

Summary Report to Redwood City Council, November 9, 2009

Redwood City Community Conversations August 2009

Summary

In partnership with the City of Redwood City, Threshold 2009 conducted a series of four community conversations in August on housing issues in San Mateo County. Following a project in 2008 that engaged more than 1,000 citizens in dialogue about San Mateo County's housing future, Threshold has sought in 2009 to help local governments use similar practices of civic engagement. With a demonstrated commitment to community building, Redwood City has been a leader in exploring effective ways to involve the public in important decisions. The partnership between Threshold and the City was intended to provide the community with an opportunity to become more informed on critical housing issues, and to strengthen the City's capacity to engage the community going forward.

With support from Redwood City staff, Threshold conducted four Community Conversations about how San Mateo County should grow and how decisions about housing should be made. In preparation for the public dialogues, Threshold trained community members to facilitate the dialogues (and the first dialogue was conducted among facilitators as part of the training). All four meetings were held in Redwood City during August 2009. The facilitator training was held at City Hall, and the three public dialogues were conducted at the Veterans Memorial Senior Center, Fair Oaks Community Center, and Redwood City Downtown Library.

The content, questions, background information, and format of the dialogues were similar to those piloted by Threshold in its 2008 Community Conversations. During 3-hour meetings consisting primarily of facilitated small group dialogue, participants addressed questions about housing and land use at a countywide level, focusing on long-term alternatives. While participants were free to reframe the policy choices presented to them, the prepared briefing materials did not concentrate on Redwood City or reference any local plans or projects.

The project offers several deliverables and opportunities. First, the dialogues provide policymakers with a snapshot of citizens' views on important issues when they have a chance to consider carefully the tradeoffs of different choices. Second, the citizens who took the time to participate in the dialogues represent an informed cross-section of the public who can be invited to participate further in city decision-making processes. Third, the trained facilitators are a valuable resource for the city, strengthening its capacity to continue engaging the public in dialogue. Finally, Threshold will conduct a workshop with City staff to identify the core principles and implementation practices of the Community Conversations, allowing the City to use the method as part of its public outreach for decision-making on housing and other issues.

This report summarizes the main findings from the individual participant surveys and small group comments at the four dialogues in August. It also briefly summarizes the methods of participant recruitment. Following the Council presentation, Threshold will submit a more detailed final report covering the design of the dialogues, analysis of who participated and what they said, and lessons learned from recruitment and implementation. Among other things, the final report will acknowledge by name and affiliation the numerous community members and city staff who generously contributed their time to make this project a success.

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Data Summary: What Did Participants Say About Housing?

Overview

Including the facilitator training, 67 people participated in the dialogues. More than 90% were residents of Redwood City or unincorporated North Fair Oaks. The majority are long-time residents of San Mateo County, with a mix of renters and homeowners at various income levels. Because the intent of the project was to include voices not typically at the table, it is notable that about one-third of the participants rarely or ever attend public meetings on planning processes (and only 38% participate “very often”).

Most participants believe that San Mateo County urgently needs more housing, and a large majority (76%) believes that housing should be higher-density homes built in already developed areas. Many participants believe strongly in local control of land use decisions, but an approximately equal number believe there should be more regional cooperation or oversight across jurisdictions. Nearly everyone thinks that there should be more public input in housing decisions.

While a small percentage of participants believed the framing of the conversation biases opinions in support of more housing, participants overwhelmingly evaluated the process favorably and two-thirds considered it “very useful in helping them think about the issues.”

Level of Participation

- 67 participants in four dialogues (51 apart from the facilitator training)
- 16 facilitators trained
- 50 individuals and organizations assisted with recruitment and logistics

Profile of Participants

- 35% had never participated or participated “only a few times” in a city planning process
- 82% had not participated in any other Threshold activities
- 80% RWC residents; 11% unincorporated county residents; 9% other city residents
- 65% have lived or worked in San Mateo County for more than 10 years
- 62% homeowners; 38% renters
- 69% female; 31% male
- 80% age 35 or older
- 41% have household income \$90,000 or below; 59% over \$90,000
- 73% have a college degree
- 68% have children under 18 living in their households

Recruitment of Participants

- 58% heard about the meetings through e-mail
- 20% heard from a friend, relative or colleague
- 48% of people who registered to attend did not attend
- 41% of participants were walk-ins who had not registered

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Individual Participant Survey Results

1. Participants believe that San Mateo County has an urgent housing problem.
 - 88% think the housing shortage is serious
 - 87% think we should build more housing in the county

2. Participants express similar common ground found in other Threshold dialogues countywide.
 - 76% prefer higher density infill housing to building on open space
 - 47% favor local control of housing decisions; 53% favor more countywide coordination
 - 95% think it is important to have more public input in housing decisions

3. Who should pay for housing solutions?
 - Developers should bear the greatest share of the burden. 88% say they have at least some responsibility; 37% say “a lot” of responsibility
 - Employers who attract new workers are close behind. 83% say they have at least some responsibility; 31% say “a lot” of responsibility
 - Taxpayers have a role: 63% say all local residents have at least some responsibility and 66% say the state has at least some responsibility

4. How should we pay for housing solutions?
 - Public funds: 60%+ “strongly support” using public funds to:
 - Build homes affordable to low income households and those with special needs
 - Incentives for developers to include below market rate units in new developments
 - Home ownership subsidies for middle class residents and public employees
 - Inclusionary requirement for market rate developments: 78% “strongly support”
 - Commercial impact fee (\$1 per square foot): 44% “strongly support”
 - Document recording fee (\$1 to \$5 per document): 43% “strongly support”

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Common Ground Identified Across Small Groups

Transcribed/synthesized from small group reports following their discussions

1. Future Housing Solutions

Choices: Limit housing growth, open new land to development, higher density housing

- Focus on using underutilized space in already developed areas rather than open space.
- Allow taller building limits to accommodate high density housing that provides more affordable options at all income levels, offers choice of a range of housing types, and reduces traffic. Residents will live closer to work and can access all modes of transportation (bike, walk, cars).
- Smart comprehensive planning with intelligently planned transit-oriented, higher density housing that is built along with the infrastructure to support it. Clarify capacity of existing and potential resources. Pay attention to efficient use of resources, especially parks, schools, streets, highways, and water.
- The community needs education on higher density housing, land use, and statewide legislation to address climate change. Provide higher density housing case studies.

2. Who Should Make Housing Decisions?

Choices: Local control, countywide decisionmaking

- Keep various governing agencies as they are now. Locals know their community identity and needs best. Local control and decision-making is key, but standards and guidelines could come from countywide authorities without overlooking local issues and concerns. If a countywide agency has oversight, it should be through incentives, not a hammer.
- A countywide agency may be better equipped for regional decisions (watershed, baylands, coastal issues, transportation) but countywide regional authority could possibly augment parts of local development processes (financing, planning/building guidelines, data/knowledge) by providing the “big picture” vision.
- Local agencies and officials need overall support from regional bodies to protect regional interests such as infrastructure and transportation.

Participant Evaluation of the Dialogue

- 97% considered the dialogue useful in helping them think about the issues
- 67% considered it “very useful”

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Selected Comments from Participants

- *The need for housing...*

“We need more education on this topic especially on the topic of affordable housing. [We need to see and hear] more examples and coverage on great examples of density and affordable housing developments.”

“As long as people making \$100,000+ live here, there be a need for lower/middle income people to sustain their lifestyle. How will they be supported, housed and given equal opportunity and basic rights?”

“Focus should be on workforce housing close to transportation and jobs. The County doesn't need more McMansions or market rate San Francisco.”

- *Local and regional authority...*

“Debate over local vs. county control - I did not think of it being important until today.”

“We agreed generally that a balance or citywide and countywide planning is needed, but we seem to need to find a way for cities to really commit to giving up power, what incentives to cities would compel them to keep commitments to build more housing-affordable housing that is recommended by ABAG and other groups.”

“That government is best which governs least (Thoreau). We should do nothing regarding the creation of new housing. We should remove obstacles to land use by property owners. Decisions should be local, as in the property owner.”

- *The process of community dialogue...*

“Consensus is less important than the dialogue process.”

“I was very impressed with a small but very involved and dedicated group of people had gathered in this room tonight!”

“There was a pre-determined agenda and set of assumptions and nothing would deter the group leaders from finding conclusions that fit those assumptions.”

“I learned that there are many people who understand there is a shortage of housing and agree on density as a solution. However, I believe many who oppose addressing the problem are not willing to spend the time to come to the community conversation.”

“I would like more people that believe things are good the way they are - more anti growth people in the discussion. Enjoyed the time very much.”

“Great process. Need to encourage more people to participate.”

“It was fun. I got to learn more. I hope to do this again.”

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Recruitment: How Were the Meetings Promoted?

To recruit facilitators and enlist participants in the public dialogues, Threshold worked closely with the City's public information department and focused our communication efforts on direct, targeted outreach to select individuals, groups and organizations through established networks within Redwood City, as well as through relationships held by Threshold.

The tools used to implement the plan included but were not limited to: press releases, community newsletter and local media articles, scheduled e-blasts to 2,700 contacts, flyer distribution and replenishment, announcements during televised city meetings and lunchtime at the Senior Center, e-flyer distribution, targeted postcard mailing, and personal invitations to participate. Several versions of a four-color promotional flyer were produced; a general version stated the dates, times and locations of all three Conversations scheduled in Redwood City, with subsequent versions produced for each individual Conversation stating their specific date, time and location. The flyer for the bilingual session held at Fair Oaks Community Center was produced in English and Spanish. Flyers were distributed electronically, and in hard copy at locations throughout the City including the venues where the Conversations were held.

A complete description of the promotional plan will be included in the final report. Some highlights of activities include:

- Replenishment of flyers several times at multiple public locations including libraries, City Hall and community centers;
- An article in *Community Notes*, Redwood City's official newsletter with a wide distribution to 40,000 households;
- Media coverage in *San Mateo Daily Journal* ("Housing discussion scheduled," August 28, 2009; "Workshops look for answers to housing issues," September 7, 2009; *The Daily News*, Your Chamber Today section, August 15, 2009);
- More than 600 bilingual flyers distributed to Family Resource Centers in the Fair Oaks neighborhood;
- Postcard mailing to 2,000 addresses, including community and non-profit organizations, school administrators, workers and residents of Redwood City Assisted Rental/Owner Housing (CDBG properties), Fair Oaks and unincorporated Redwood City;
- Presentation to the North Fair Oaks Council, August 20, 2009;
- Countywide promotion through Community Information Program (CIP) e-Bulletin issued by the Peninsula Library System;
- Consistent support from members of the Housing & Human Concerns Committee
- E-flyer distribution through the Redwood City-based Social Services email list (Teri Chin), Caron Program (Sheriff's Office), Redwood City San Mateo County Chamber of Commerce, Sequoia High School District Community Service Leadership Program (migrant workers), Redwood City Mothers Club, Fair Oaks Leadership Group/Read Write Now, and others;
- Flyer distribution to clients of St. Anthony's Padua Dining Room, Maple Street Shelter, and the Boys & Girls Club.

Most participants reported that they heard about the meetings through an e-mail message or from a friend, relative or colleague.

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The final report will analyze the participant responses in more detail, evaluate the relative success of various forms of outreach and recruitment, and discuss ways that the City can use the project's dialogue methods as part of the public process around housing decisions in the future.

At a summary level, the project revealed:

- Substantial common ground among participants regarding the kinds of housing solutions that are most likely to enjoy public support;
- Overwhelming enthusiasm among participants for meaningful engagement of the public in housing decisions;
- The real challenge in bringing community members to the table, particularly those who do not ordinarily participate in public planning processes;
- The importance of bringing together dedicated staff resources and community networks to meet this challenge on a meeting-by-meeting basis, but particularly for a city committed to creating a culture of civic engagement around important decisions.

For policymakers who routinely face public opposition to new housing, the project offers some suggestions about how dialogue can help to address community concerns:

- To the degree that neighbors within a planning area or adjacent to a proposed development are inclined to oppose plans for new housing, a carefully designed process that brings balanced information to the table, presents a range of choices, and uses facilitated dialogue may have the best chance of expanding common ground prior to divisive public hearings;
- Given real interests that often cause neighbors to oppose new housing, a consistent effort to engage the broader public in dialogue about Redwood City's housing needs is likely to present policymakers with a more representative range of voices upon which to base decisions about particular sites;
- The fact that people appear most motivated to oppose new housing when there is a particular project involved suggests that early engagement and dialogue around land use planning (apart from specific project proposals) might be most effective in revealing the cumulative and long-term tradeoffs involved in decisions about particular sites.

Threshold is very appreciative of the opportunity to work with Redwood City officials, staff and community members on this project. We look forward to releasing our final report and hope it supports the City's commitment to meaningful public engagement in the decisions that shape the community.