

**Johnson County for All:
How Can We Make Johnson County Livable for All of Its
Residents?**



Saturday, April 16, 2016
11am-2pm
Johnson County Health & Human Services Building
Room 203
855 S Dubuque St
Iowa City, IA

Hosted by the Iowa Program for Public Life (a project of the University of Iowa Communication Studies Department), this event was a university-community partnership:

- Community Transportation Committee
- JC Affordable Homes Coalition
- League of Women Voters JC
- JC Livable Community
- PATV Channel 18
- Johnson County Board of Supervisors (Supervisor Mike Carberry)
- UI Dept. of Communication Studies
- UI Office of Outreach and Engagement
- UI College of Arts and Sciences

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Please Note:

This report does not represent public opinion, but rather the unique voice and ideas generated when one group of community members were led to think deeply about their concerns, ideas, and priorities.

Background/Goals:

Hosted by the Iowa Program for Public Life, this facilitated community conversation was designed to bring together North Liberty, Coralville, Iowa City, and all of Johnson County to learn and listen to each other about what we should do to ensure the highest quality of life for all of our neighbors. "Livable" is defined as the sum of the factors that add up to a community's quality of life—including the built and natural environments, economic prosperity, stability and equity, educational opportunity, health, and cultural, entertainment and recreation possibilities available to community members.

Our central goal was to tap into collective wisdom by bringing a diverse group of citizens and stakeholders together to learn and listen to each other and identify opportunities for coordination and innovation. While the group assembled was diverse in terms of age and sectors (over 30 local organizations and institutions were present), this diversity did not extend to sufficient racial and geographic representation. Because greater representation is required to create a vibrant civic culture and strong public voice, the IPPL is committed to working to improve this for future events by developing more and stronger partnerships and focusing outreach efforts into diverse communities.

This report was compiled and designed by Student Associates of the Iowa Program for Public Life and students of Comm 1830: Solving Public Problems. Lead Report Designers were: Emily Giovannetti, Courtney O'Meara, and Jennifer Rolston.



A group of about 60 individuals from the community came to partake in the deliberation. Event attendees included, but were not limited to, citizens, mayors, and County Supervisors. Utilizing the World Café method, a facilitator led participants in small roundtable discussions, organized around three central questions:

- What do we currently know, and what do we still need to learn?
- What assets do we have that can be better utilized, more coordinated, or reinvented to make progress?
- What opportunities do we see emerging from this conversation?

Participants were seated in groups of 5-6 people, with a student note taker capturing new ideas and tensions that emerged from each round. Facilitators used predesigned probing questions to encourage participants toward dialogic and deliberative outcomes, as opposed to expressive and conversational ones. Participants began in one group while discussing the first question. In order to mix the interactions and cross-pollinate insights and ideas, participants were asked to move to a new group for the second and third rounds of discussion.

Open Space

After the three rounds of discussion ended, participants were given the opportunity to choose what they wanted to discuss next in an “Open Space Discussion.” If a participant had an idea they particularly wanted to discuss, they were given the chance to write it on a poster during the lunch break. Each individual was given a small dot sticker to add to the poster of the topic of their choice. The group then broke up into smaller sections based on the chosen topics, seated throughout the building, with one participant each group serving as the discussion facilitator.

Open Space Topics Included:

- More living wage initiatives (apprenticeships, training, outreach)
- Communicating services to individuals in need
- Increase diverse participation
- Role of the University
- Need for centralized resources/leadership
- Engaging Private Sector Employers in Housing+Transportation Needs
- Partnerships across sectors (public/private/nonprofit/etc.)
- Transportation expansion (esp. As barrier to work)
- Draft a housing Bill or Rights

Analysis of Deliberative Conversations

Round 1:

“What do we currently know, and what do we still need to learn?”

In an effort to better understand community member’s insights on the livability of Johnson County, round one of this community-based discussion posed the following question: What do we currently know, and what do we still need to learn? This broad question allowed participants to share both their concerns and positive insights on their perspective of Johnson County and the degree to which it is a livable space. Major themes that emerged during this round of conversations included transportation difficulties lack of affordable housing, and the disconnection between urban and rural areas in the county.

Transportation

In regards to transportation, many participants expressed that the public bus system needs to be updated. Given this system seems to be the most popular transportation option for many community members, people agreed that there needs to be longer bus routes and they should expand wider in distance to accommodate late work schedules, weekend hours, and other geographic locations that do not have accessible bus stops. While people feel strongly about updating the bus system, people also wanted to find ways in which cities like Coralville, North Liberty, Cedar Rapids and other rural areas can be connected more efficiently. It is perceived that much of the new development is focused mainly in the Iowa City area, yet attention needs to be given to other cities and rural areas.

Neighborhoods

People also expressed they want neighborhoods that are walkable and bikable to major attractions, such as the downtown Iowa City area. However, the only neighborhoods that are livable and walkable seem to be too expensive for many community members' budgets. Many conversations were had about wanting to be closer, yet not wanting to pay a higher rent. According to many participants, the land prices are too expensive near the downtown area and they feel students are the only ones to afford that property. These ideal properties, ones that are walkable and bikable to the downtown area, are perceived to be only for students and not accommodating to larger and low-income families.

{ *Walkable, Likeable, Bikeable, Neighborhoods* }

Round 2:

“What assets do we have that can be better utilized, more coordinated, or reinvented to make progress?”

In order to make true changes on the issues stated above, we must focus on the assets we have available in the community. We must also realize what needs to be done for these assets to be utilized to their full potential. Only then will we be able to move forward in improving Johnson County. It is easy to only focus on the negative aspects one experiences, so it is important to remember to focus on what can be done.

The University

The University the largest entity in Johnson County, with an estimated \$6 billion annual economic impact. The discussion found that if the University was able to better utilize all the resources and power it has to benefit the community instead of just its students, Iowa City could improve greatly. Some found problems with the University expanding, and felt that it was happening too quickly and was



using up all of the county's resources. Perhaps this was felt because of the disconnect locals experience with the University. When the city is made up of mainly a Big 10 university, it is easy to feel alienated if one is not a student. It is also possible for the University to be the one to bring smaller communities together, and help Johnson County feel more like one instead of a few small towns.

Housing

Housing was also a large topic in the discussion. The participants felt that the affordable housing options were not affordable enough; and when there were affordable options available, it is rented out immediately from one student to another. Most believed that more resources should be put towards low-income housing and community development, instead of what feels like benefitting only the students at the University. However this is understandably realistic since building developers can get more money from students compared to low-income families.

Transportation

Transportation was also a large discussion topic during the event. Participants were looking for a more unified transportation system throughout the entire county. While it was understood and appreciated the large amount of public transportation offered in the city areas, more is still needed for those who rely on it. One woman stated how she wishes there were busses on Sundays so that people could take the bus to church in the morning, and no busses are offered during that time. A better transportation system could also work to unite the different towns together, instead of all busses meeting downtown Iowa City. There are also those who face difficulty with relying on the transportation systems for their jobs. Some citizens do not own cars and are being held to wherever the bus routes go. Improving this system is decreasing unemployment for the county.

Agencies

Participants felt that Johnson County has agencies available that offer many benefits, however there are a few things that must change so they are being used to their full potential. There is still the feeling that each city in Johnson County are not working together, making each town feel isolated from the others in the county. The participants were proud of the 'volunteer spirit' that exists, however they felt that each agency felt as if they were competing with each other instead of cooperating to help the overall community. Specifically, one participant wants to see more communication between each crisis center and food pantries. Perhaps if this was to happen, more people would be helped overall, and the 'volunteer spirit' will become stronger.

An involved community

Participants agreed that there needs to be more community-wide involvement throughout Johnson County. This stems from the strong 'volunteer spirit' felt in the county, but each town feeling isolated from the entirety of Johnson County. Some felt that the leadership of these agencies should be in charge of empowering people to get involved. Some were looking for more extension work in community schools, such as after-school programs, nutrition education for child care providers, or community based mentoring.

Round 3: Actions

“What opportunities do we see emerging from this conversation?”

The participants were then asked to think of possible outcomes from this conversation. They were asked to consider the assets the community has to offer, and how we may utilize them more efficiently. The deliberative process was gaining traction at this point, and many of the participants were forming ideas.

Some possible opportunities they saw emerging included the following:

Transportation is necessary to accessibility:

The participants agreed that public transportation needed improvement throughout the county. The development of a more efficient transportation system would improve civic capacity and improve relations from city to city. One idea the participants found promising was the idea that employers would offer employees a subsidy for their bus fares/passes. This would then make jobs more accessible to people not living in a walkable distance from areas of business, and also would increase the revenue of the public transit. This increased revenue would give funding to the transit, and allow for expansion. The tradeoff addressed in conversation was the concern of putting a cost burden onto employees to financially support the transportation for their employees.

Open Communication:

One issue that concerned the participants was the lack of communication between entities in the community. One possible opportunity they saw as a solution for improved communication was an elected board filled with community members, one representing each city. There was a desire to connect our community resources, both private sector resources and governmental resources. One participant stated, “There’s the availability of resources, we must communicate them to the community.” They would like to see more partnerships between business and the government. Also, improved communication from the County Board of Supervisors to the mayors and city chambers. The participants also agreed that to have more open communication between organizations means the possibility of less security for personal information.

Services and Technology:

The group took notice to the richness of resources in the community. Resources such as: the Crisis Centers, the Senior Center, Healthcare resources, and the local Food Pantries. The participants wanted these local resources to be utilized. Suggestions were made, such as having these services partner with other services to combine their resources. One of the best services that the participants didn’t believe that the community has utilized enough was the growth in technology. One idea was proposed to create an app that held information about all the local resources available for citizens of Johnson County. One noted tradeoff to this proposal was the necessity of a smartphone. The concern was the possible isolation of elderly people.

University of Iowa Efforts:

Participants believed that the University of Iowa supports many employees throughout Johnson County, but did not play a big enough role in community development efforts. Participants wanted to see more steps taken to increase student housing from the University. They believed that if the University did so, this would aid the cost of housing in Johnson County. Participants also wanted to see more effort on for the assistance of business efforts. It was believed that University officials who make business decisions needed to be more involved in discussions so they can understand viewpoints and be more understanding of what the community wants.

Inclusiveness in the Community:

Discussion arose of the lack of diversity in the community. Participants wanted to see an effort for more diverse groups in the community. There are many young, able people, of all ethnicities, that have a desire to get involved, but do not feel like their help is wanted in the community. One participant stated, “Many don’t want to be involved because they don’t feel heard.” The solution to this sensitive concern was public outreach among those who do not feel heard.



Ongoing Open Space Conversations

Several of the Open Space discussion groups expressed interest in continuing their conversation. The “Partnerships Across Sectors,” “Transportation,” and “Role of the University” groups took notes and submitted them.

Partnerships Across Sectors

Issues identified:

- There are challenges connecting to private sector employers.
- The University of Iowa has big impact and influence but is not always engaged in the community discussion at all levels.
- Time is a challenge, elected officials don’t have a lot of time and rely on their staff to get together and have discussion instead of themselves.
- Silos are created by funding sources.
- Territorialism around issues

New Ideas (actions, partnerships, approaches):

- The Chamber, ICAD, CVB, United Way, the University of Iowa and UIHC are all entities that work with multiple sectors and have opportunity to play stronger roles in the partnerships across sectors.
- The first step to be to create a better, general understanding on how to get issues and topics on community agendas.
- Larger funding can create awareness and break away from silos.
- Collaborations need staff to create continuity and keep working going.
- The ultimate goal is create sustainable partnerships and collaborations.

The group is interested in continuing the discussion and inviting the entities that were identified above (first bullet) as a way to stimulate more multi-sector discussions and partnerships. An email list for interested people is being administered by Patti Fields of United Way. Anyone can contact her to be added to the list as meetings and/or discussions are convened.

patti.fields@unitedwayjwc.org

Role of the University of Iowa

New ideas (actions, partnerships, approaches) discussed

- Approaching sympathetic university entities (e.g., Office of Outreach and Engagement) about setting up a “Community Advisory Board” that would be made up of community members as well as student/staff/faculty with ties/relationships to the community.
- How would CAB fit into existing governance structures? In other words, how would they influence university decision-making?
- General discussion of *why* the university needs to be more engaged with the community and what kind of benefits would result (on both sides).

What, if anything, did your group identify as next steps?

- We established an email list (which others have already joined).
- People on the list are going to (try to) attend the upcoming strategic planning meetings in the coming weeks. We want to see if/how our issue comes up in conversations about the five-year plan. After these events we will share our insights with others.
- Set up a shared document to begin drafting a white paper or a proposal for creating CAB.

Email bailey-kelley@uiowa.edu to be added to the email list.

Transportation Expansion

New ideas (actions, partnerships, approaches) discussed:

- The city should have a workshop this summer so that the public can comment on any proposed route times/route changes.
- A new route that goes up and down Scott blvd
- We need multiple hubs instead of just downtown
- Encourage employers to provide bus passes
- More places such as shopping centers could give bus ticket reimbursements
- Planning should include more surveys for bus passengers
- UI should conduct an economic impact study of regional transportation
- Permanent address should not be required for low-income passes
- Fix old busses/vans
- Can transportation resources be allocated better to serve schools?

Individuals interested in joining this conversation can join the Community Transportation Committee and attend their regular meetings.

<https://www.facebook.com/communitytransportationcommittee>

Appendix A: Why Deliberate?

Public dialogue and deliberation involve a set of methods for conducting community-based problem solving. There are profoundly different outcomes when community members think about a common problem within a deliberative, as opposed to adversarial, frame. Benefits of framing issues for deliberation include:

- Everyone is capable participating (educational level is not a barrier).
- Participants reconsider their own opinions and judgments.
- Participants approach issues more realistically (consider costs, consequences, and trade-offs).
- Participants become more interested in political and social issues.
- People consider the views of others and develop a greater understanding of those viewpoints.
- People define their self-interests more broadly.
- Deliberations in a community enhance communication between different groups.
- Deliberations lead many participants to feel a greater sense of confidence in what they can do to make a difference.

This is adapted from material originally compiled by Martín Carcasson of the CSU Center for Public Deliberation and created over the course of three decades by a long list of individuals and groups that include: the Kettering Foundation, members of the National Issues Forums network, the International Deliberative Democracy Workshop Faculty, the West Virginia Center for Public Life, Texas Forums, University of Missouri Extension, as well as Carcasson and Leah Sprain with the CSU CPD.

Appendix B: Affiliations of Participants

Congressman Dave Loebsack's office	TRAIL
Iowa Senate, District #37	UNA
Iowa State University	United Way of Johnson & Washington Counties
UI Department of Communication Studies	Coralville Food Pantry
Iowa City Masonic Foundation	Inside/Out
Johnson County Livable Community	Comm 1830: Solving Public Problems
Unitarian Universalist Society of Iowa City	4Cs Community Coordinated Child Care
UI Ombudsman Office	Superior Senior Care
Johnson County Affordable Housing Coalition	NAMI of JC
Iowa Realty	DVIP
Iowa City Housing and Community Development Commission	Shelter House
Johnson County Task Force on Aging	Economics Forum, University of Iowa
League of Women Voters Johnson County	Housing Trust Fund of Johnson County
The Senior Center	North Liberty City Council
Iowa City Area Development Group (ICAD)	GuardianIowa
Johnson County Board of Supervisors	Pioneer Park (Lone Tree)
Iowa City City Council	AARP Iowa
Peace and Justice of NEA	Johnson County Public Health
	Heritage