

Innovations in Public Engagement
Rural Residents Focus Group (Hackettstown, NJ)
February 18, 2016

Date: February 18, 6-7:30 pm

Location: Hackettstown Public Library

Staff Facilitators: Miriam Salerno, Trish Sanchez

Other staff in attendance: none

Major Takeaways

1. **Public meetings are hard to find:** Many participants at this focus group indicate that they would be interested in participating more regularly but that it is difficult to find information on when meetings take place – they rarely see public meetings/workshop advertised in their area. A couple of the participants were very active in their community – one active in downtown economic development and another one active in bike/ped. However there was concern that the dialogue at public meetings/workshops contains too much jargon and technical language for residents. Suggested places to advertise engagement include QuickCheck, laundromats, supermarkets, post offices.
2. **Downtown redevelopment is big driver:** Participants said that they are concerned/motivated by the lack of economic development in their small towns – lack of jobs, stores, restaurants and activity. They also have to travel far to get anywhere and subsequently would be motivated to participate in local decision-making if it could improve the quality of their towns' downtown areas.
3. **Regional planning can bring shared services and get cars off route 80:** Participants are also very concerned about traffic on Route 80 and would be interested in regional planning insofar as it connects to the issue of long commutes and too many cars on the road. If regional planning can get people off of Route 80, then residents will support it. Residents also feel that shared services would be good for their communities in order to save costs.
4. **A positive association with the future:** Participants at this focus group were overwhelmingly positive about planning for the future. They all indicated that they felt hopeful for the future and they see future/long-term planning as an opportunity to make positive changes in their communities, especially as it related to downtown redevelopment and economic opportunities. However, use the year 2040 or 2045 makes the future feel too far away. It is better to mention "25 years from now."
5. **Use local media to spread the word:** All of the participants had learned about the focus group from the Hackettstown Life website. The site covers the entire Warren county area and is everyone's first resource for online information about local events and issues. Many also follow their local town pages and local police departments on social media.
6. **Online engagement is good, but no signing up:** Most participants would respond to a quick survey, if it were quick and easy and convenient. However, the entire group agreed that they would not take a survey or participate in online engagement if they have to sign-up or create a

username/password for a website. It needs to be quick and easy. Conversely there were concerned that Textizen text message engagement would oversimplify issues and not educate residents on the tradeoffs associate with choices.

7. **Advice to NJTPA:** No one in the group had heard of NJTPA. The participants felt NJTPA needed more brand recognition if they were going to get people to participate. Otherwise co-brand events with familiar names and organizations. Use local champions, especially churches, to get the message out to residents. Meeting advertisements should also contain links to online engagement option links.
8. **Lessons learned from recruitment:** Hackettstown Life is a major source of information for Warren County residents who want to stay on top of what’s happening locally. Meetings/Workshops should definitely be advertised on that site.

Participants:

Lauren Wichowski	Caucasian	51	female	Substitute Teacher
Cathy Van Orden	Caucasian	49	Female	Client Representative
Ron Clelland	Caucasian	54	Male	General Manager
Megan Schmidt	Caucasian	30	female	sales
Peter Bunk	Caucasian	53	Male	IT Support
Jen Caldwell	Caucasian	40	female	educational consultant
Kelly Bunk	Caucasian	50	female	homeschool mom
Dana McGuire	Caucasian	47	female	accountant

Discussion and Responses:

What type of transportation do you use on a daily basis? (17:00)

- I do have a car, but it’s not always reliable because it has 100,000 miles. I’ve taken NJ Transit before. It’s good, but I wish there was a bus that could take me to work.
- I’m a cyclist only, I don’t own a car and have never had a driver’s license. I’ve been to a lot of NJ bike summits so I’m very involved in promoting pedestrian infrastructure, especially in the most rural part of the state.
- I have a small business in Hackettstown and I use public transportation a lot, especially going in and out of the city, but many of my employees and family members are absolutely afraid to use public transportation and that’s horrifying to me. I can’t believe it. Sometimes our employees are almost insulted if we tell them that we want them to take a bus into the city together to do a job. It’s like they’re insulted that we’re not renting a car for them to drive into the city. A lot of them are from Paterson. I think Hispanic pride plays a role, people wanting to see themselves as self-supporting.

- I have a car and I use it every day. I'm an educational consultant so I travel all over the place. I've gone from Pittsburgh, to Jersey City, to Elizabeth.
- I work in Morristown so I drive every day. When I do go into the city I take the train. I wouldn't mind taking the bus but I can't figure out the bus schedule because there are different bus companies so I just take the train. I can never find a schedule. There are private bus companies but not NJ Transit. They used to serve this area, but not anymore. And the train doesn't run on weekends.
- I take a car because there is no other choice. There is no bus or train station, nothing. I commute to Morris County. I can't rideshare because nobody goes where I go.
- I take my kids to a lot of classes and we travel by car, usually 20-30 miles. When the weather's nice we walk a lot in town. When we do theater groups in the City, we drive to Willowbrook Mall and park our car there, and then take the bus from there.
- I commute every day, and sometimes I wish there was another option, especially when there's an accident. We use public transit sometimes to go into the City. Many years back I did take transit from here to Parsippany. But that was kind of sketchy because if I missed a bus there was no other way. I liked it because I could catch up on things, but now I don't have that option.
- [When asked, only one participant indicated that they had grown up in the Hackettstown area]

Have you ever participated in a public meeting about an issue you felt strongly about? (24:30)

- I did many years ago, when I was working in Paterson as an Americorps volunteer. They took us down to Princeton and they had a public policy forum and they were talking about voting rights. But that was many years ago, I haven't been to one since.
- I went to development meetings about 15 years ago when a lot of development started. I was still in high school, but definitely interested. I went to some advocacy and Safe Streets meetings.
 - I worked for Marty Epstein, one of the biggest advocates out there. She's the woman who runs Montclair Safe Streets, so those are the meetings I've been to.
 - There was a lot of jargon involved and I think a lot of people would have trouble seeing a plan on paper and understanding road use terminology. To me a lot of it was foreign, not being involved in planning or education. So seeing that on paper and then translating it to your city and seeing how much money is allotted and how people are going to use it – that didn't come across to me very well in those meetings.
 - They had us look at a slice of an intersection and see how much space could be taken away on each side and who that may affect, or looking at taking away parking on this block and who that may affect on a daily basis, so definitely no concrete ideas but kind of hard to say as a citizen how it's going to affect the town.
 - They asked for input. I also was going to a BID meeting for planning their new infrastructure and sidewalks. I was mostly just kind of trying to take something away from this meeting that I could bring to the BID meeting. I basically brought the Safe Streets

initiatives binder and there wasn't a lot that they could put in in the town, so I didn't necessarily have a lot that I could take away from that effort.

- I don't think there was enough interest or actual users for it to be looked at here.
- My motivation was being an everyday cyclist.
- I went to a Mayoral debate in Allamuchy, because I was curious why we needed to have a primary there for the mayor.
 - I was curious because they had three debates between these two mayoral candidates. There was a Republican primary for the mayor of this teeny little town. I was curious what we had in Allamuchy that we needed to have three debates about. There was nothing about transportation.
 - There were 50-75 people there, which is a lot for Allamuchy.
 - They had a Q&A session for the interactive part.
- We [my spouse and I] went to one when Centenary College was going to build dorms that were going to affect our neighborhoods. We were there more as spectators. We also went when they were protesting the Wal-Mart that was going to be built.
 - It was an experience of small town politics.
 - It was kind of amusing for us, because we grew up in Essex County.

If you haven't gone, have you seen one advertised? (32:15)

- I'd like to go to one, but I don't know where they are or where to look for them.
- I hear about it on the radio, but I don't go.
- I don't see them advertised on paper.

How important are these factors in deciding whether to go to a meeting?

- Topic
 - 10 [various]
 - 5. I go to everything. I don't go as a spectator
- Food or refreshments
 - 1
 - 0
- Childcare
 - 0 [most]
 - To me it'd be important because I'm a single mom
- Location or proximity
 - 7
 - 8
- Day and time
 - 10 [most]
- *What's the most convenient time?*
 - 6pm

- 7pm or 8pm
- *Would you bring your kids?*
 - I have an elementary and middle schooler, and if I thought it would interest them as well, maybe I'd bring them
- Being invited
 - 10
 - If I'm interested
 - 6
 - 7
 - I'd go anywhere to go along with them
- Happening where you're already going to be
 - 6 or 7

Look at the flyers and tell us what you think. Assume these are hard copy flyers posted at bus stops or on storefronts (36:10)

Flyer #1

- I had flipped through these flyers before and this one stood out to me because the heading is very clear what it is to be about. It's got transportation and writing about service alternatives, so right away when I look at this I know what this is.
 - It seems well-organized, so if the meeting is as well-organized as the poster, I would think it would be productive. And it helps that there are three different time options and locations.
- This is the most organized one out of all of them.
- It's not too busy looking; it's straight to the point.
- *What do you think about the meetings being held during the week?*
 - [all expressed preference for meetings held during the week]
 - I like to pack my weeks so my weekends are free

Flyer #2

- I don't have any comment specifically. I'd possibly go.
- I would have to stop and read this entire flyer to figure out what it was. It's very confusing. There's nothing – it's only in the small print where I actually figure out what this is about.
- The website address is miniscule. If you're over 40 and don't have your glasses, you can't read it.
- "Public workshop" is the only thing that stands out, and that could be a bad influence. I'd have to stop and read it. Even the pictures don't really have anything about transportation.
- The words are too jargon-y.
- Why is the mayor not talking until 6 if I'm supposed to arrive at 5:30?
- The first thing I saw was the ADA accommodation note.

- The crash of the gray and blue is maybe what's problematic. They're too close together. These bubbles look like the pop-up things on VH1.
- "Come help us identify projects" is very vague.

Flyer #3

- I haven't read it, but you need a minute to take it all in and read it
- The colors pop out, but I probably wouldn't take a minute to read it. I'd walk right by.
- Nothing is broken down to catch your attention; it all blends together. The address and everything are just all in a line.
- "where are we going" is kind of interesting
 - It doesn't pop out though
- It doesn't tell you what the topic is here, you have to read the whole thing
- The topic should be a bigger font
- If I read the topic, it sounds appealing but maybe too many topics
 - Just one topic might be better, like transportation
- It seems like it might be a political group, because there are so many facets
 - Maybe it's an environmental group, because it's green
 - It has an eco feel that is positive for me

Flyer #8

- I'm interested but I'd want to know am I going for a bike ride or are we doing some planning here?
- I think the Mayor of Denville is the best example of someone who helped get Safe Streets in the town because he rode his bike all the time. So if this mayor's doing the same kind of thing, that's what I've seen be effective. I have a friend who specifically moved there for the infrastructure because he wanted to ride around in town safely with his kid. They also have a thriving downtown there and some parks, so promoting that with the infrastructure went hand in hand. That's hard to do here.

What do you think about planning for the future?

- It could be empowering, especially out here where a lot of things tend to be stagnant. Maybe there's a new group involved in planning or some new force in this area.
- I didn't grow up here but I've been here for 20 years and I've seen a lot of changes – the Wal-Mart, the Target. Oftentimes I use the website Hackettstown Life and people will talk and argue about the development, like the vision for Main Street. So when I saw talk about the "future," that's what I thought about – what it used to be, and could be, and what it is now. For those who plan to stay in the area, it's an exciting thing. For people who have been here forever and like the way it was, it's not an exciting thing.
- I told you about my town and what we're trying to achieve there. The word "future" is very big there right now. Anything we can do for the future is positive, because things are

backsliding very quickly. We have no businesses, no nothing, and taxes just keep getting higher. There's no end in sight unless we have some sort of redevelopment plan to bring businesses into the area. So it makes me hopeful.

- If you have good transportation and you're bringing in the jobs, people will stay here.

Who finds thinking about the future hopeful? Who finds it scary? How can we get people to care?

- [The majority expressed that they feel hopeful about the future]
- I guess I'm cynical because I feel like in small towns, they control everything, so what does it matter? In cities, there are big groups that go to meetings so maybe their voices can be heard. I'd like to be optimistic, but I guess because I used to live in Newark and I work in Paterson, I see how they get more turn out at things like Board of Education meetings.
- Maybe they could create some kind of transportation forum in different areas
- A lot of people in this area commute on Route 80 every day. Very few people work in Hackettstown. If we think about the future and what Route 80 will be like in 5 or 10 years, people might be interested because it's something specific and personal to them.
 - Before Route 80, people used to wait for 30 minutes in their cars to get through Route 46 on weekends
- Make it personal, because people care about different things. For some people, it's route 80. For others, in Jersey City, it's the Pulaski Skyway.

What do you think about when you hear regional planning?

- County
- Regional school districts
- I would think it's probably only Morris County. We're part of that region, but not really.
- It's a good thing in my opinion because it shares services. You can put 5 or 6 towns together to come up with some sort of solution
- Positive and negative. It can be a cost reduction, but at the local level people have more control and more say.
- *Are your transportation concerns local or regional?*
 - Both
 - Where I live there is no local NJT buses. It's 6 or 7 miles to the ShopRite. So if I didn't have a car, how am I going to get there? There are no taxi companies.
 - People 25 and under don't ever perceive a problem getting from A to B. they just call Uber.
 - I'm 30 and most of my friends have cars and complain about their commute to. Even high school kids commute to school. My bus ride from Belvedere to Hackettstown High School was 45 minutes.
 - I've never even considered taking a bus to go to the grocery store.
 - There is one shuttle bus – the Warren County transport bus from Washington to Hackettstown. It does that same route. You can flag them if you're a disabled or alternate

user but you have to do paperwork. It's free but they ask for a donation. Because we're so rural, nobody's coming. Even if you had that schedule, it only basically goes on that one road so it's not really convenient to where most people live.

What would you want to discuss at a regional transportation meeting?

- Commuting transportation. I'm used to driving for local transportation, but I'm interested in commuting in and out.
- This part of NJ has lost so many residents to Eastern PA because people are looking for lower taxes. Those are the people jamming up Route 80 and they're not even local residents. Years ago I heard talk of a rail line to bring that down.
- I heard from a friend who did research on that rail line at Penn State that people opposed it because they were under the impression that it was going to be a freight line for garbage. A public meeting would have been fantastic.
- I can't imagine how many cars that would take off the road if we had a rail line in Eastern PA. It would help NJ residents too.
- If the flyer said "help us get cars off Route 80," I'd go to the meeting [several agreed]
- The train doesn't go on the weekends, and it barely goes during the week. 11 is the latest returning time. I know tons of people who would take it on Saturdays or Sundays.

What do you think of planning for 2040, like in Flyers #6 or 7? (59:39)

- I'd think I probably won't be in NJ then, I'll be retired
- I have to do the math to figure out how old I'll be
- 25 years from now is better. It doesn't seem so far off, even though it's the same thing.

How do you feel about downtown here in Hackettstown?

- I like this downtown because it's better than my town's. We don't really have a downtown; it's mostly empty. That makes flyer #9 very attractive.
- Coming downtown here is like paradise for me because I can park and walk around for an hour and then say hi to people in stores.
- When I first moved here 20 years ago there were storefronts being filled more regularly, and it slowed down but there's been a resurgence recently.
- They've done a good job promoting events recently, like live music in the summer

How can we get people to care about regional planning?

- Tying it to economic development would resonate in small towns. You don't always want to go to the Wal-Mart or Rite Aid. Sometimes you just want to go to the little shop.
- Where I live, after the coffee shop closes at 2pm you can't get anything to eat; you have to go out of town.
- *Where would I hang flyers?*

- Shop rite, post office, library
- *What if I tabled outside?*
 - People would ignore you
 - They'd think you'd want to sell something
- I pay attention to things sent home with my kids, but I'm not sure how welcoming the schools are of that
- Most things I see are over email

Social media – what do you use? Who do you follow? Would you respond to a survey?

- [all participants heard about the focus group on Hackettstown Life]
- I don't use the Patch; it seems like a hard-to-use interface and it's poorly written.
- Hackettstown area garage sale groups on Facebook
- I follow the police department for updates. They post official events.
- Most townships have their own pages.
 - Several follow their township's pages
- Local radio station
- I don't get cell service on my street
- I'd take a 5 minute survey from a group [several]
 - I'd have to see it in my feed at a time when I had 5 minutes then to do it. Otherwise I'd be interested but would forget about it by the time I had time to do it. You'd have to have it be able to recur so it would be at the top of my feed if I went back later.
 - I never click on ads.
- On Hackettstown life, most items in the Classified section are legitimate. Other sections are subject to a lot of trolls.
 - The website encompasses the whole area – Independence, Allamuchy.
- *Would you prefer a meeting or a survey?*
 - Meeting
 - I like the option to write something in addition to a meeting
 - Digital is more cost-effective
- *How would you advertise digitally?*
 - Facebook ads
 - [several]: I see the ads, but I rarely click on them
 - Oldest and youngest are not on Facebook – youngest are on to other sites and apps
 - The easier, the better. No signing up, confirming your email, etc.
 - I'd have to be really gung-ho about doing something if I have to sign up and create an account. If it's just a casual thing, no.
 - [several agreed]

Textizen images (1:14:07)

- [7 would respond to it]
- It seems like that's the end of the communication and that's it. If it's just yes or no, I don't feel like it's super effective. It seems strange to just pick one option and text it. If it were a survey with more interaction and you can write something, that's what I'd rather do instead. I just don't normally like text stuff like that, it's not something I'm used to doing.
- I like that it gives you options – phone, website, text
- As much as I would respond to that, I'm not sure that it's effective in terms of making huge decisions based on people saying "yeah! I want wider sidewalks" but then we lose a lane in the street because people aren't considering the wider context of it.
 - I agree, there's no place to educate people before getting their input
- I wouldn't text it. I wouldn't be interested.
- If it were a random thing that popped up and I didn't know where it had come from, I wouldn't respond. If I saw it on a sign or on the bus I'd be more interested.

Word association

- Walkable
 - Nice
 - Downtown
 - Thumbs up
 - Spacious
 - Paths
 - Sidewalks, greenery
- Livable
 - Vibrant
 - Sustainable
 - Clean
 - Vague. I can't picture anything.
 - Lowest rung
- Sustainable
 - Eco
 - Positive
 - Impacts your future
 - Is that an overused term? I think so.
 - I picture it more economically than environmentally
- Complete streets
 - No idea what that means
 - Shops, storefronts?
 - Parking spaces available
 - [Miriam explained what Complete Streets are]
 - We don't have anything like that around here!

- Regional planning
 - Consolidated services
- Community development
 - Projects, local projects
- Capital investment
 - A lot of money
 - High taxes
 - Negative connotation
 - Town center
 - I think in an area like this there's a lot of back-and-forth of wanting to have things like the Wal-Mart and Target but also wanting to maintain that rural feel and the NIMBY feeling.
- Mobility
 - ADA
 - Walkability
 - Access

[Reveal of who NJTPA is] Have you heard of NJTPA?

- No, but I remember they were on the flyers
- I've been to the Smart Streets meeting, but I've never heard of them.
- I've probably never heard of it because nothing ever gets done. Warren County and Sussex County are like the red-headed stepchildren of New Jersey.

What's your advice to them? (1:24:30)

- Get their name out there because none of us have heard of them
- I get emails from Congress people, but I don't know if that would work for them because they have to know your email addresses
- I work with Transportation Alternatives, so that's something I'm familiar with but I've never heard of NJTPA even though they get funding from them.
- It's important to know about it so people know that it's legitimate if they are interested in the topic of a meeting and they see NJTPA's name on the flyer.
- If I heard they were hosting a meeting, I'd assume it was a citizen advocacy group. But if I saw that the meeting was also funded by a county or DOT that I recognized, that would help. You pay attention to those things, so they could co-brand it.
- Focus more on online outreach, but still have meetings in person. People who are not active politically might quickly respond to links.
- It's good to advertise meetings but also give links for what to do if you can't make the meeting
- Commercials are good because they're so repetitive that eventually you get the message
- It's so easy to share things on Facebook. But I'm wondering how you get things to those first people who start sharing. I think you need to start identifying some key players.

- Local champions: the police department, Trinity Church newsletter or bulletin is very active, Warren Reporter's weekly email of weekend events, Centenary College spring festival
 - I don't know why Warren Reporter wouldn't cover your event [this focus group]; they don't have a lot going on!

Workshop Images (1:32:30)

- Workshop image 3 is interesting. You see the facts, and there's a computer to give you more detail
- Workshop image 4 is interesting. Are they building a bike?
 - It looks like it would draw the kids in
 - A Thomas the Train table would draw kids in, and then parents would have to stop and chat
- If I saw workshop image 2 in my municipal building I'd probably participate, but not at an expo
- Workshop image 1 is the best one.
- If you had people there with a quick survey on an iPad, that would help
- Kiosk image 2 turns me off. It looks like a science fair. Maybe kiosk image 1 would be relevant if I thought it was a development going in behind my house.
- Candy or other gimmicks helps draw people in
- Good to go advertise at places where people wait: QuickChek, laundromats. QuickChek is the only place in White Township that is mobbed all the time. Food Mart in Belvedere also.
- I would hire a marketing firm, tell them my target demographics, and it would be done.

Demographic Survey Results – Rural Residents





