator of each table led participants through a deliberation about that priority. For each priority, participants discussed the benefits of this action, what resources were needed, anticipated obstacles, who needed to be involved in addressing this improvement, and what would be first steps in addressing this area for growth and improvement.

Deliberation 1, Priority #1: Community Strategic Planning

Participants acknowledged the importance of a sound and comprehensive strategic plan across the whole community so that there are clear goals and timelines. Many participants believed that this plan would give us a clear path of where we are going in the short and long term, which in turn would help

develop evaluative criteria. Some were of the opinion that a strategic plan would increase civic engagement and could identify the most acute problems within the community. A plan might also enable the community to address ongoing issues in human and capital resources, allowing leaders and community members to target issues strategically to maximize positive impacts.

When asked to identify concerns and roadblocks, community members voiced concern about those who might be resistant to change or strategic planning at the city or county level. Despite the identified benefits of a strategic plan, some worried about implementation due to opposition. For example, one survey noted that “individuals who fear change ... [would] oppose change vigorously.” Furthermore, a group of participants were troubled with the lack of resources to carry out this plan thoroughly and wondered if such a plan would be too diffuse. The question of who would take the lead on this planning process was prevalent across several discussion tables.

In discussing who should be involved in this process, participants suggested a wide range of actors but most put heavy emphasis on collaboration between local government, non-profit organizations, and citizens. Some even recommended forming Citizen Action Group to strengthen “Montgomery citizens’ middle management” in business and government, as well as promote greater civic involvement from community members.

A few attendees complained that this topic was too broad, so one table narrowed it down to what they felt was a common ground concern in planning: subsidized housing as a part of community planning. At this table, several participants voiced doubts about the wisdom of providing housing subsidies to the poor because this policy may attract poverty to the area. The table noted that any policy changes about housing needed to start with data collection in order to illustrate how grave or how insignificant this problem is. One participant expressed a worry that the “belief that [Crawfordsville] draws welfare recipients seems divisive [and] toxic to improvement. We need to address [and] publicize what is true.” This seems to be a topic that requires greater clarification.

Deliberation 1, Priority #2: Workforce Development

When asked how an emphasis on workforce development would benefit Montgomery County, participants noted that they felt a higher quality workforce would attract employers to the county, expand the tax base, and most importantly, keep the youth population here. Some claimed that an overemphasis on a college education had left many high school graduates with few options, while other tables noted the recent conversations that blue-collar jobs in Montgomery County are available. Thus, this gap in information resulted in an exodus of local human resources and warned of the need to educate young people on what they could do after high school. For example, one participant wrote on their survey that “our youth need opportunities [and] reasons to stay invested in [our] communities.” Besides the importance of retaining the youth population, some participants felt this could lead to subsequent benefits such as reduction in substance abuse.

Efforts to retain the young population in the community should start with informing high school students of their career options. Participants discussed the potentials of college and other viable career paths, particularly in manufacturing and industry. Some suggested greater collaboration between the local high schools, employers, and Ivy Tech to show the students that there are numerous local

opportunities and that they would not have to go anywhere else to get a job. Despite these optimistic sentiments, others worried that even if jobs are plentiful, certain individuals would not be able to work because they had children. Accordingly, some noted the need for developing a more dynamic network of daycare. In addition, another concern that sprung up among participants was the lack of attractive salaries. One survey mentioned the “continued low wages offered by our area employers and a refusal to see that a fair wage leads to more employee investment in their work.” In addition, another participant feared that “if schools balance too much on work skills they may pull back too much from college prep + motivation [sic].”

During this part of the conversation, participants identified first steps such as connecting local high schools with local employers and Ivy Tech and promoting manufacturing jobs to students and recently graduated young people.

Deliberation 2, Priority #1: Beautify Downtown Crawfordsville

During the second community conversation, the first prioritized topic was increasing the aesthetic beauty of Crawfordsville downtown and the surrounding parts of Montgomery County. In general, the groups saw this as an important priority because they saw it as a starting point for improving quality of place and tackling bigger issues. Many felt that improving the beauty of the town would attract more visitors, create a stronger environment for civic unity, present our youth with more fun and safe activities, and give the citizens of the county more pride in their residence. Developing the downtown might encourage business development and permanence, increasing the local economy. Others saw beautifying downtown as a way to increase foot traffic to downtown businesses. For those reasons, this strategy would also substantially help our local stores in the downtown area.

Even though attendees were optimistic about this improvement, there were certain hurdles. A major concern across several groups was that improving the town’s beauty might take away from the small town feel that many of the citizens fell in love with. Furthermore, if improvements focus on downtown Crawfordsville, it might reinforce feelings of division felt by Crawfordsville and the surrounding areas in Montgomery County.

During this process, each table took time to look at some of the major obstacles blocking their progress in this priority. Many tables brought up financial issues, explaining that beautifying the downtown would require funds that this county simply may not have. Others conveyed anxiety about implementing changes, with one participant suggesting: “We just don’t have the community support we need here.” Many of the tables stressed the importance of having a community that is willing to not only accept, but also take initiative in developing the community for the future.

When asked to identify who needed to be involved, community members generally agreed that local officials and sponsors would be important. Other groups included: Wabash College, state government, individual community members, organizations, and local companies. Some tables drew attention to the fact that even without funding, beautification could be possible: support does not always have to come in the form of finances, but in other forms like volunteerism.

Overall, the participants gathered felt passionate about this priority. Many agreed that this would be a good priority, although some noted that they were in support as long as it did not negatively affect them



personally in the forms of taxation. This conversation ended with the majority of the participants hopeful and excited about seeing an improved Crawfordville.

Deliberation 2, Priority #2: Connecting across the Community

Initially this topic emerged from participants as “connecting to the blue collar community.” Some tables used this as a topic, while others rejected the need to connect or “reach out” as patronizing or embodying stereotypes. Thus, we have titled this section as the conversation seemed to end at several tables: Connecting across the Community.

Looking at the conversations across the event, while the topic was initially suggested as “blue collar,” many tables discussed the overall diversity of the community. The tables generally agreed that focusing on this priority would reduce class barriers and perhaps increase our local workforce. People also saw this priority as a first step in building a unified and active community, a key component for quality of place. Others saw it important to reach out to those who are not present at many meetings because it would encourage the community to increase the overall diversity and voice of the community. A few participants noted that the time of public meetings often makes it challenging for those who work swing shift or second shift to attend these sorts of meetings, which would be a concern going forward.

There were also a fair number of drawbacks and obstacles that came out of this deliberation. Several attendees were concerned that this priority may offend or aggravate the blue collar members of the community. Several surveys noted that the “misconceptions” from their fellow participants about blue collar workers were problematic and that the conversation seemed to view this group as an “other needing an invitation” which was a significant problem. Some surveys used alternative language, talking about diverse “socio-economic groups.”

The majority of participants emphasized the importance of employers, government, nonprofits, and community members coming together. Of course, tables differed on what “coming together” meant—for example, one survey noted that the participant was “not convinced that togetherness is always the right way... letting people have choice and make separate decisions is okay;” another survey suggested that quality of place “means way different things to people.” Some participants emphasized the importance of engaging with the educational system, because when we foster community integration at an early age, that foundation is set and ready to fully develop further down the line.

From the conversations, it seemed as though community members wanted to reframe this priority as finding ways to connect to many groups of people in the community. Most agreed that having more diverse opinions in public conversations was important, and that divides in our community hurt our quality of place.



Table Selected Priorities

After discussing the two top-voted areas for growth and improvement, each table selected one additional priority to discuss. Chart 3 shows the list of priorities selected during each community conversation.

CHART 3: Priority 3 chosen by each table

FEBRUARY 28	MARCH 3
Create a “liveable community” – improve access and diversity / infrastructure	Develop Youth Programs
Protect and promote natural resources	Branding
Promote health in the community	Communication in the community
Increasing civic engagement	Evaluate effectiveness of policies
Economic Development Plan	Increase cultural diversity
Infrastructure	

The above chart and Appendix B demonstrate the wide variety of areas for growth that community members at the conversations prioritized. Many of them deal with improving items cited as existing strengths—such as promoting natural resources and developing youth programs. Others suggested the need for further conversation about key priorities.

Reflections

These discussions represented an early phase of community conversation—assessing the current quality of place and then identifying priorities from those members gathered at the two conversation events. Many “first steps” identified a variety of actors necessary for improvement, including citizens, government, and organizations.

At both events, participants were invited to fill out a post-deliberation survey at the event, with n=43 surveys completed. The surveys had a series of open ended questions and scaled rating questions. One open ended question asked participants the most important things they learned at the community conversation. Many responses talked about learning that others are interested in what community members think, that people “may want to be more inclusive with our community,” and that many are invested in quality of place. Other themes in what participants learned included new information about Crawfordsville, including both strengths and areas for growth. Still others expressed enthusiasm for the conversation process: “we can exchange views, focus on specific ideas-communication is possible;” “people are concerned about the same things I am;” and “there are areas of agreement” in the community.

On the whole, the surveys show that while most felt that the conversation introduced them to a diversity of ideas and their opinion was heard (see Chart 4, questions 2, 3, and 4), community members felt that the conversation was not broad enough (see Chart 4, question 5).

CHART 4: Post-Event Survey

	Average Rating
Today I learned something new about Montgomery County's quality of place.	3.884
Today I heard a lot of different viewpoints about Montgomery County's quality of place.	3.930
My viewpoint was heard at today's event.	4.488
The discussion at my table was productive.	4.209
Everyone that is affected by the issues discussed today was present in our conversations.	2.674
A variety of groups and actors are necessary to improve quality of place.	4.418
Leaders are the most important actors for improving quality of place.	3.698
I plan to stay/become involved with improving the quality of place in our community.	4.419
I plan to take part in future community actions to improve the quality of place in our community.	4.326
I seek information about issues that affect my community.	4.326
The facilitator at my table was helpful for the conversation today.	4.581

The Next Montgomery County community conversations brought together more than 50 community members across two events. From the results, it seems as though there are priorities for improving the community as well as a desire to have additional public forums and conversations, engaging many community members and diverse points of view as Montgomery County moves forward to improve its quality of place.

This report was presented in an open public meeting on Thursday, April 30, at 4:30 p.m. in the Will & Ginny Hays Center for Leadership and Community Development in Crawfordsville, Indiana.

Thanks to Montgomery County 4H, the Crawfordsville District Public Library, and the Will & Ginny Hays Center for Leadership and Community Development for hosting the public events for this project.

Appendix A: Montgomery County’s Current Quality of Place

Places	People
<p>Strengths</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Museums (9) • Wabash College (8) • Library (8) • Protected natural areas (7) • Close knit community (4) • Golf course (3) • Location in Indiana (2) • Movie Theater (entertainment) (2) • Hospital (2) • Athletic Center (2) • Churches • Community Centers • Diverse Industry • Animal Shelter • Good Neighborhoods • Airport • Public Schools • Small town 	<p>Strengths</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Diversity in age, culture and religion (5) • Educated people (3) • Wabash Students (3) • New people moving in/ migration (2) • Large blue-collar population (2) • Helpful citizens (2) • Philanthropy (2) • Low crime rate • Helpful to Wabash • People with a desire to improve the environment • Faithful to the community • Nice friendly people • Work ethic • 4H Community
<p>Areas for Growth and Improvement</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • New businesses (Denny’s Whole Foods, Qdoba) (7) • Beauty of Downtown Crawfordsville (7) • Public transportation (6) • Bike lanes (6) • Better infrastructure, such as sidewalks, fixing potholes (5) • Better preservation of natural areas (4) • More entertainment and shopping (3) • Better advertisements (3) • Railroad traffic (2) • Better athletic facilities (2) • Improvements on Court House • Unused buildings (2) • Small town • Industry • Lack of places keeping people here • School renovations • Quality of housing (subsidies) 	<p>Areas for Growth and Improvement</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Improve anti-drug and rehabilitation programs (8) • Lack of high school career center (7) • Greater collaboration between Montgomery County and Wabash College (3) • Improving home life (root issue) (2) • Lack of day care center (2) • Lack of young people (2) • Awareness of diversity (2) • Poverty in the community • Dependency on charities • Political diversity • Health • Brain drain • Not teaching leaders • Young people are not engaged • Work force development • Quality of housing (subsidies)



Policies	Things
<p>Strengths</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Old buildings/homes being torn down, renovated (2) • Tax abatement (2) • Street Cleaning (2) • Awareness of drug abuse • Stimulus package for jobs • Drug rehab (not incarceration) • Implemented classes on meals and food • Police force • Step up IT Department • Mayor easy to work with • Balanced city/county budget • Economic development program • Shoveling of walkways 	<p>Strengths</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Town festivals (7) • Swimming Facilities (3) • Schools are good (3) • Ivy Tech (2) • Service clubs (2) • League of Women Voters • Tutoring programs • Food Pantry • Willingness of citizens to be involved • Cooperation in politics • Addressing development • Sugar Creek • Care for less fortunate • Sporting events • Lunches on Plaza
<p>Areas for Growth and Improvement</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Renovate old buildings (4) • Add strength to police force (2) • Additional fire stations (2) • Enforce Policies (2) • Reformed Housing Policy (2) • More efficient Social Services (2) • Lack of readily available health care • Rewards programs for the youth • Strengthen tax policy • Incentives for Recycling • Old buildings are not accessible to the disabled • Greater civic engagement • Policy on small businesses 	<p>Areas for Growth and Improvement</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Communicating within and outside the community (4) • Landscape architecture (2) • Lack of manufacturing opportunities • Lack of Fine Arts programs • Lack of after school programs • Coordination between Crawfordsville and the rest of Montgomery County • Lack of strong convention center • Journal Review • Event planning • Respect for land • Specific jobs • County-wide Internet • Tax breaks-seen as negative • Property value is high • People do not feel welcome at Wabash • Public events (Multicultural events) • Sidewalks • Homeless shelters • New swimming pool • Paint on pavement • Child care • Community events (5K Runs) • Safer traveling



Appendix B: Prioritization and Voting Results

After discussing the strengths and areas for growth and improvement in quality of place, each table prioritized and submitted 2-3 topics. Then, participants used clickers to vote for their top two priorities that the entire group would discuss. Below are the priorities and voting percentages for each community conversation.

February 28: Top Areas for Growth and Prioritization

PRIORITIZED TOPIC (# OF TABLES THAT PRIORITIZED)	PERCENTAGE OF VOTE
Community Strategic Plan (3)	28.39%
Workforce Development	20.8%
Health	10.31%
Infrastructure (3)	10.13%
Increase civic engagement and leadership (2)	9.76%
Economic Development	8.5%
Tourism (2)	5.24%
Child care	3.44%
Increase diversity in community	1.8%
Cooperation between county and city	1.63%

March 3: Top Areas for Growth and Prioritization

PRIORITIZED TOPIC (# OF TABLES THAT PRIORITIZED)	PERCENTAGE OF VOTE
Aesthetics of downtown	25%
Connections with the blue collar community	11.5%
Substance abuse	9.76%
Cultural diversity	9.6%
Coordination with social services	9.6%
Campus-Community partnership	9.6%
Evaluation of effectiveness of local policies	7.69%
Mentoring for youth	7.69%
Transportation	5.77%
Housing policies	3.85%

