
Greene County's Future Opportunities Deliberation Report

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A Community Conversation

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This report presents a summary of the conversations and the preferred actions generated by participants at the workshop on November 29, 2016. It is *not* meant to be a complete representation of the public opinion of Greene County’s economic future. 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.

All research for this project has been approved by Wabash College IRB #1608201.

Background for the Deliberation

The Greene County Community Foundation sponsored a workshop on civil conversations to engage local public problems. The workshop featured a deliberation, or a small group conversation process, focusing on improving Greene County's economic future and opportunities. To prepare for the community deliberation and workshop, the Wabash research team interviewed local leaders as well as involved citizens who all shared interest in Greene County's current and future success. These conversations provided our team helpful background information that served as our platform for guiding the conversations.

The deliberation occurred as part of a workshop on productive civic discourse on Tuesday, November 29, 2016, from 5-8 p.m. at the Greene County Community Event Center. Titled *Greene County's Future Opportunities*, the workshop functioned as both an educational workshop of deliberative practices as well as a live deliberation with trained facilitators from Wabash Democracy and Public Discourse. The purpose was to show applications for community dialogue as a tool for public engagement and decision making around community concerns. After a one hour introduction, participants in the workshop broke into three groups and engaged in a deliberation on future opportunities for Greene County. The facilitation from the event produced this report out that highlights community attitudes and ideas.

Based on 21 pre-surveys, participants at the workshop were predominately white with a mean age of 51 years old. The age range was distributed across a range from 23 to 74, and a median identical to the mean. Female participants outnumbered males, but each of the three table had males and females, as well as a range of ages.

CHART 1 - Demographics

| | |
|-----------------------------|--------------------|
| Average Age of Participants | 51 Years Old |
| Gender of Participants | 8 Male & 13 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. Most felt confident in their presence in their own communities, and nearly all felt it is very important to have a variety of opinion in the decision making process.

CHART 2 – Pre-Event Survey

Ratings: 1=Strongly Disagree, 2=Disagree, 3=Neutral, 4=Agree, 5=Strongly Agree

| | Average Rating |
|---|----------------|
| I often do my part to make my community a good place to live. | 4.2 |
| I believe it is important for people with diverse opinions to be a part of community decision-making. | 4.6 |
| I take part in public discussions about issues that affect our community. | 3.7 |
| I consider myself well qualified to participate in politics and community affairs. | 3.8 |
| I seek information about issues that affect my community. | 4.4 |

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. An overwhelming majority of the participants shared that they wanted to make a positive impact on the community that they live in, whether that would be improving economic opportunities or social engagement. They also viewed the conversation as a method to build their own abilities to converse on difficult topics that have complex tradeoffs. Finally, others came to learn and garner new ideas from others.

Greene County's Current Strengths and Areas for Growth/Improvement

After introducing themselves and sharing why they came to the event, the facilitators then led participants through a discussion of Greene County's current strengths as well as areas for growth and improvement. To focus this discussion, the team used four categories that make up a "quality of place" assessment: People, Places, Policies, and Things. For each category, participants in the deliberation identified strengths already present in the community—what contributes positively to quality of place—as well as areas for growth and improvement in the future. Participants were given a deliberation guide with a chart that had 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.

While a complete list of strengths and areas for growth is available in Appendix A of this report, here we summarize the dominant themes across the three tables.

Across the three tables, the most cited strengths in the community included (*note: the x# indicates multiple tables discussed this*):

- Places: Hospital (x2), Natural Resources (x2), Outdoor Recreation Spaces (x2)
- People: Many Older Citizens Loyal to County (x2), People have Family Values (x2)
- Policies: Low Taxes
- Things: Community Working with Farmer's Market (x2), Community Foundation (x2)

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

- Places: Transportation/Infrastructure (x2), Local Work Opportunities (x2), Developing Tourism (x2)
- People: Workforce Development (x3), Lack of Diversity (x2), Need Entertainment (x2), Need More People Returning to the Community (x2)
- Policies: Lack of Building Permits/General Regulation (x3), Lack or Bias of Enforcement for Ordinances/Law (x2), Consolidate Schools (x2)
- Things: Substance Abuse, Develop Riverfront, Lack of County-Wide Organizations, Regional Leadership

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 strengths and areas for growth, the facilitators then led their tables through a discussion designed to prioritize which areas for growth and improvement were most important. Each table submitted 2-3 areas to the deliberation moderator, Dr. Sara Drury. There was some overlap, and so this process resulted in five total areas to vote on: workforce alignment/jobs, encouraging county-level engagement, regional leadership/planning, infrastructure, and education/schools. The five areas were compiled and put on an easel pad so that everyone could see them. Then, participants voted using clickers to identify their top priorities for further discussion.

The three top priorities were (1) workforce alignment/jobs, (2) encouraging county-level engagement, and (3) regional leadership/community planning. For a complete list of prioritized areas and the vote count, see Appendix B.

Analysis of Prioritization Conversations

After the three top priorities were identified, participants were invited to pick a table that aligned with their interest and/or top preference. Each table had roughly the same amount of participants, and many participants moved tables.

At each table, the groups discussed one priority, focusing on the benefits of this action, what resources were needed to move forward and improve the community around this issue, anticipated obstacles and ways to address them, who needed to be involved in addressing this improvement, and appropriate first steps.

Priority 1: Workforce Alignment/Jobs

Encouraging a more diverse and engaged workforce is one of Greene County's top priorities because community members felt it would provide more opportunities for young people (thus enabling them to stay in or return to the community) and also create room to further develop Greene County. One of the biggest concerns discussed was that young people often grow up in the community, go off to higher education, and never return. It is believed that this cycle is negatively impacted by limited job opportunities in Greene County. Participants discussing this area shared their worries that if something is not done to improve the job possibilities, Greene County could fade into dust as young people continue to leave.

To begin addressing this issue, participants advocated for **conducting a SWOT analysis** to determine the economic growth and job prospects for Greene County. As the Greene County mining industry fades, the new opportunities for Greene County need to be found. Once those are established, the workforce should be built based on those strengths, with opportunities for flexibility as the times change.

Participants stressed that there also needs to be an **educational emphasis placed on small businesses and entrepreneurship**, particularly in fostering this sort of attitude in young people. This was seen as something that could be a partnership between successful business owners in and around the community, local K-12 schools, and possibly higher education partners (such as Indiana University).

Indeed, this small group stressed the need for involvement from a wide variety of people throughout their discussion. Community leaders, business leaders, education, and nonprofit organizations all need to be involved, particularly if the community intends to apply for grants to help address this issue. As the

discussion closed, the table also stressed that strengthening current networks and building new ones—such as reaching out to communities similar to Greene County who have successfully tackled these challenges—would ultimately aid workforce development and economic opportunity.

Priority 2: Encouraging County-Level Engagement

Encouraging community engagement was the second “top priority” based on the vote, and it came up in different ways for each group in the first stage of the discussion. As they discussed the problem further in the second stage of the deliberation, local leaders in this group felt that many citizens within the community did not participate in local elections or do not bring issues to the leaders responsible for them. Participants shared their impressions that many people in Greene County seemed frustrated, but instead of notifying the proper authorities, they would stay localized and create an aura of dissatisfaction with their social group. This means that there is a general aura of negativity among some groups in the population, which is not conducive to working together. In fact, the participants shared that while the local government has held events, they receive little participation or interest from their target groups. While many people may be busy and lack time to dedicate to events, often times citizens seem like they just don’t want to get involved.

Therefore, after discussing this problem, participants in this small group felt that it is crucial to change this trend and encourage high participation from as many community members. This would enable changes to be better assessed and endorsed, as well as cater to their constituents’ unknown needs.

The first significant action step discussed by this small group was to **form an outreach committee** that would incorporate members from various social groups or organizations that would serve as representatives from the groups to the local government. This sort of public engagement effort would need the involvement and support from the local government, but should be a mix of government officials and community members. The longer term goals for this group would be to focus on community engagement in the school curriculum in order to begin cultivating community involvement, ultimately serving to bring up young people investing in the community and reach parents through their children. Participants saw opportunities to involve local clubs or programs such 4-H as well. Second, participants also stressed the need to **create engagement via social media, apps, and other internet activities** to serve the dual purposes of marketing the outreach program and organizing interested community members for activities.

The group concluding by stressing that there would need to be support from the local government, local clubs, businesses, and social leaders to organize the outreach committee. Then, the committee could focus on collaboration with educators to prioritize community engagement in class rooms as well as advertise opportunities for involvement in clubs or local leadership.

Priority 3: Regional Leadership/ Planning

The third priority was promoting regional leadership. This area for improvement arose because some participants felt that Greene County has a lack of connectivity between the various small towns and communities within the county. As they discussed the problem, participants felt that there are ample opportunities to come together, and that the need is urgent.

As an action, this small group encouraged **forming a group to guide regional leadership efforts and community planning**. This group should then seek to hear from the public about planning the future of Greene County – a broader public than was assembled at the workshop event they were taking part in.

While the group had energy about planning processes, at the same time, they struggled with leadership and involvement. They felt that having Greene County begin to adopt new ideas and efforts will require more risk takers in leadership. The group hoped that there could be a county leader, a single individual or organization who would coordinate, invest in the community, and be willing to experiment and take risks. They stressed that resilience will also be important, because it could take time for community members to see benefits. The group was unsure of where exactly to start but they were adamant that it was essential to help better Greene County.

Reflections

As they looked at improving the future of Greene County, each of the three deliberation groups stressed the need for more public engagement, more planning, and more involvement from a broader group of communities and citizens. Participants were eager to share their thoughts and came up with a variety of strengths and areas for growth for Greene County. While the conversations eventually narrowed into three topics, those topics remained related around business growth, employment, and youth engagement.

Each group tackled the issue at a different pressure point, with some residents pointed to the lack of engagement with the locals and focused on inspiring the youth to take more civic action and others suggesting thought that county employment was the larger area for growth, and with added prosperity other issues would fade. Still others suggested that with stronger regional leadership (in business and/or government), then a central plan would alleviate public concerns as things improved. Participants largely agreed, however, that proactive changes need to be made for the health of the county and that engaged leaders and citizens are the actors to make change happen.

As Chart 3 demonstrates (below), post-survey responses emphasized that the deliberation was productive. While many respondents identified as involved citizens committed to learning more about their community in the pre-survey, at the post-survey, they felt that not all groups affected by the issues discussed were present. All participants were not completely convinced that leaders were the most important actors, which may reflect some of the themes discussed earlier around the need to have broad public involvement in future actions.

Perhaps most importantly, those who came to the event plan on remaining committed to improving the community and continuing the work discussed.

CHART 3 – Post-Event Survey

Ratings: 1=Strongly Disagree, 2=Disagree, 3=Neutral, 4=Agree, 5=Strongly Agree

| | Average Rating |
|---|----------------|
| Today I learned something new about Greene County. | 3.8 |
| Today I heard a lot of different viewpoints about Greene County and the future. | 3.8 |
| My viewpoint was heard at today's event. | 4.5 |
| The discussion at my table was productive. | 4.3 |
| Everyone that is affected by the issues discussed today was present in our conversations. | 2.7 |
| A variety of groups and actors are necessary to improve Greene County's future. | 4.6 |
| Leaders are the most important actors for improving Greene County's future. | 3.7 |
| I plan to stay/become involved with improving the quality of place in our community. | 4.3 |
| I plan to take part in future community actions to improve the quality of place in our community. | 4.3 |
| I seek information about issues that affect my community. | 4.2 |
| The facilitator at my table was helpful for the conversation today. | 4.4 |

Appendix A: Assessing Greene County

Notes: the x# indicates multiple tables discussed this idea; ideas are listed in alphabetical order.

| Places | People |
|---|---|
| Strengths | Strengths |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Agricultural land • Close to other larger city job opportunities • Developing tourism • Hospital (x2) • Lack of accessibility, and so remote/natural lands • Natural resources (x2) • Outdoor recreation spaces • Tulip Trestle | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Civic organizations • Higher education access • Many older citizens loyal to county (x2) • People have family values (x2) |
| Areas for Growth and Improvement | Areas for Growth and Improvement |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Access to goods • Childcare • Citizens unfamiliar with Greene County opportunities • Develop tourism • Develop local industries to compete with larger city competitors • Education • Lack of Chamber of Commerce • Local work opportunities • Transportation/infrastructure (x2) | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Address the lack of diversity (x2) • Address the gap between communities within the county • Encourage more community events • Workforce development (x3) • Lack of risk takers/institutions to help them • Leverage advantages of school & faith based communities • Need entertainment (x2) • Need more young people returning to community (x2) |

| Policies | Things |
|--|---|
| Strengths | Strengths |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Low taxes | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Community foundation (x2) • Community is great for returning young families • Community working to sustain and develop a strong farmer's market (x2) • Go kart track • School tracks and facilities |
| Areas for Growth and Improvement | Areas for Growth and Improvement |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Consolidate schools (x2) • Lack of (or biased) enforcement for ordinances/law (x2) • Lack of building permits/general regulation (x3) • No oversight for low quality buildings • Need a county manager | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Lack of county-wide organizations • Need to develop riverfront • Need to develop stronger regional leadership • Substance abuse amongst community members |

Appendix B: Prioritization and Voting Results

After brainstorming strengths and areas for growth, the facilitators then led their tables through a discussion designed to prioritize which areas for growth and improvement were most important. Each table submitted 2-3 areas to the deliberation moderator, Dr. Sara Drury. There was some overlap, and so this process resulted in five total areas to vote on: workforce alignment/jobs, encouraging county-level engagement, regional leadership/planning, infrastructure, and education/schools.

The five areas were compiled and put on an easel pad so that everyone could see them. Then, participants voted using clickers to identify their top priorities for further discussion. Below are the rankings of the group.

- 1) Work Alignment/Job Alignment - 30% prioritized
- 2) Encouraging County Engagement- 26% prioritized
- 3) Regional Leadership - 22% prioritized
- 4) Infrastructure (Housing/Transit) - 13% prioritized
- 5) Education/Schools - 9% prioritized