

Overview

On January 27, 2006, 403 participants from throughout the county gathered at the Holiday Inn in Champaign to share their knowledge, opinions, and ideas for the future of the county at the Stakeholder Workshop. At the workshop, community members had an opportunity to delve deeper into the issues that impact the county. Over the course of this workshop, they reviewed existing conditions and trends, discussed critical topics emerging from ideas generated at the public meetings, and identified principles related to physical environment, prosperity, and quality of life that will help the community achieve and sustain a desired future. The Stakeholder Workshop marked the beginning of the Community Assembly process, in which community members work together over the course of several months to develop the goals, objectives, and strategies that will define Champaign County's vision for the future. Ideas from the Countywide Community Dialogue meetings and results from the Stakeholder Workshop will all contribute to the formulation of this vision.

Workshop Agenda

The workshop began with a presentation perspectives and perceptions revealed through focus group interviews, as well a summary of the results from the Countywide Community Dialogue meetings that were held in November 2005. The bulk of the workshop focused on two activities- Small Group Activity 1: Mapping Strong Places, Weak Places, and Small Group Activity 2: Critical Questions. Each activity was conducted by volunteer facilitators at tables of seven to eight participants. Tables were randomly assigned specific topics to address for each of the two activities. Following each activity, a reporting period was held in which certain groups had the opportunity to share the results of their work. This document provides a summary of the two small group activities, drawing upon the contributions of every group at the workshop.

Mapping Strong Places, Weak Places

For the Mapping Strong Places, Weak Places Activity, each table was randomly assigned to address one of eight topics: Agriculture; Commerce; Community Character; Neighborhoods; Parks, Trails, Recreation and Natural Areas; Transportation - Vehicular; Transportation - Alternative and Public; or Urban Areas and Downtowns. With their table's topic in mind, each participant identified three strong places – places that reflect well on the community and feature conditions that they would like to see more often, and three weak places – places that are eyesores or reflect poorly on the community. Participants then identified these places on a large map, using green stickers to represent strong places and red stickers to represent weak places. Next a facilitator led the table in a discussion, using the collective mapping results to help the group identify the three strongest and three weakest locations. They recorded information about the characteristics that define each of these six locations, and then developed a number of recommendations based on their discussion. All of the information was recorded on maps or flipchart paper. This section provides a general summary for each topic.

Agriculture

A total of six groups addressed Agriculture during the workshop. With regards to the county's strengths, the participants noted the high quality soil, large tracts of land for cultivation, agricultural support infrastructure like roads and the railroad, the economic contributions of agriculture, and the wide open spaces in the landscape. The weaknesses

dealt mainly with urban expansion into agricultural areas, the conversion of agricultural land to other uses, and increased demands for infrastructure because of these new developments. There were also environmental concerns about water quality to soil quality. In general, the participants felt that agriculture in the county could be improved or enhanced if new development takes place in a more concentrated way, through redevelopment, infill development, or more contiguous development. They also felt that agriculture should be a research priority, that there needs to be intergovernmental cooperation, and that there should be environmentally friendly practices.

Commerce

Six groups that were assigned Commerce as a topic for the mapping exercise. In general, participants felt that Downtown Champaign was a very strong place and Downtown Urbana was also strong. These places are strong because of their energy, variety, walkability, good transit, unique identity, and presence of people. North Prospect was sited as both strong and weak. It was considered strong because of the variety of retail, interstate access, convenience, brands, and one-stop shopping. On the flipside, it was considered to be ugly, lacking in community spaces, offering limited access without a car, and lacking in local retailers. Other areas that were considered weak tended to be those that have abandoned buildings, are ugly or poorly maintained, offer few desirable retailers, or feel unsafe.

The participants recommend improving access to commercial areas with a variety of transportation options, and creating places that are more pedestrian-friendly. They would like to improve appearances and add lighting and landscaping. There was also a clear emphasis on redevelopment, revitalization, and support for independent businesses. Participants would like to see commerce in small communities as well as in downtowns and regional shopping centers. They felt that government initiatives or intervention might be successful in making these changes.

Community Character

The seven groups that addressed Community Character identified the University of Illinois, Downtown Champaign, Downtown Urbana, Mahomet, and parks in the county (e.g. Meadowbrook Park) as strong places. The more urban areas and the University were cited because of their vitality, walkability, architecture and aesthetic qualities, and cultural opportunities. The more suburban areas were cited for their good schools and sense of community. The parks were identified for their recreational opportunities and natural features. Specific weak places varied greatly, but participants generally focused on those places that were deteriorating, unattractive, visually unwelcoming or featuring poor signage, not pedestrian friendly, or that had an abundance of apartment complexes, rental housing, or dormitories. One place that was identified repeatedly as a weak place was Rantoul, due to its defunct air force base.

Recommendations to enhance community character include visual and design improvements such as lighting, landscaping, and gateways. There was also an emerging consensus to focus on redevelopment. Participants suggested that the community character should be unique to individual communities, in order to avoid an “anywhere-USA” feeling. They suggested that it would be worthwhile to have countywide strategic and economic planning that accounts for the needs of all communities in the county.

Neighborhoods

There were four groups that addressed Neighborhoods. The strong places mainly focused on Urbana, Savoy, and Downtown Champaign. Urbana was cited for its quality housing, historic buildings, sense of community and friendly atmosphere, walkability, good schools, and proximity to the U of I. It also has a variety of services and restaurants. Savoy is considered strong because of its good housing, mix of uses, convenient location, and tax base. Downtown Champaign is strong because of independent businesses, mix of uses, pedestrian-friendly environment, diversity, neighborhood schools, transit, and integrity of its old neighborhoods. Weak places included Rantoul, North Urbana,

and small towns. These places were considered weak due to loss of economic base and perceptions of crime, lack of new growth/stagnation, poor maintenance, no transit, limited character, and lack of infrastructure.

Recommendations to enhance neighborhoods include economic development, redevelopment with residential, commercial, and recreational uses, improvements to schools, enhanced transportation options, and increased community activities. Participants strongly emphasized the importance of redeveloping and improving existing areas before investing in new development.

Parks, Trails, Recreation, and Natural Areas

Strong places identified under this topic include Lake of the Woods, Homer Lake, Meadowbrook Park, and Crystal Lake Park. The participants cited a number of positive attributes including trails, presence of water, playgrounds, activities, natural areas and nature centers, topography, restored prairie, and variety of things to do such as fishing, biking, golf, tennis, basketball, and baseball, among others. There were not any dominant weak places that emerged from the six groups that worked on this topic, since the participants' identification of weak places was dispersed among numerous locations. However, the reasons why certain places were considered weak are very similar. A lack of parks and open space was a commonly cited weakness, as was poor maintenance or lack of programming in existing parks.

The groups' recommendations suggested improving forest preserves, creating a regional bike path and trail system, improving maintenance, requiring new developments to include parks and open space, interconnecting parks and green spaces, beautifying residential, commercial, and industrial areas, and expanding recreation opportunities for all ages.

Transportation – Alternative and Public

Eight groups worked on Alternative and Public Transportation. The strong places included Lake of the Woods, University of Illinois, Urbana and Champaign (and their downtowns), and bike trails. These places are considered strong because they are walkable, offer a mix of uses, don't require the use of a car, offer transit, and have well-managed traffic. Strong places were also cited for their safety, connectivity, accessibility, and hiking opportunities. Weak places included North Prospect, because it is difficult and unsafe to walk, there are no sidewalks or trails, there is traffic congestion, and it is automobile dependent. Rantoul was cited because there is no public transportation and limited sidewalks or walking/biking trails. Many other places were identified because of their lack of sidewalks and automobile dependency.

Recommendations to enhance alternative and public transportation include improving safety by enforcing traffic laws, expanding transportation options for youth and seniors, expanding public transit, expanding and interconnecting sidewalk and trail infrastructure, improving coordination between governments, including sidewalks, trails, and transit in new development, and creating more walkable communities. Participants would like to see development patterns that support walking, biking, and transit, as well as the car.

Transportation – Vehicular

Five groups addressed vehicular transportation. Their strong places included Mahomet and Windsor Road, among others. Places that were considered strong have limited traffic problems, and are scenic, well-maintained, and attractive. These places were cited for their character, older trees, bike paths, good connectivity, and faster speed limit. Participants mentioned the importance of interstates in providing access to the larger region. Weak places included North Prospect, due to congestion, poor timing of traffic lights, lack of walkability, and a confusing and unattractive environment. Other places were identified because they are considered dangerous, poorly maintained, lack parking, are confusing, congested, not pedestrian friendly, or are locations where conflicts occur between pedestrians, bicycles, and cars (e.g. U of I).

Recommendations to improve vehicular transportation include providing alternative modes of transportation, increasing transportation options for the elderly and other groups, improving traffic flow, enhancing coordination

among government bodies, better integrating commercial and residential areas, limiting cars on campus, improving rural safety, and minimizing conflicts between pedestrians, bikes, and cars. Other recommendations address the need for a beltway, higher standards for roads, additional sidewalks, and bike paths in new developments.

Urban Areas and Downtowns

For Urban Areas and Downtowns, the strong places most often cited include Downtown Champaign, Downtown Urbana, Mahomet, and Meadowbrook Park. The Downtowns were recognized for their streetscaping, pedestrian friendly environment, entertainment, welcoming atmosphere, activities, restaurants, diversity of shops, ample parking, residential areas, libraries, galleries, diversity, and parks. Meadowbrook Park is a great green space with arts, nature, and activities near urban areas. Mahomet has natural amenities near residential areas. Weak places include North Champaign, Rantoul, and North Prospect, among others. Weak places were cited as such due to congestion, sprawl, empty stores, big boxes, lack of unique character, perception of blight and crime, single uses, or a struggling economy. Additional problems affiliated with weak places include a lack of neighborhood schools, no green space, no sidewalks, poor quality housing, insufficient activities, unattractive streetscapes, and empty stores or buildings.

Recommendations from the seven groups that addressed this topic include: building community character through infill and redevelopment, expanding the parks system, landscaping, improving aesthetics, addressing the needs of low income households and communities, undertaking historic preservation efforts, promoting economic development, improving transportation circulation, improving sidewalks, providing transportation alternatives, and ensuring adequate parking.

Critical Questions

For the Critical Questions Activity, each table was randomly assigned to address one of eight topics: Arts and Culture; Development Patterns; Economy; Education; Environment and Natural Resources; Leadership and Governance; Social Issues / Diversity; or University of Illinois / Parkland College. First, each group held a brief discussion on the opportunities and challenges related to their topic. Next, they were asked to answer a specific question, and the facilitator recorded their answers on flipchart paper. Finally, the groups were asked to reflect on their discussions and provide recommendations in the form of specific strategies on ways to address their assign topic in the future. These responses were also recorded on flipchart paper. This section provides a summary of the major ideas and recommendations generated for each topic.

Arts and Culture

Among the groups that addressed Arts and Culture, funding was a major priority. They recommended that public, private, and educational resources be tapped for generating more financial support for the arts. Coordination and publicity of arts opportunities was also emphasized, and several groups recommended the formation of an arts council or similar organizing body to promote arts awareness and publicize events throughout the county. Groups also mentioned the importance of focusing on youth, and expanding and enhancing arts education for young people. Other topics addressed by these groups include: accessibility and affordability of arts and cultural events, the potential of the arts as an economic driver, and the desire for more public art, among others.

Development Patterns

The groups that examined Development Patterns emphasized the importance of maintaining and enhancing existing communities through attention to the urban core, incentives to promote home maintenance, adaptive reuse of existing buildings, and a number of other suggestions related to community revitalization. Participants would like to preserve farmland, strengthen small towns, and reduce sprawl. They encourage new development that is contiguous,

compact, and eco-friendly. The groups also noted the need for greater government efficiency and better long-range planning in order to achieve these desired development patterns.

Economy

The participants that discussed Economy saw education as playing a central role in the county's economic health. They emphasized the importance of promoting high quality public schools, youth employment opportunities, and vocational training initiatives. Groups also emphasized the importance of improving public transit, with particular attention to connecting urban and rural parts of the county. They would like to see Champaign County build upon its strengths and diversify its economic base, creating a supportive environment for small businesses and encouraging innovations in agriculture. They acknowledge the substantial role that the University of Illinois plays as an economic driver for the region. Participants also noted that they would like to encourage more economic development throughout the county, not just in the urban core.

Education

Funding was a top concern for the groups assigned to address Education. Participants recommended changes to the formulas for funding public schools, with less emphasis on property taxes and better resource management. Groups also emphasized the need to better support teachers, through smaller classrooms, additional staffing, and attention to discipline in schools. They noted that teachers should be able to pursue more creative teaching methods, and be less compelled to "teach to the test" (i.e., the No Child Left Behind test). Additional community and parental involvement in schools was cited as a top priority. Participants also noted that more attention should be given to non-college-bound students, and suggested instituting more school-to-work programs.

Environment and Natural Resources

The groups that looked at Environment emphasized the importance of clearly identifying and defining the county's natural resources, and developing unified strategies among all levels of governments in order to protect these resources. Public education was seen as an important tool for protecting the environment. Specific topics addressed by participants included solid waste management (involving landfills, littering, and recycling), erosion, attention to prairies and native species, and public and alternative transportation options, among others.

Leadership and Governance

The groups that responded to Leadership and Governance recognized the importance of improving communication and coordination among all levels of government. They suggested that government officials find ways to share knowledge, increase efficiencies, and in some cases, consider consolidation of government units. Participants indicated that public education is needed to encourage more residents to vote. They noted that civic involvement needs to begin with the county's youth, and they recommended mentoring programs to help develop future leaders. They groups also cited the need for more diversity in governance and civic leadership.

Social Issues / Diversity

The rising cost of services was a concern for many of the groups dealing with Social Issues / Diversity. Participants discussed the need for affordable housing, health care, and child care. They would like for low-income residents and seniors to receive financial assistance in maintaining their homes and paying for utilities; they would also like to provide seniors with more assisted living options. In terms of education, the groups emphasized the need for more vocational training, language instruction, and job placement services. Participants expressed an interest in establishing more opportunities for interaction among different social groups, in order to promote greater understanding and celebrate the county's diversity.

University of Illinois / Parkland College.

The groups that focused on the University of Illinois and Parkland College would like to see enhanced communication and partnerships among these institutions, local governments, and the general public, perhaps through the organization of a task force. In particular, participants expressed that the University could be more integrated with the surrounding community in terms of decision-making, service provision, and resource sharing. Groups also suggested that these institutions could invite the public to more free or low-cost events.