

**Innovations in Public Engagement**  
**Southern Suburban Residents Focus Group (Toms River, NJ)**  
**December 17, 2015**

**Date:** December 17, 2015, 6:00-7:30 PM

**Location:** Ocean County Library, 101 Washington St, Toms River

**Staff Facilitators:** Miriam Salerno, Cailean Carr

**Other staff in attendance:** none

**Major Takeaways**

1. **Personal livelihood and frustration drive participation.** Most participants have never been to public meeting but noted that they would participate if it were something related to their livelihood or the local economy, and if it was about in issue they were frustrated with. One participant, who has been to a public meeting, noted that they felt heard because the facilitators stayed longer than the meeting was planned to take the time to hear everyone.
2. **Keep advertisements simple and relatable. Offer alternative opportunities.** Participants did not like flyers with too much going on, small text and too many colors. They also did not like when advertisements were not relatable to their personal experiences. It was noted that advertisements and opportunities need to be targeted by community type. Participants did like flyers when the important information, including the date, time, and location, were easy to locate. It was also noted that they liked advertisements that clearly define what you want, that have multiple dates and times, and points you to something to do if you cannot make any of the meetings. The Ocean County Connection in the Ocean County Mall is also a good place to advertise what is going on. Other ways to advertise is through backpacks at schools and by creating an online central portal for all things transportation.
3. **Consider local events and organizations for opportunities, but also potential competition.** Participants suggested the best way to engage with them is through leveraging existing events and setting up where something is already drawing people. They recommended working with local Business Improvement districts, community festivals and fairs, libraries, blood drives, and home owner association meetings. However, it is important to check the local events calendar for conflicts, such as school concerts, football games, etc. They also suggested implementing online forums for engaging people who cannot make it to a meeting.
4. **Make activities quick, fun, and interactive.** Participants won't stop to partake if an activity does not look like it will be quick or fun. They suggested setting up something tangible, like models, a video or some other interactive activity to get people talking. They recommended giving participants an opportunity to show you what they want to see happen through something interactive. They want to see real life visual examples from nearby. Participants suggested already having a plan created to spark people to give their opinions. They also recommended helping people understand how things work and could work in the future through tours.

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5. **Transparency and continued communication is important.** Participants are confused about project timelines and how things are paid for, and they want to better understand the process. Participants also want their contribution to be validated with follow up communication that gives a summary of what was learned and the next steps.
6. **NJTPA is unknown and participants don't identify with North Jersey.** Nearly all of the participants expect for one who works at engineering firm, have never heard of NJTPA. Participants noted that they don't consider themselves to be North Jersey residents and that hearing the word "North Jersey" is a turn off. Participants preferred to think about planning at the statewide level or more localized.
7. **Lessons learned from recruitment:** The largest share of participants found out about the focus group from the Toms River Patch. Local media coverage was key to getting the word out about this focus group.

**Participants:**

Vince Garofano	White	Male	Retired Service Tech; Now Fulltime Musician	Toms River
Frank Kivka	White/Hispanic	Male	Sales	Toms River
Jennifer Newton	White	Female	Engineering administrative	Toms River
Bill Kiehling	White	Male	Retired	Lakewood
Michael Nastasi	White	Male	Clerk	Toms River
Shirlene Leach	White	Female	Senior Library Assistant	Pinebeach
Mary Ann Gutchigian	White	Female	Travel Agent	Long Beach Township
Lisa Hoffman	White	Female	Scheduler	Brick
Barrie Barkley	Black	Female	Disability Claims Manager	Jackson Township

**Discussion and Responses:**

*Warmup: What are your day-to-day transportation needs? (0-5:27)*

*Summary:*

All participants own cars and drive regularly. A few participants only take the bus from Lakewood or Toms River when going to NYC. No participants reported using the local bus. Reasons include bad signage and difficulty to understand how the system works].

*Comments:*

- My typical transportation is my car
- I drive to work every day, about two miles
- I have my own car, but I work from home.
- I drive a car, and I need to get to Philadelphia, Atlantic City, or New York City a lot and it's very expensive because the buses here are unfortunately not very convenient. Sometimes going to New York is \$100, and if you take the bus it's still \$60 round trip.
- I live in Lakewood and drive exclusively. I like to walk and bike, but not necessarily to get somewhere. I'm a big believer in public transportation, but I drive even when going to NYC because the bus is expensive and less convenient. I've taken the train but it's far away. [This participant was not aware of the bus going from Lakewood and thought he had to go south to get to the Toms River bus.]
- I have cars but I take the bus when I work up in New York. There are buses from Lakewood to NYC and I've done that before.
- I drive but my three kids take the school bus, which turns into a nightmare when trying to drive down a two-lane road.
- I drive about 50 miles a day to and from work.
- I use my car, I use my bike, and I walk.
- We have a free summertime Shuttle in my town and I use that. I take the Toms River bus into NYC for trade shows. I've also taken the train out of Metropark. I'm not really a city person, but I've used it.
- We really could use a train to bring tourism to the shore communities like Long Beach Island (LBI).

*Have you ever been to a public meeting, workshop, or event about transportation, planning, or infrastructure? (7:45)*

- [Most participants had never participated in any public meeting or workshop].
- We had many meetings with the LBI business alliance and chamber about getting a free shuttle going on the island. And when they were discussing rebuilding our bridge, they had constant meetings telling us this was coming in 2012 or 2014 or 2016; it kept getting pushed back. Finally they came in with what they were going to do and how they were going to fix the bridge.
  - I felt heard. On the island, I think they really have to listen to the people because you're not only talking about the residents but you're talking about their incomes. You have business owners who really pressure them to get things done so they have to in order to avoid going bankrupt.
  - We would go to the Town Hall, and the mayor would have whoever came in to speak about the bridge specifically, then they had all kinds of charts and graphs, timelines about the layout, and then they would go over each piece. They started with the 2014 section, then moved into the 2015 section and they'd give you timelines and the charts on how

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they were tearing out shrubs and grasslands and things and how the flow for the town was going to work out.

- I felt heard because even if the meeting was supposed to go until 8:30, we wouldn't finish until 10, so they took time to listen.
- In my town they wanted to put a Wawa in, and there's only like 2000 residents in our town. There are already several Dunkin Donuts and three gas stations, so half the residents don't want it, the other half want to save nine cents on gas so they push for it. It's crazy because it's a huge Wawa they want and it's been going on for two and a half year.
  - I felt motivated by the topic because it's crowded, and mostly anyone who uses the Wawa is going to come from other towns because like I said we only have 2000 people. The traffic is crazy already.
  - I went to the Town Council meeting. They had people speaking. It's going on to a fair hearing now.
- There's actually a dispute meeting going on as we speak at Pine Belt Arena in Toms River now – The Hassidic population is trying to buy residential property but make it into a private school and the residents are obviously not taking it well if they're at the Pine Belt Arena because it's like 2000 people that are fighting this.

*Samples of public outreach flyers (12:30)*

*Flyer #1 (13:20)*

- Looks like it has to do with different ways to get around
- Probably trying to get people to use transit
- Looks like an ad for private bus line like the Greyhound buses in New Jersey [several participants agreed],
- Not interested in attending
- Like that there are 3 dates and different times
- I wouldn't care unless about this unless I was taking that bus; otherwise who cares? It's not personal
- Logo looks like the Greyhound bus, which would not draw me in
- I think if the Mountain line logo were smaller you wouldn't be as confused.
- Flows well, the thing that sticks out are the times and dates

*Flyer #2 (15:37)*

- The writing is too small
- I'm not getting the message
- It's very confusing, there are a bunch of arrows going all over
- I like that you can go on a website web site for people if you can't make the meeting, but the URL should be front and center

- ADA information is unwieldy, but understands that it needs to be there
- I have to read it to figure out what they're trying to say to me, and it's still not saying a lot – just you tell us what you want.

*Flyer #3 (48:00)*

- [Favorite among the group]
- It looks like a Ben & Jerry's container
- It's appealing to the eye
- I can tell you from a marketing perspective, the reason people like it is because it has only 4 colors
- I like the city background
- I like the green, we're all trying to be green
- I like that you're asking a question
- I like that it gives a website as an option for if you can't make the meeting
- I would contact them.
- I might go to the website.

*In Sample 3, what does the term "planning for the future" evoke?*

- It sounds like something that we may end up doing in the future, but I'm not sure if it will be implemented because it's not definite – when will we find out if it will happen?
- NJ is always writing a regional plan. For example, the Garden State Parkway. When will it just get done?
- People won't care unless it affects them directly. In fact I think that reaching out to everyone is a waste of time. It's better to target people who are really affected, versus bribing people to come to a meeting who only want money. Find people who will be affected.
- New Jersey has a problem. Most people in NJ don't even care about next town, not to mention the next county, so never mind the regional plan. Unless you give a good incentive, nobody will come. Why would I care about what you're doing? The way to make me care is if I'm affected by it. If you talk about Camden and I work in Camden, I care about it. But if you're asking me about the stops on the light rail, I don't care if I never go to Camden. Even NYC is a city of neighborhoods. One neighborhood couldn't care less about the next neighborhood.
- It would be a good idea to work with the Chambers of Commerce to bridge gaps between towns, because they talk to each other. For example, a town Chamber of Commerce has incentive to talk to another town's Chamber because they rely on each other for business. But I agree, individual citizens don't care as much about neighboring communities three towns over. Our chambers connect with each other.

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- Lakewood has separate communities of Hassidic, Hispanic, and African American, and different marketing messages are necessary for both because they are very separated. It's all Lakewood, but they might as well be different towns.
  - Those groups really don't talk to each other too well. You have to market it to each group.
  - You'd probably have to do it at separate meetings.
- Ocean County College is a melting pot and a good outreach opportunity. You have people from all walks of life.
  - My 21 year-old son goes there and he is on the move all the time. I think about what will happen if he crashes my car and the insurance goes up and we can't afford it?
  - Younger people have more of a regional focus because they might move. They think, how will this affect me? What if I can't get there?
  - Older adults care less about the future. In 15 years I'll be 60 and I won't care.
- How could we sell the long-term plan to you?
- I honestly think most of us really believe there is no long term plan because we hear about it but never see it implemented; NJ is just getting by a day at a time. We just suffer through each day.

*What would Ocean County residents come to a meeting to talk about? How could we get them there?*  
(19:20)

- Give presentations at HOA meetings. Luring them in here isn't going to work.
- As far as the seniors, it's a big population, and their association meetings are during the day.
- Social media wouldn't work for me, and you need to get people physically here. If they do online surveys, they plug it in and then they're gone and forget about it. [several agreed]
- Go to community fairs
  - [Mixed thoughts about who would stop and chat with someone tabling at a fair]
  - Reasons for stopping
    - Convenient
    - Fun activity is a lure. But I do think the seniors do spend a lot of time online, you'd be surprised.
  - Reasons for not stopping
    - If I'm at a fair, I'm mostly there to socialize I don't want to sit and have a conversation about problems.
    - I wouldn't want to stop there for a half hour talking. So you should think of it as a small window into the issue.
- Sometimes you'll hear something come up, but then it disappears. For example, over here we have the Dover Plaza which has made that intersection a nightmare. They're still building there. Every now and then you hear that there's going to be a meeting somewhere but there is no follow up at least as far as I've heard.

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- It would be helpful to have a central portal for transportation issues online, where we can find out about meetings all in one place. You could team up with the state to have something on the government that would link to your site. Also, agencies could use it to track people and their interests. You could compile the data together and then email it out.
- When approaching people on the street, clearly define the purpose for talking to them. Make it clear that you are just advertising a meeting and are not seeking their feedback right there, so they know they won't have to stand there talking to you for a while and have an entire conversation.

*Look at the kiosk images. What would make you stop at a kiosk? (28:30)*

- You have to have a giveaway, especially for seniors, but not just candy. If you don't have a giveaway it won't stop.
- Need sugar-free candy or other items like pens and stickers to attract people, especially diabetics because there are so many seniors here.
- This time a year, insurance companies will give people \$15 CVS cards for an hour of their time, so that would be a draw for seniors. They also have focus groups online and by video and they give \$20 gift cards to Walmart.
- [mixed thoughts on if they would stop at Ocean County mall to talk to a tabler].
- Morning walkers at the mall
- I might stop if there was valuable, hard-to-find info there, like bus schedules, and I'd talk to you if I was there because I don't know how to get that information.

*Other thoughts for effective outreach*

- Video focus groups are a good idea for people who can't get there, or their time is valuable and they don't want to waste time coming and getting through traffic, so that would be one avenue, depending on who you're looking to target.
  - Advertise the forums on social media
- Seniors might watch public access TV channels, but most people wouldn't. It's a senior thing. If you go into the City chamber meetings in Ocean County, there are at least six in my area, they are always looking for someone to speak, and the people who go to those meetings are usually the movers and shakers and they tell other people and get them involved.
- Another way to reach parents who are too busy is to put a flyer in a backpack – make a connection for how it helps kids, saying that it will help them get a job if you can't drive them there.
  - Getting permission to go into schools is a problem, although it's a good idea. They have their own agendas.
- Partner with AAA to reach drivers in places where traffic is horrible. For example, the ShopRite in town – they let anybody sit there. I'm sure if you went there and they saw a table with AAA and they just got off this horrible road, they would see it's relevant.

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- Ocean County Connection in the Ocean County Mall is a fabulous resource for residents and I go all the time. It's a highlight for so many people.
  - People go there for information, passports, notaries, etc.
  - They have open doors and tables like this set up with a bunch of flyers.
  - Great outreach opportunity!
- Every week I've seen people here [at the library] a lot, like an insurance company table giving out pens.
  - You could set up near a blood drives, mobile mammograms, etc. at the mall
- SCORE is an organization of retired business people that offer pro bono assistance. You tell them your goals and they will help you find solution.
- Toms River BID runs festivals, etc. and they are always interested in ways to draw people in, so you could partner with them.
- Go in small groups and hit up several places rather than one central meeting. You can't just focus on one night. Go to HOAs, festivals, and various venues to attract a wide range of people.
- Consider that there may be band concerts, football games, or weather conflicting with a meeting.
- There must always be incentives for bringing people to the meeting. Makeup companies give incentives for bringing people to the meeting through discounts, etc. That might inspire me to tell five of my friends that you're having this forum.

*How would you tell your friends about a public meeting? (42:18)*

- The Traffic around here sucks – here's a way to give your input and be heard, so why not come out?
- I'd post on Facebook and I think a lot of people would be willing to do it. That's how I found out about this meeting.
- Toms River Patch – how most people heard about focus group
  - Also, flyers
  - [many go to the Patch every day]
- Word of mouth
- Follow up is important.
  - What came of the meeting?
  - What was the feedback that was gathered? Did other people say what you said?
  - Validates your participation
  - Maybe I'm the only one who thinks there's traffic on Hooper Ave. I'd like to know if so.
- Ask questions that make it personal instead of just advertising, i.e. "are you sick of traffic?" "Do you need help getting from point A to point B?" Then people thing, wow, you know my life!
- 511.org is another good spot. They have accidents and construction sites in real time, so if I went there I would be interested in knowing about a meeting about traffic

*Do you know how transportation projects are funded?*



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- County and state
- I see signs that say who funds the projects. That's great, so can we move it along? I wonder why nobody is getting it done when it's a sunny day and there are cones out and nobody's there.
  - DOT will make bureaucratic excuses to not pay workers
  - But that's not fair to us, the taxpayers of NJ.
- The Parkway and the Turnpike are private businesses, based on tolls.
- Not sure if county and state chip in for most roads
- I would say it's something like, south route 9 needs, say \$20. But we only have \$5, so we have to come up with \$15. So what are we going to do? Taxes, bonds, referendums?
- It seems like there must be different funding in northern and southern parts of Ocean County because Route 9 goes down to 1 lane in the South. There's where the disparity is to me. How is it that as soon as I hit Lakewood we're down to one lane? But before you get to Howell it's much better.

*Let's think about ways we can make regional issues resonate with you (1:07)*

- When you have a regional issue, you really need a leader with lots of guts who is not afraid to get things done and has the power. I believe that most of the roads of New York were done by one individual who put roads in – Robert Moses.
- You need to look at how other places handled it. I used to live in South Carolina, and there was a road like Route 9 and finally the County came in and said enough of this, we're taking 2 inches off each person's land and raising taxes.
- *How can we bridge the regional and local conversation?*
- If you start bringing out these little models, that would get people's attention better at a kiosk or a mall. Need something 3D, tangible or a video, rather than a flat piece of paper. Something realistic looking. People are going to look at that thing and wonder what the heck it is. Then you can have a poster that says "look at this problem..."
- If you want people to give opinions, what you need to do is tell people you already have a plan, people will come out to oppose it and participation will increase. You have to do it the backwards way and everyone who is affected will be out there. This has been discussed for so long that it's financially and politically impossible unless you can get someone like that.
- Look for opportunities for people to model what they'd like to see. You can get ideas for what might work and what's going to work.
- Image 5: We should have a hands-on activity where people are walking down a narrow lane to understand traffic flow
  - Help people understand how giving up property can help them
  - If they saw that it would make it possible to not be stuck behind a 90 year old driver but go around them now, they'd be more amendable to giving up some of their property.
  - I sold some property in Mercer County that the state needed and my neighbors didn't understand why I would do that, but I wanted to because it was good for the state. It was

on the edge of the property anyway. Why wouldn't you want to do that? But if there isn't a tradeoff, people will refuse.

*Would you respond to one of the Textizen signs? (1:12:20)*

- I don't think my response would matter. I texted yes, so what?
- I would participate if it were in my town, about anything – traffic, detours, etc.
  - I'd answer follow-up questions
- I like this because it's simple: would you use rapid transit? I think a lot of people would participate if it were simple. But what you're trying to do is not so simple. So that might be harder.
- *What do you think of the question in Sample 3: Is Buffalo Niagara moving in the right direction?*
  - Good question for NJ in general; people could say no and would feel they had expressed their opinion
  - It's a simple way to get your opinion out there, but I don't know what would come after that.
  - It's a very generic question. What is "other"?
- Ranking priorities would also be good, most important to least important. I think a lot of people have opinions on a variety of concerns. They would want to be able to express more than one thing.
- I would also want to know what the follow up is. What's the follow up to "other"?

*Word association (1:17:00)*

- Walkable
  - Easy
  - Safe
  - Not Toms River
  - Bridge
- Capital investment
  - Far-fetched
  - Bureaucratic
  - [means nothing]
- Complete streets
  - Pipe dream
  - A New development would have it
  - Don't we have that already?
  - Residential area, brand new, untouched. No potholes. It doesn't mean a route 9 or a turnpike.
  - [Miriam explained what complete streets means]
- Livable
  - What we have now

- Traffic calming
  - We have one by my house, a traffic calming circle
  - White noise from cars
  - Speed bumps
- Mobility
  - Getting from one place to another
  - Everyone can do it
- Sustainable
  - Longevity
  - Not the Garden State Parkway
  - Prius cars, Green
  - Long-lasting
- Community development
  - Neighborhoods
  - Coming together to develop
  - HOAs
  - Shopping, plazas
  - A group of people taking care of a particular sector

[Miriam explained NJTPA and Regional Transportation Plan]

- Only the person who works at an engineering firm had heard of them

***What would your advice be to NJTPA?***

- “North Jersey” in the name would be a turn-off for many Ocean County residents, esp. seniors who only care about getting around a five-mile radius. You say North Jersey, forget it. They think of Hoboken, Jersey City, and they don’t care about that. The seniors are a large group here.
- Call it something more local – Central Jersey?
- Why not call it New Jersey TPA instead of dividing us as a state? We’re all one state. That’s part of the problem, is we’re all divided. If you say New Jersey TPA, people will know it’s part of our state.

***What about the flyer drew you in to this focus group? (1:23:48)***

- Traffic issues, because I know it is a nightmare
- I wouldn’t have come if this were listed as a North Jersey issue
- Knowing that local actions connect to a bigger region

***How could we tie transportation to other things you care about?***

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- Show us 3 ideas to choose from, don't just tell us you're going to fix it. Tell us what you're going to do, not just what you're thinking about doing.
- I came to the meeting with the thought that if it's a New Jersey issue that will actually affect Ocean County, it's transportation to bring tourists to shore communities, like Long Beach Island. When I moved there in 2000, there were 8,000 people, and now we're down to about 6,000, but we're building back up post-Sandy. There are more people living there year-round though now, and they are important to economic development.
- Show an example, for example on LBI we're thinking of becoming a cultural arts district. They showed us what New Hope, PA did. If you show a town that was a big mess and then transportation came in and benefited everybody, they'd sign up.
- Point to examples nearby of places with better transit usage and better traffic, like Stockton and Galway and Atlantic City, where more people use trains and buses.
- If New Jersey wanted to change things, they would subsidize mass transit so it makes more economic sense to take it than to drive. Right now it costs over \$20 each way to take the bus from Toms River to NYC. If you had a planner decide to subsidize buses, you'd have a bus running out of there every 15 minutes. Also, they should give tax incentives to take the bus.
- The bus takes too long, stop after stop after stop – put in bus lanes so it's faster to take the bus
- Rail system would be ideal because you're not dealing with traffic; we already have a rail not in use in Lakewood
  - With shuttles to/from stops
- Route 9 doesn't immediately impact me, but when you talk about detouring or bypassing construction, that brings traffic to new neighborhoods, so there's that ripple effect.

*[Other thoughts about transportation and outreach]*

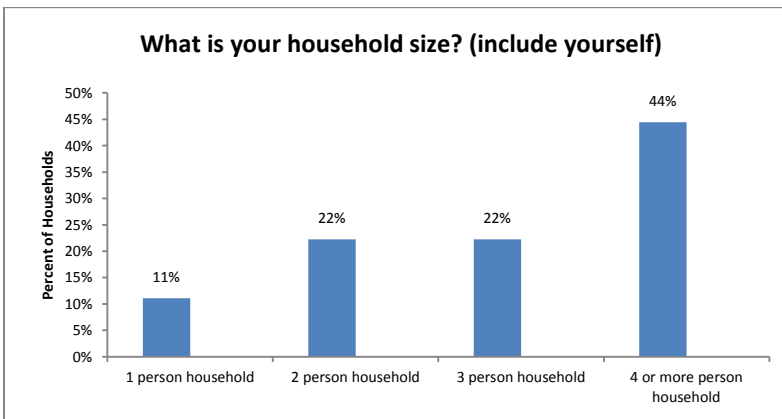
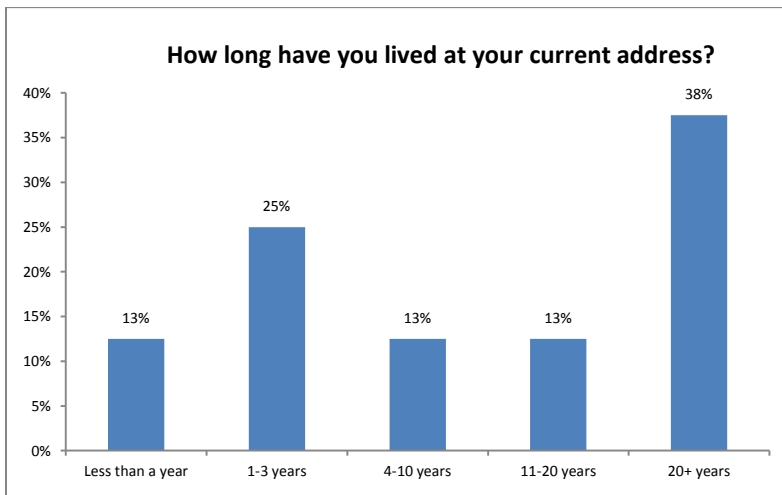
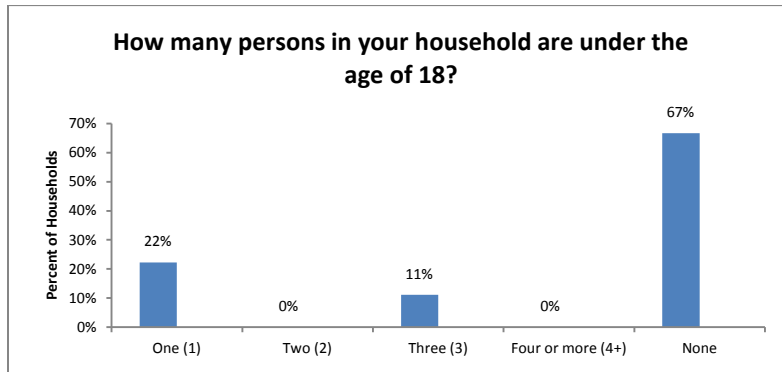
- There's really no way to get around without a car here; my mother broke her shoulder and can't drive now. She can either take a taxi, which is going to take 2-3 hours for it to get there, and it's \$20 to go to ShopRite 2 miles away, or she's dependent on me. OceanRide [paratransit] works but she'd still have to go to the bus stop and she's got a cane.
- Uber is everywhere and cheaper than a taxi. My husband started driving for them. The kids take it to school if they don't want to take a bus. And it tells you right where the cars are.
- Down in Ocean County you have lots of seniors who are less likely to take the train or venture out. I'm not too sure that those folks are even here year round, they might be part-timers.
- My Son, 24, cannot drive and probably never will; he walks 2 miles to get a bus because there's no transportation.
- People basically don't take mass transit unless they have to. If you have a car, especially around New Jersey, you won't take it. There's no financial or time incentive to put yourself through the pain.
- It's actually about \$150 per month cheaper for my husband to take the bus. But it's the time and energy it takes to research it, and the fear of what if the bus doesn't come, that makes it hard.

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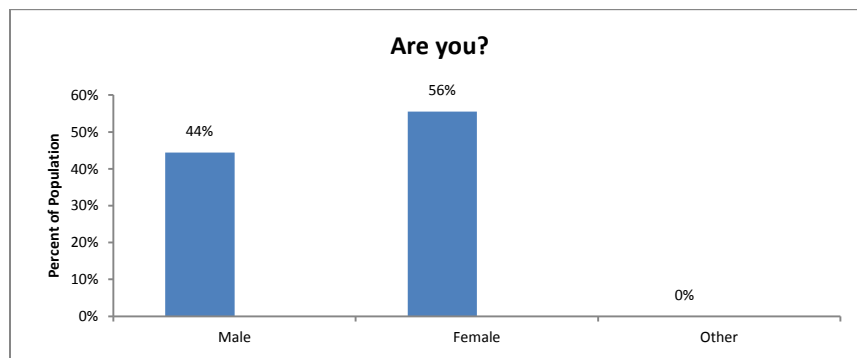
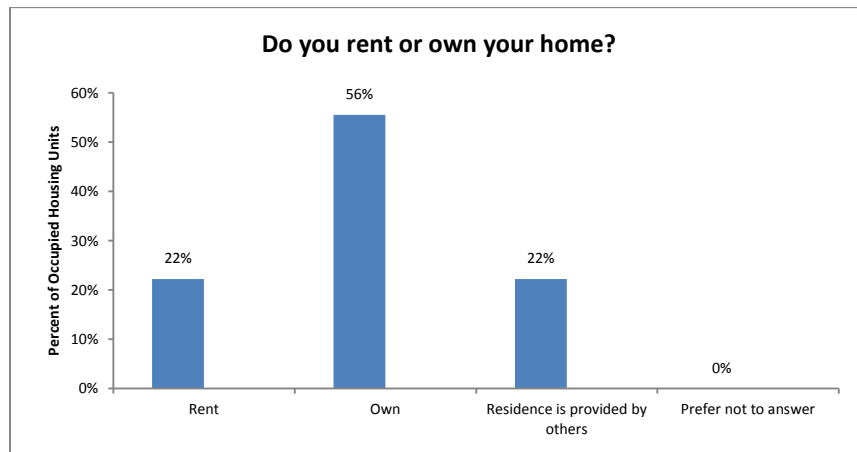
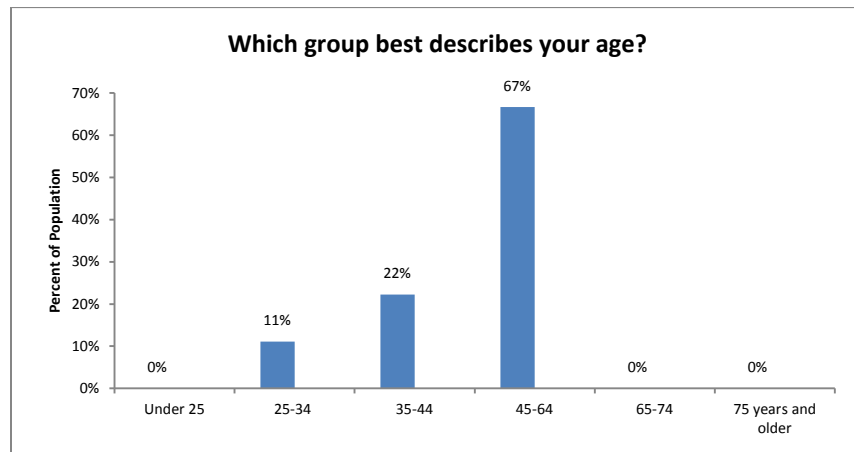
And they don't promote the fact that it's a tax write off. If people realized that, they might do it, but a lot of people don't want to spend the time and energy. But if you do it, you could save \$40 a month, which is actually a decent amount of money.

- This is a mass transit desert, and without a car you really can't go far.
- You're studying Route 9, but it's been like that for 45 years. When I think of plans, I think of taxes. I think, there goes my money. I want to know, what are you going to do about it?
- I want a beginning, middle, and end to the plan. It's route 9, it's congested, but we're going to do X to fix it.
- People in NJ learn to deal with transportation problems, don't try to make changes, ie Skyway bridge. It's all a big joke and part of living in NJ
- When they closed the road for the Pulaski Skyway project, they didn't know what was going to happen. It's been a nightmare. People in NJ just deal with it. They don't go to meetings to cry about it. They're never going to fix that bridge.
- Living in New Jersey is really a big joke. It's a joke on the people.
- There's no timeline, the timeline is just "it's getting done."
- The reason they're fixing the Skyway is because the road itself is going to fall down. Route 9 in my opinion will not be touched, it will look the same in 10 years.

**Demographic Survey Results – Southern Suburban Residents**



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 Southern Suburban Residents Focus Group (Toms River, NJ)  
 December 17, 2015

