



SMITHSBURG COMMUNITY CONVERSATION

Saturday, February 23rd, 2019



WASHINGTON COUNTY
FREE LIBRARY

Where People & Possibilities Meet



United Way
of Washington County, MD

Smithsburg Community Conversation

The Event

On the afternoon of Saturday, February 23, 2019, a cross-section of Smithsburg citizens broke bread together at a free lunch/ community conversation organized by United Way of Washington County and Washington County Free Library as a part of the re-establishment of Choose Civility Washington County. For this event, held at the Smithsburg Branch Library, several tables were placed end to end in the Community Room to create one “long” table with six seats (for one volunteer and five participants, ideally) at each section of table.

Approximately 22 participants attended this event. Each guest was directed to a different section of table. Seating participants with people they didn’t already know was meant to encourage engagement with everyone at the table, foster friendships, and highlight the importance of civil discourse with others.

Approximately 15 volunteers were also present to help and facilitate during the event. Table hosts attended a brief training prior to the event about facilitations and notetaking based on Harwood Institute theories for successful community conversations. During the event, at least one volunteer “table host” was seated at each section and guided discussion around the following questions (displayed on the table as paper table runners perfect for notetaking):

1. What brought you to the community conversation?
2. How would you describe your neighborhood?
3. What brought your family to Smithsburg?
4. What kind of a community do you want?
5. What are the most important issues or concerns facing our community right now?
6. What are the kinds of things that could be done that would make a difference with these issues?
7. What groups or individuals do you trust to take action on these things?

These questions introduced participants to one another and established the objective of event—to hear directly from “the people” what issues affect them day to day, and to discuss these issues in a civil way. Conversations began to pick up pace after initial introductions as participants settled into their wonderful lunch of salad and soup prepared by the Smithsburg Market.

During the one and a half hours of conversation, guests were generally engaged with others at their table. Table hosts kept the discussions on track, productive, and took notes using the exact words or phrases participants used to describe important ideas. There were no issues with tensions during discussion and cell phones were generally away as participants engaged with those around them.

As with the original Longest Table event, the intent of this lunch was not to focus solely on the issues or encourage negativity. Rather, our hope is that these smaller community conversations will fuel initiatives within community organizations and help determine strategic plans to benefit the people of Washington County. There may be innovative ideas listed here which inspire local groups into action. That solution may cause a chain reaction of further positive change! It is also our hope that, for the attendees, this program will ignite a desire to think positively, engage civilly, and work conscientiously to create positive change within the community. There were about 37 people at the Smithsburg Community Conversation in total, nearly reaching our goal number of participants. That is, of course, also 37 opportunities to inspire civil discourse and create progress

Concerns Discussed Most Often

Overall, the conversations focused on several issues which have been at the forefront of public discourse in the last year. These numbers are derived from answers to the second and fifth questions about current neighborhoods and issues facing the community.

Mentions of children, kids, programs for children, education —
Mentions of substance abuse, drug(s), opioid(s), addiction —
Mentions of safety —
Mentions of public transportation, infrastructure —
Mentions of mental health, mental illness —
Mentions of racism, judgement —

Resolutions Discussed Most Often

The issues that concerned the participants most are reflected in their discussions of steps which could be taken to create positive change. These numbers are derived from answers to the sixth and seventh questions about steps which could be taken to address concerns in the community and groups trusted to take those steps.

Mentions of children, kids, programs for children, education —
Mentions of options for mental health treatment —
Mentions of substance abuse or addiction treatment —

The Conversations

The following notes were collected from the conversation notes written by volunteers and participants, notes made on the paper table runners by volunteers and participants, and the surveys returned by volunteers and participants at the end of the event. These answers have been directly transcribed from notes taken during each tables' conversations and are listed together here in order of the questions asked.

As per the Harwood Institute method, particular attention is paid to the words and phrases used by participants in their answers.

1. What brought you to the community conversation?

- Don't want to be isolated
- Everything that goes on in Smithsburg can impact Cascade
- General sense of curiosity to see what others are concerned about
- Being a good neighbor
- Came from out of state
- See what the process is
- Live in Smithsburg and want to take active role in the community
- Curious about what will take place

2. How would you describe your neighborhood?

- Respectful of others
- Depressing
- Overly cautious of privacy – guarded
- A lot of great people
- Sad, falling down buildings
- To make change and get involved
- Schools are a draw
- Great place to raise a family
- Love my neighborhood!
- A residential community, not a business-centered community
- Know my neighbors and we help each other out

3. What brought your family to Smithsburg?

- Job
- Vocation
- Family farm
- Raise family
- Small town feel

4. What kind of a community do you want?

- Inclusive
- No drug problems
- Somewhere to slow down (like restaurants)
- Healthy community with activities
- Thriving economy
- More current, up-to-date, and innovative businesses\
- Fun things to do
- I like the idea of a small town and knowing neighbors
- Reasons to stay and play here
- Preserve the character of the area but bring commerce
- Safe, friendly, thriving
- Want a safe, involved, engaged community

5. What are the most important issues or concerns facing our community right now?

- Visible law enforcement
- Crime and drugs
- Trust in appointed officials – the topic most discussed in our group of six
- Services
- Interaction
- Need strategic plan for economic development
- Community collaboration
- Drug issues
- Transportation
- Isolation
- Hunger
- Homelessness
- Mental illness
- Drugs
- High level of stress on young people, as evidenced by suicide attempts of high school students in area
- Lack of services
- Illiteracy
- Lack of employment
- Assisted living
- Trust
- Response time to emergencies
- Problems with judicial system
- Environmental regulations impact on farmers
- More responsive customer service
- Funeral services
- Change
- Need more policemen available
- Financial strength
- Communication
- Involvement
- Mental health
- More police protection in Smithsburg and Washington County
- Frustration with police response time
- More help for farmers
- Rising costs of county services
- Better parking
- More long-term planning for land and developments
- Opioid addiction and associated crime
- Economic development

- Being willing to accept change
- Growth
- Consensus
- Officials in town—involvement
- Fear of moving forward
- Growth
- Jobs
- Make Main Street more appealing
- Connection
- Lack of community engagement
- Our youth
- Mental illness
- No elderly services (dementia, assisted living)
- No homeless services
- Taxes raised too often
- No afterschool care options
- Drug use
- Hunger
- Only Antietam for cable/Internet access

6. What are the kinds of things that could be done that would make a difference with these issues?

- More sheriff deputies
- “Meet and Greet” with local leaders in the county
- Teach public servants to act civilly
- Make county positions elected, not appointed with greater accountability
- Attract new business, smart growth initiatives
- Preserve character of the area
- Churches focus on local missions
- Local community center
- Building loving relationships and community connections
- More events like this
- Fear of more traffic and other issues if there’s a boom in business
- Town recognize library and other local organizations
- More public visible law enforcement
- Lack of volunteer groups
- Traffic on Jefferson Boulevard
- Revenue stream of town (Shadow Mountain annexation was good)
- Streamlines way to communicate with community—not everyone is on social media
- Pot luck community social
- Grant writing
- Attractions pamphlet

- Benchmark other communities—what works?
- Find the talent!
- Work collaboratively together
- Local business and health fair expo
- Volunteer opportunities—use schools and surveys
- Website about Smithsburg events
- Flyers with information like upcoming community meetings
- Collaboration with agencies
- Create connections and human relationships
- Ask people what matters to them
- Seniors teaching others
- Communication
- Ask “what needs to happen for downtown to happen”
- Be part of the solution—not the problem
- Go to town council meetings to get more involved in what’s going on
- Offer solutions to your complaints
- Community center for kids and teens
- Community center space
- Partnerships with town employers, healthcare, and town council
- Survey community to identify skills and state what needs are, how to volunteer, how to get engaged
- More public transportation
- Soup kitchen
- Adults listen to teens talk about issues at regular event (like teen addition panel held in Hagerstown)
- Gathering places for kids
- Drug education
- Need initial change so people feel heard
- Healthy conversation—too much confrontation
- More police officers available
- Community health center with “pop up” or rotating services in at regular times
- Ways to release tension
- Invite council to more conversations like this
- Older and younger generations working together (tutoring students and helping with homework, for example) in common areas
- Need a champion or cheerleader to highlight strengths and opportunities in Smithsburg
- Establish neutral place to host local group meetings and forums
- Way to anonymously submit questions for town meetings and other group forums
- Engaged community members
- Hold local government accountable
- Share what funding priorities are
- Community voice needs that go untouched

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7. What groups or individuals do you trust to take action on these things?

- Library
- Public official attendance [at community events]
- Market
- New mayor, new ideas, great potential
- Library
- Teens in community—listen to the new generation
- Town council
- Churches
- Youth and new faces – there is no current group to turn to
- Collaboration with organizations to keep conversations going
- Smithsburg Market
- Doctors
- Businesses
- Tabitha’s Table
- Schools
- Trusted Mayor and town officials
- Government
- Businesses
- Youth skate park or more things for kids to do
- Churches
- Library
- Mention issues in churches and other public places to encourage young men and women to join the forces
- More “in-home companion” or “Visiting Angel”-type services
- Tabitha’s Table looking to create soup kitchen
- Combination of non-profits who use their specialties to reach a person in all need areas
- Leaders to help gather people and organize them

Conclusions

After the initial Small Town Community Conversations event in Smithsburg, participants were already inquiring about the possibility meeting together in smaller groups in the future to focus on problem-solving. We hope that this can become an annual event with a greater number of participants and new or continued support from community agencies, organizations, and businesses.

Partners & Sponsors

Thank you to the partners, sponsors, and volunteers who made this event possible!

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