
Chambersburg Community Conversation Recap 3.14.2023

**In Partnership with WITF and GearHouse Brewing Co.
Facilitated by Linda Beck, Beck and Associates**

Executive Summary

On Wednesday, March 14, 2023, WITF hosted a community conversation in conjunction with GearHouse Brewing Company of Chambersburg. The event gathered local leaders and residents to discuss ideas for how to strengthen their community.

This conversation grew from an earlier “News and Brews” event held at the GearHouse on September 27, 2022. At that event, volunteer Linda Beck presented information about Braver Angels, a national organization dedicated to depolarization.

When the organizers decided to continue the conversation, they invited Linda back to facilitate that meeting from her perspective as a communications professional.

At the “Community Conversation,” 19 individuals representing various facets of Chambersburg convened to compare the current state of their borough with a hoped-for future state within the next 6-12 months. This group represented slightly more than half of those invited. Although the group did not possess the political and racial balance hoped for, there was general agreement that a good subsection of the community was represented.

After introductions and establishing ground rules, the group spent most of the time discussing ideas for moving the community forward. While no action was agreed upon, there was expressed interest in continuing the conversations and involving others.

The most resounding ideas seemed to indicate:

- a desire to “bridge the gap” among all community members, especially those who may not be well-represented politically
- building relationships with those who represent different viewpoints
- fostering more community involvement in existing programs
- teaching community members strategies and processes on how to get more involved, including providing on-ramps to community leadership positions.

Participants were asked to share their interest in continuing to meet. Those results were provided to GearHouse co-owner Erin Miskell, who, along with her partners, has expressed a desire for their brewpub to be a place for all community members to be welcomed.

This document will provide further details on the meeting set-up, results, and recommendations.

Chambersburg Community Conversation Meeting Setup

Genesis of the Conversation

The Chambersburg Community Conversation grew from earlier programming held at GearHouse Brewing Company called "News and Brews." That event, held on September 27, 2023, was sponsored by WITF as part of a series of events to engage more closely with various communities and establish ongoing relationships. WITF received support from [America Amplified](#), a national project dedicated to helping public media organizations better serve their audiences through community involvement and listening.

Scott Blanchard, WITF Director of Journalism, convened a call with members of WITF's staff and GearHouse owners to create plans for a second event at the brewpub. They invited Linda Beck, a volunteer for Braver Angels, to speak about the national organization dedicated to depolarizing the United States. Braver Angels works to help people "engage those we disagree with, looking for common ground and ways to work together."

After the Braver Angels presentation, WITF staffers led small-group discussions about what attendees had just heard from Linda about civil dialogue and problem-solving across differences. They returned to a big-group discussion and shared ideas and inspiration.

Continued Planning

Because of WITF's commitment to community engagement, with support from the national collaboration America Amplified, and GearHouse Brewing Company's desire to be a welcoming place to all, they agreed to host a follow-up meeting. In conjunction with Linda Beck, they agreed it was best to focus on future efforts rather than scrutinize previous issues.

To that end, the group worked together to identify goals for the evening, including:

- Invite 20-30 guests from various community perspectives with an attempt to have representation from all political and socio-economic groups in the community.
- Structure the conversation so it stayed positively focused.
- Create actionable items for the group to pursue.
- Have people feel their voices were heard.
- Identify themes, issues, and stories WITF journalists could use in continued coverage of the Chambersburg community.

Erin took responsibility for inviting guests and approached numerous individuals in a variety of roles from the area. Precedence was given to those who lived in Chambersburg rather than those who may simply work in the area.

There were 39 individuals invited; of those, 17 declined or did not respond. Three individuals indicated they would attend or likely attend but did not.

So, 19 individuals represented the following entities (listed in no particular order):

- Wilson College
- Borough council
- Library
- Healthcare organizations
- County government
- Sheriff's Office
- Faith groups (Christian and Jewish)
- Hispanic community members
- LGBTQ community, including Pride Franklin County
- School District
- Business leaders, including Downtown Chambersburg
- Representatives from several racial groups, including Racial Reconciliation of Franklin County
- Franklin County Area Development Corporation
- Representatives of Veterans' interest groups

These descriptors do not fully represent the backgrounds of those who attended. Many indicated they represented various community entities, including serving in previous leadership roles. It should also be noted that the group said they would have liked to have seen representation from the Black community as well as conservative members of the borough council, each of whom were invited.

Participants were given a [pre-meeting survey](#) that asked them to identify Chambersburg's strengths, opportunities and insights about the upcoming meeting. This was done to identify any potential concerns or issues that might arise. Twelve of the 19 participants [responded to the survey](#). Results indicated a deep appreciation for the community with varied ideas about opportunities. Many of the respondents also indicated a desire to share their insights and hear from other diverse voices.

The meeting was structured to create an open environment, tolerant of diverse opinions that allowed everyone to feel as if their voice could be heard. More details about the meeting are included in the next section.

Meeting Results

Participants were invited to join the meeting for a brief dinner before the start of the meeting and this allowed them to get to know others before it began.

Then, the meeting was organized into four parts:

1. Welcome/Introductions
2. Gap Analysis
3. Reactions/Discussions
4. Action Items/Commitment.

Welcome/Introductions

Opening remarks included:

- **Erin Miskell, on behalf of GearHouse Brewing Company**, shared the organization's vision to be a place that welcomes everyone in the community and represents a place for diverse voices to be heard.
- **Scott Blanchard, WITF Director of Journalism**, discussed the news organization's role as a convener of this conversation, and as a chronicler of Chambersburg's movement toward growth. WITF recorded ambient sound of the meeting, took photos and notes, and interviewed 4 people at length after the meeting to gather material that could be used in reporting on air and online.
- **Linda Beck, facilitator**, discussed the following with the group:
 - **Agreement to the ground rules.** Participants were given a list of Braver Angels Rules of Engagement and a smaller subset of those rules on a flip chart; then they were asked to discuss them in small groups to determine if anything should be added or changed. They were also told that it was expected if anyone stayed in the room after this small group activity, it was assumed they would abide by the ground rules. Those listed on the flip chart included:
 - Listen
 - Ask questions for understanding, not "gotcha"
 - Use "I statements" and speak only for yourself/organization
 - Avoid exaggeration and name calling
 - Know it's OK to disagree respectfully

- **Items to use to ensure everyone’s voice was heard. They included:**
 - Colored Cards
 - Green cards to identify agreement with something being said
 - Red cards to identify disagreement with something being said
 - Yellow cards to indicate a violation of the ground rules
 - 2-minute timers to be used to ensure no one voice dominated the discussions

The group was given a few minutes to circulate among themselves to meet anyone else they may not have previously met.

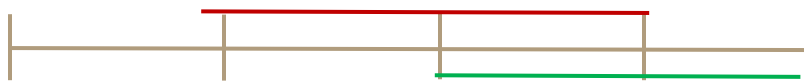
They were also shown a word cloud that pulled together the common words from the pre-meeting survey that included “Chambersburg,” “Community” and “Opportunities.” The group agreed that created a positive perspective from which to begin.

Gap Analysis

Using a process known as a gap analysis, the group brainstormed attributes of the “best” and “worst” communities. (See Appendix.)

Then, the group was asked to identify the current state of the community as well as where it could reasonably get to within 6-12 months. Note: This diagram only shows the range of responses. A photograph in the Appendix shows the specific data from the flip chart page used during the meeting.

The results were as follows:



Red/top line = Current state **Green/bottom line** = Expected state within 6-12 months

Reactions/Discussion

Participants were asked to identify their reactions to the data immediately after it was revealed. Some expressed surprise that there was such a disparity in the current state. Others stated they believed the low ratings stemmed from concerns that certain individuals and groups in the Chambersburg community don’t feel welcome. It was noted that, although it’s a theme common to Central Pennsylvania, many people who move into Chambersburg feel like outsiders even after they have lived in the community for 10, 20, or 30+ years.

During the conversation, several participants identified fears of coming to the meeting because they were afraid their voices would not be heard or there would be negative reactions to their ideas.

There was also some conversation about how people selected their ratings and, during that conversation, some said they ranked the “current” score low because they had become very pessimistic about the future of the community.

The group was asked to identify actions that could happen to move the group from the current state to the future state within the next 6-12 months. It was agreed that major change could not happen in that amount of time, but that obtaining small wins in the near term could lead to broader successes in the future.

Specifically, the group identified the following:

- **Fostering involvement to create an engaged citizenry that reflects the diverse nature of the community.** This could involve individual efforts as well as building on the existing efforts of community organizations.
- **Community leadership courses that would focus on helping community members, particularly those in marginalized groups, better understand government processes in order to become community leaders.** This education could also include strategies and tactics to foster change. There was some discussion about programs like “Leadership Franklin County” and, although some of the participants in the conversation were graduates, there was concern about the cost of tuition and accessibility to those programs. So, perhaps, local businesses could sponsor seats in the next leadership program.
- **“Bridging the Gap” between disparate members of the community.** At least some in the group publicly identified themselves as “living in a bubble” and being surrounded only by like-minded people. This was true regardless of political affiliation or socio-economic background. Multiple participants discussed the need to start at an individual level to begin building relationships throughout the community. It was also noted that to meet the disenfranchised, it was important to meet them in their gathering places.
- **Giving people a voice by creating an effective way to communicate current or future grassroots efforts.** This is closely related to the above ideas to reach marginalized groups. There was a sense that those individuals don’t necessarily know what’s available in the community.
- **Find best practices.** Other towns and cities have faced (or are facing) similar issues to Chambersburg, particularly in the climate of polarization that’s evident in our country. So, it was suggested that “best practices” be identified from other communities and then determine how to move forward in Chambersburg.

- **Form a non-affiliated, nonpartisan community group to explore the opportunities to move Chambersburg forward.** The importance of creating a vision was also discussed.

Other ideas that were outside the scope of 6-12 months but were notable suggestions, included:

- **Create an Office of Immigration Services.**
- **Build better public transportation services.**
- **Have a document access center.**
- **Help businesses initiate childcare assistance**

Action Items/Commitment

The meeting resulted in an expressed desire to move forward but with no clear plan of action. Each participant was asked to make some kind of commitment to continued community growth. Those forms and ongoing discussions after the meeting identified a core group of people who plan to continue the conversation to implement strategies aimed at helping Chambersburg address the needs of their community. This includes reaching out to those who were not as represented in the original conversation—politically and culturally.

GearHouse Brewing Company offered its location as an initial gathering space for the group and a commitment to continue to back any identified initiatives.

WITF interviewed four participants of the conversation and is planning coverage of the event.

The [results of the feedback survey](#) indicated mostly positive reactions to the conversation, including having more appreciation for different ideas, hope for Chambersburg, and a desire to be involved in future efforts.

Recommendations

Overall, the conversation, ideas, and commitment sounded very positive. If the group wants to continue efforts to further engage the community, it should:

- Plan a follow-up meeting within the next four to six weeks.
- Identify a group leader (or leaders) and determine the next steps.
- Create a plan for involving community members who were less represented at the initial meeting. This includes distributing the report to other community leaders.
- Take the generated ideas and prioritize actionable items to occur. Assign these items to specific group members.
- Determine benchmarks and measures of success.
- It may also be helpful for the group to brainstorm obstacles and identify ways to overcome them.
- Create a long-term plan for the group, including a mission and vision statement.

Summary

In all, the Chambersburg Community Conversation represented an opportunity for some of the diverse voices in the community to identify ways to move their community forward. While there were no actionable items prioritized, it appeared that the group has enough energy to continue to make inroads on some of the suggestions. It will be critical to continue to engage other community members in these efforts and create a strategic plan for the next steps.

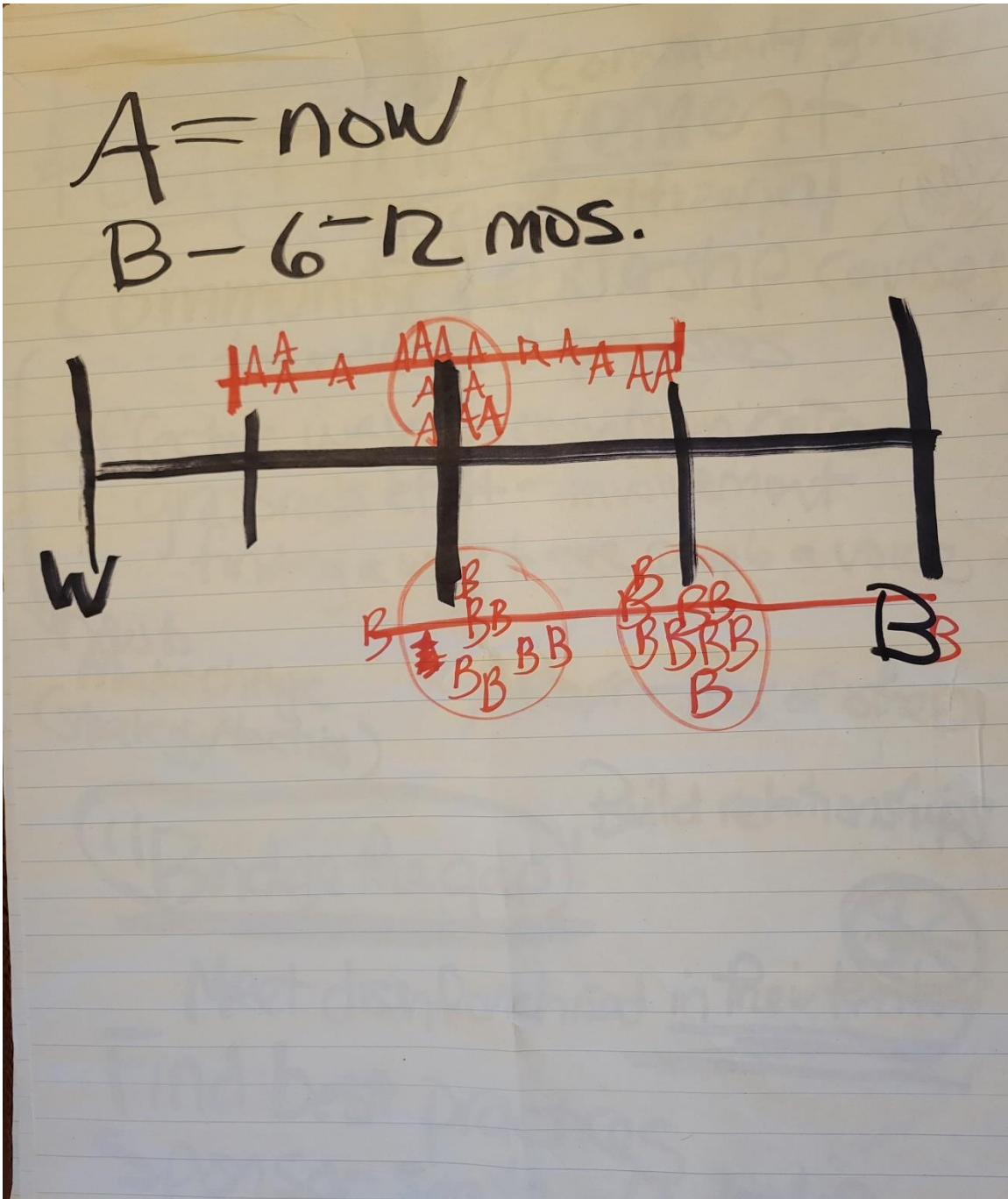
Appendix: Flip Chart Information

Characteristics of Communities

(Transcribed from flip chart for better readability)

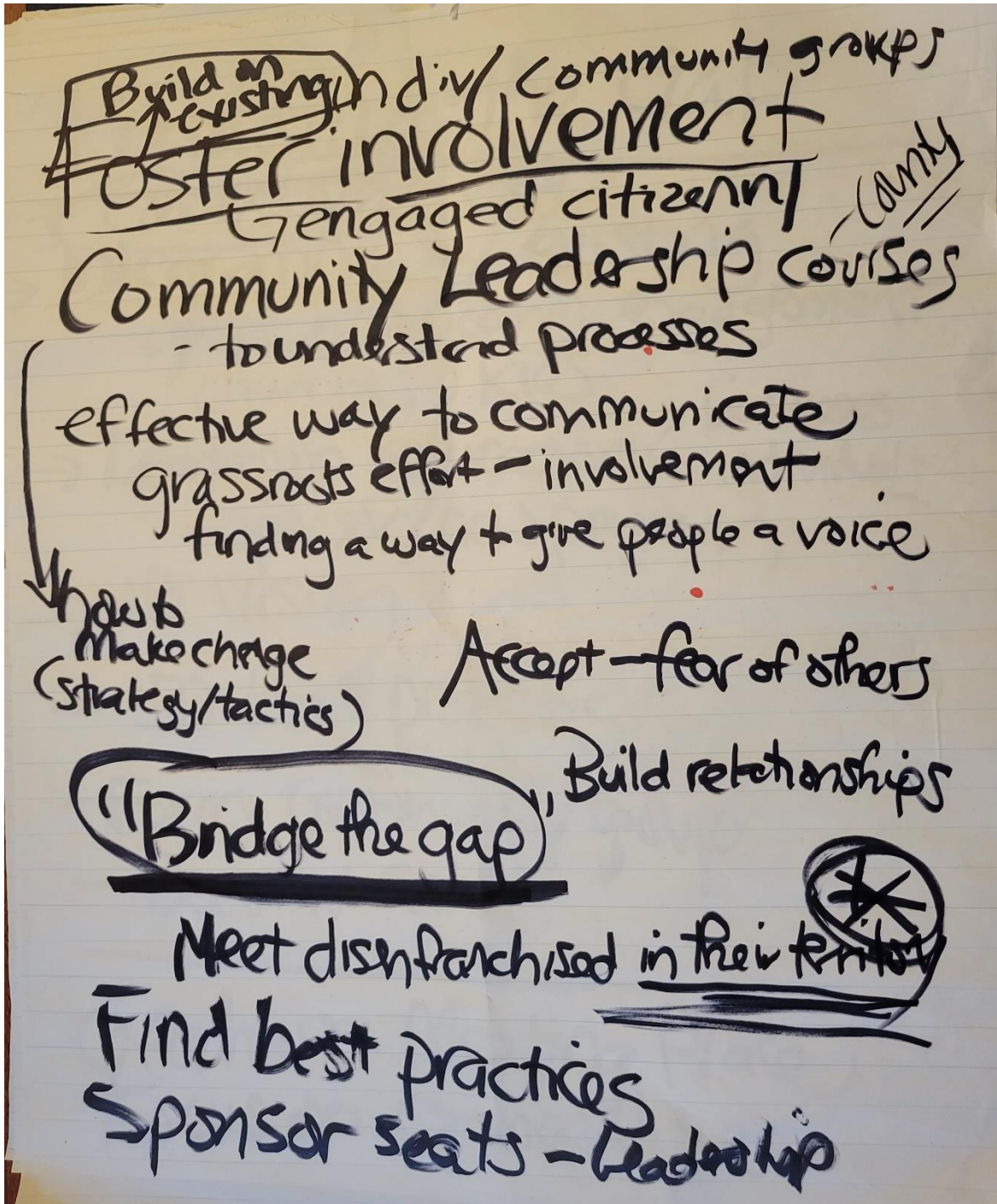
| WORST | BEST |
|-----------------------------------|-------------------------------|
| Apathy | Greenspace |
| No sense of purpose or place | Relationships/friendly |
| Despair for the future | Transportation |
| Closed-minded | Access to healthcare |
| No infrastructure | Diversity embraced |
| Crime | Engaged citizens |
| No breweries 😊 | Positive reinforcement |
| Poor leadership | Libraries |
| Absent parents | Diverse restaurants |
| Crime | Good communication/media |
| No employment or activities | Public radio 😊 |
| Unhealthy | Collaborative |
| Discrimination | Transparent government |
| Undersourced | Safe spaces |
| Pollution | Thriving education |
| Lack of opportunity | Respect |
| Lack of small commercial activity | Liquor policy |
| Lack of diversity | Growth without gentrification |
| Lack of culture/arts | |
| Regressive/frozen in time | |
| Segregated | |
| Poor housing | |
| Rapidly aging (population) | |
| Failing schools | |
| | |
| | |

Results of Gap Analysis



Ideas for Moving from Point A to Point B

(Note: The following photos are provided in a spirit of transparency and represent the overall conversation. These ideas have been clarified in the "Reactions/Discussion" part of this report.)



~~How~~ ^{part of/govt}
Form non-affiliated comm. group

Create articulated vision

211-list/ID services

Office of Immigration Services
Public transportation

Document Access Center

Employers - child care

Bridging the Gap

~~Conversations~~ ✘

→ Integrating w/ existing
grps. - build comm. engagement
churches kids

→ Leadership education < businesses
individuals
- sponsor/new program

→ ID Vision

- ID best practices

- Form ^{non-affiliated} community group

- Document Center

Gearhouse - Meeting Place
Focus on commonalities