



COMMUNITY CONVERSATIONS



REPORT TO THE
BELLINGHAM PUBLIC LIBRARY
BOARD OF TRUSTEES
AUGUST 2019

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Special thanks to the 343 people who participated in Community Conversations, April through June 2019.

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Project adapted from an initiative developed by:

American Library Association
Libraries Transforming Communities

Harwood Institute for Public Innovation

See page 32 for more information.

CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION	5
--------------------	---

OUR COMMUNITY STORY	7
---------------------------	---

WHAT WE HEARD	9
---------------------	---

ASPIRATIONS

CONCERNS

ACTIONS

WHO PEOPLE TRUST TO ACT

PROJECT BACKGROUND	25
--------------------------	----

PROJECT GOALS

PROJECT TOOLS

WHAT WE ASKED

PROCESSING CONVERSATIONS

PUBLIC KNOWLEDGE STEWARDS

ABOUT THIS INITIATIVE

APPENDIX	33
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INTRODUCTION

What do you care about? Libraries can help.

Bellingham Public Library leaders embarked on an ambitious project during Spring 2019, using a new-to-us community engagement model for our 2019-2023 Strategic Plan. Our Community Conversations project aimed to gather feedback by talking to people – in person – about their hopes for our community and their ideas for working together to strengthen it.

This report describes these conversations and what we learned from them. With this information, library leaders will determine where the library can make the greatest impact and form its strategic directions accordingly.

National engagement model

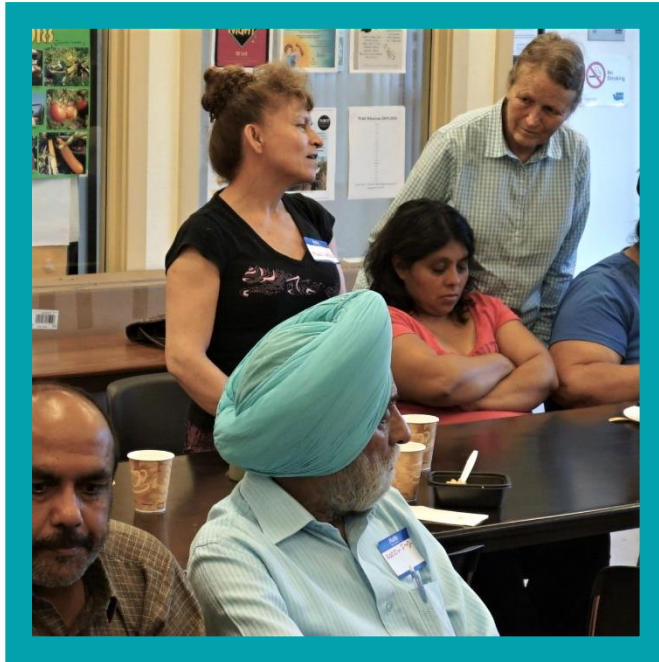
Our Community Conversations project is based on tools developed by the American Library Association and the Harwood Institute for Public Innovation. It is one of several step-by-step processes these organizations designed to help libraries strengthen their roles and bring about positive change in communities.

These processes are being used by libraries around the country to better understand their communities, be more proactive to community needs and issues, and put community aspirations first. Using the Community Conversations model, libraries authentically engage members of the community and generate “public knowledge” to inform decision-making of all kinds.

PUBLIC KNOWLEDGE	EXPERT KNOWLEDGE
Comes from authentically engaging with people about their aspirations, their concerns, how they see their community.	Comes from professional analysis and reporting of statistics, trend data, poll data, audience and market studies.
In plain language that everyone can understand.	Often in language only professionals understand.

From American Library Association *Libraries Transforming Communities*

Other local, state and national organizations publish reports and data that also will inform our strategic plan. This “expert knowledge” comes alive when considered alongside the voices of the people who participated in our Community Conversations.



Our experience

Our goal was to gather public knowledge on a range of topics of interest to people who live and work in Bellingham to inform our strategic plan. We promised to listen carefully and develop our plans for the future based on what we heard.

Over the course of three months (April through June, 2019), our staff team of 12 spoke with 343 people. The conversations took many forms: some were held as drop-in public meetings, some were scheduled around specific themes or with specific groups in different locations. Many were held with individuals, people who were willing to be

interviewed during events and gatherings, or scheduled in their offices, at coffee shops, and elsewhere. Several group sessions and individual interviews were hosted in languages other than English.

We believed we would get the most impactful and useful information by talking to people. What we didn't expect was just how much people would open up to us and how meaningful these conversations would be. People were eager to share their hopes, their fears, their challenges, and their hurts. The conversations were rich and rewarding, and sometimes hard to hear.

We are humbled and honored that people entrusted this information to us. We are inspired to use it to envision public library services that are transformative and tailored to our community's needs. Thank you to everyone who participated. We look forward to using your voices to shape our strategic directions for the years ahead.

OUR COMMUNITY STORY

People want to be connected, safe, valued, respected, and accepted by others, with opportunities to be engaged and ever-learning together.

But they are concerned that our community could be more inclusive, safe, and sustainable, with resources and opportunities more equitable and prevalent for all.

As people talk more about those concerns, they talk about the need for authentic connections that strengthen our understanding of each other's diverse experiences, that bridge inequities in access to community resources and economic opportunity, and that reduce divisions and feelings of exclusion.

They say we need to focus on building a welcoming and safe community with well-funded public spaces, where relationships and connections can flourish, where reliable information is accessible to everyone, and where barriers to opportunity are acknowledged and reduced.

And if non-profits, faith-based organizations, people in leadership positions, our government, and our good and creative neighbors played a part in those actions, folks would be more likely to trust the effort and step forward.

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WHAT WE HEARD

Aspirations

“People want to be connected, safe, valued, respected, and accepted by others, with access and opportunities to be engaged and ever-learning together. ...

Connected. Accepted. Engaged. Valued. Respected. Using these words and other similar phrases, participants described the community they wish for as collaborative and safe, where people belong and are valued and accepted for who they are.



Connection was a central theme throughout our Community Conversations, with people describing their wishes for connections of all kinds, including connection to each other, connection to resources, and connection to information and learning.

They said they want access to better, more reliable information, as well as opportunities to learn from and about each other. Despite our world being more electronically connected than ever, people said they wish for greater in-person connections, places to gather, and social opportunities.

Participants said they want a compassionate and caring community, where basic needs are met for all, where helpful resources are abundant and easy to find. They said they want a community that is accessible for everyone, with accessible transportation, accessible learning opportunities, accessible greenspaces, and accessible buildings.

They said they want a diverse and culturally rich community, where everyone is valued, respected and accepted, and where everyone has access to opportunities, resources and amenities.

People also highlighted the beauty and amenities in Bellingham that make our city among the most desirable places in the country to live, work and play. Many people aspired to be in a community just like Bellingham and love it just like it is today.

Aspirations quotes

“I want a community that is affordable and economically strong, educated and engaged, with diverse voices. One that is welcoming, connected, and interdependent. I want a proactive ‘yes’ community, not a reactive ‘no’ community, one that has a ‘sense of the commons’ and people’s basic needs (shelter, food, water, information) are met. Where there are spaces for public uses, or ‘third spaces,’ both indoor and outdoor. A community that is economically strong, environmentally sound, safe, and has a sense of home, where you live, give, and make investments.”

“Where all people can find places they fit, where they can create interdependence with others, where there are people one can rely upon and where one can be supportive of and relied upon by others. A community with a cultural focus, where there are things to do, places to connect and artsy kinds of things.”

“A safe and peaceful community that is inclusive, hospitable and accommodating, active and connected ... where we can truly see people and their strengths.”

“A community where everyone is cared for, and their needs are being met. Where there is kindness and compassion, and a healthy web of support. A community in which people feel welcomed and honored. A community that is well-resourced, and not just financially. Where there is connection, collaboration, and community knowledge. A community that can handle and manage conflict in healthy ways. A community where kids can thrive. A community that is not siloed, but is worldly and interacts and invites multiple perspectives and people.”



WORDS MATTER: SAFE, SAFETY

The words “safe” and “safety” can mean many things. We heard these words often, usually used in a broad sense accompanied by comments about feeling welcomed and trusting, and having emotional and cultural safety, as well as physical safety. Comments about physical safety often highlighted safe places for children to play and learn, safety for pedestrians and cyclists, and safe access to community resources and amenities for people with differing abilities.

WHAT WE HEARD

“Safety for children, such as walkability within the community.”

“Safe to be who you are, to speak up.”

“A more diverse community can make everyone feel safer. Those who are 'othered' can relax and not feel excluded.”

“Being intolerant breeds a feeling of being unsafe or a fear of the unknown.”

“Quality of life and personal safety (in my home, in my neighborhood) are important.”

“If people feel safe and welcomed, community building is easier, and we're more engaged and productive. Crime rate is not that high, but there is a perception of elevated crime.”

“Safe, accessible community that embraces lifelong learning.”

“Safety is a concern, homes are broken into, there is a feeling that the neighborhood is less safe, but also more interesting.”

“A friendly and inclusive community with active and informed members. Safe, affordable, and well-funded.”

“A place that is tolerant and people want to help those in need. Where people are safe to be expressive in different ways.”

“I want my community to reflect my core values, as an individual and a parent. People can be at their best when their core needs are met. Safety, clean air, these are baseline human rights.”

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WHAT WE HEARD

Concerns

... But they are concerned that our community could be more inclusive, safe, and sustainable, with resources and opportunities more equitable and prevalent for all.

As people talk more about those concerns, they talk about the need for authentic connections that strengthen our understanding of each other's diverse experiences, that bridge inequities in access to community resources and economic opportunity, and that reduce divisions and feelings of exclusion. ...

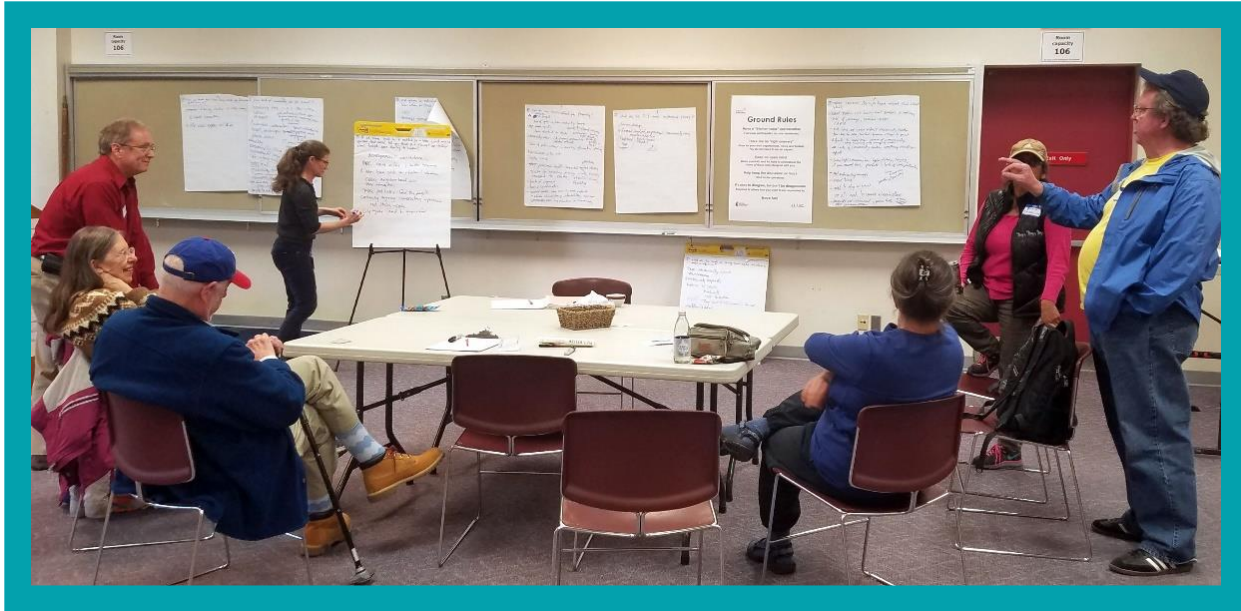
Throughout our Community Conversations people said they love Bellingham and referenced the many great things about our city: natural beauty, parks and trails, our focus on sustainability and local businesses, strong neighborhoods and sense of place, respected educational institutions, and businesses and non-profit organizations that offer services that our community needs and values.

Participants noted there is another side of Bellingham. Those who are economically stable, advantaged, and able, may not see or acknowledge how challenging it can be to live here. We heard directly from people about their struggles with wages and employment, affordable housing, childcare, food insecurity, language barriers, health concerns, visible and invisible disabilities, racism, discrimination, and lack of access to information, resources, and opportunities. People who provide community services, and caring people throughout the community, took the opportunity in our Community Conversations to advocate for their neighbors on these topics as well.

People we spoke with expressed concerns about divisions in our community, about feeling excluded or seeing others be excluded, and about their discomfort with what they describe as “us vs. them,” “othering,” and “NIMBYism” (Not In My Back Yard).

Despite more digital connections than ever before, people said they don't have access to trusted, comprehensive information. They said information feels biased, scattered, or non-existent. They wish for better ways to connect with each other, learn from and about each other, and find out community news, issues, resources, and events.

Participants listed other issues as well, including concerns about traffic, parking and transportation, technology infrastructure, growth and change, sustainability, climate change, and safety.



Concerns quotes:

“It feels like Bellingham is two Bellinghams: the beautiful ‘brochure Bellingham’ that everyone wants to come to, then the “reality Bellingham”: lack of jobs, housing unaffordability, whole communities that are invisible. The shadow side of us being a hot commodity is the cost of living is high, it is impossible to buy a house. Bellingham is going to continue to grow due to the Seattle/Vancouver corridor. It is important to have aspirations established so that as the city continues to grow, Bellingham stays or becomes what we want in a sustainable way.”

“Removing barriers to access services and resources. The impacts of stress, social isolation, racial inequities, and increased anxiety on families. Building relationships and different levels of connections.”

“Many ‘us vs. them’ situations that harm our sense of community. People and systems not integrated, not sharing information, understanding, and resources. Separate tracks of people living in Bellingham, with very different needs and experiences. People’s basic needs not being met.”

“We want to leave a healthy legacy for our children with opportunities to stay in this community. We value critical thinking and believe that with more education and knowledge, people are more likely to be inclusive and engage in productive dialogue. Difference is not a negative; we all bring something to contribute.”

“Talent and business retention in Bellingham, it is hard to attract new businesses and entrepreneurs when there isn’t the infrastructure nor workforce.”

“There are significant gaps in the web of support for many in the community. We become habituated to ongoing systemic challenges like homelessness and domestic violence....”

“People want to help each other, but NIMBY-ism (Not In My Back Yard). Resources are split among organizations and people are pursuing their own goals. How can we work together to make a bigger difference? The people who work with different communities in need are mostly social workers who get burned out or volunteers who are not getting paid. We need more resources and funding to provide help for people who need it.”

“People want to feel connection. Without an understanding of each other there is tribalism, neighborhood bubbles, marginalization. There is an awareness of inequality and a lack of resources for those who need help but a lack of or unclear community priorities. Bellingham is changing and experiencing growing pains. How we will adapt?”

“Managing and planning for growth in terms of development, zoning, and business. Not just saying ‘it’s bad for me’ – having a conversation and seeing all sides. A community that isn’t overly dependent on single employers, has a lot of community participation, types of economics, multi-faceted. Cost of living is too high compared to current wages and shallow job market. Reactive, and focused on short-term, basic needs. Not able to have long-term view.”

“Our community believes in and wants to be welcoming, but we’re not always. We are fairly isolated and experiencing growing pains. It’s important to ask hard questions about our values and commitments.”

“The issue of school boundary changes highlighted divisions and ‘us vs. them’ concerns. How many see our community is different than reality. We are not as inclusive and forward thinking as we like to think.”

“Without an interconnected community, things start to unravel at the bottom and first impact the most vulnerable populations. That instability then starts moving up. As a community we need to know what resources and support are available. People move here because they hold certain values, one of which is social involvement.”

“Everyone is in different camps, silos. We have focused on how we are different, rather than how we are similar. Our community places more value on some voices over others. Affordable housing and access to childcare are significant challenges.”

“Equity is critical in a community. We are so partisan now, less neighborly. Gaps in income (have and have nots) are growing. We need things that will bring us together for the common good.”

WORDS MATTER: POVERTY, INEQUITY, ACCESS

For some people in our community, economic barriers are insurmountable hurdles to accessing opportunities and reaching their aspirations. We heard time and time again: too many individuals and families lack the basic necessities of life and have difficulty accessing helpful resources. Economic inequities, sometimes coupled with discrimination, disabilities, lack of childcare, language barriers, and other challenges, make life a daily struggle. People said that our community can and should do more to help.

WHAT WE HEARD

“There is a lot of inequity in Bellingham. If you have the means or good luck in life, you're okay. But many are struggling with unsafe situations, economic instability, racism, domestic violence, mental health, and gender disparity.”

“People of color and immigrants have had too many negative interactions with the court and so do not access needed legal resources. People become involved with the court system during the most important decisions of their lives, such as custody of children and losing housing, but at the same time have the least resources to deal with these issues. People who have the power to make change are not connected to our most vulnerable members of the community.”

“People who don't speak English or don't have strong literacy skills often don't have a voice or access to information and basic services. We need to give people the tools to be on the same playing field (equity). It's easy to spend time with people like ourselves. In-person connections increase understanding and empathy.”

“Families are isolated due to language and transportation barriers, limited resources, lack of support for health needs, stresses and trauma due to family situations and needs.”

“I want a community that is equitable. Where people have similar, rather than dis-similar, experiences when accessing resources. Equal access to all services: food, health care, education, housing, transportation, and recreation. Equity for people of color and all incomes. A community where we are not segregated by type of housing, quality of schools, or generational poverty.”

“We are a segregated community, especially north Bellingham, which bears the brunt of housing density. Other neighborhoods don't have this density and can afford and retain owner housing. People of color and low income show clear disparities in health. There is a population suffering from food instability in Bellingham, which also means they suffer barriers to affordable health care, equal education, living wage jobs, and housing.”

WORDS MATTER: RACISM, INTOLERANCE, DISCRIMINATION

Barriers to success, opportunity, and esteem come in many forms. Perhaps the hardest comments to hear during our Community Conversations were those from people who experience racism, intolerance, and discrimination in our community. We heard from people who experience it firsthand, parents whose children are faced with it at school and elsewhere, and those who witness it: hateful actions and attitudes are present in Bellingham. We must recognize our community is not immune from these problems and act against them.

WHAT WE HEARD

"People feel isolated because 1/5th of the population experience some type of disability (visible or invisible) and most are unaware of how difficult some disability challenges can be."

"Those who are excluded feel they have to explain their existence daily, struggle to retain their dignity, always be conscious of their 'otherness'. The Pacific Northwest has a reputation of cool or cold racism. We self-identify as progressive, but don't ask the 'othered' why they are not comfortable here. Environmentalism here is white privileged, but not environmental justice, which looks at the disparate impacts of toxic environments on low-income neighborhoods."

"Our students suffer with racism and name-calling."

"The treatment of some people as 'other' or less than. For instance, those who say 'we're becoming a magnet for the homeless.' This type of intolerance leads to terrible situations and outcomes, locally and nationally. There's a patina of progressiveness, but we are often only welcoming to people who are 'our' people."

"We are concerned that community members don't view each other as equal and we and our children experience racism. We experience isolation because we don't have adequate access to transportation, and we don't know about resources. We are concerned about safety and security for our children and ourselves..."

"Racism, discrimination, or indifference based on race, sexuality or socio-economic factors."

"Services are inaccessible to people with disabilities."

"Sense of exclusion here if you are not a white, heterosexual, coupled, house owner. Tends to be a monoculture. ..."

"Our community could benefit from anti-racism training, especially in businesses in which people of color encounter the most racism: where they bank, shop, and go to school."

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WHAT WE HEARD

Actions

... They say we need to focus on building a welcoming and safe community with well-funded public spaces, where relationships and connections can flourish, where reliable information is accessible to everyone, and where barriers to opportunity are acknowledged and reduced. ...

The theme of connection was a consistent thread throughout our Community Conversations, and many of the actions people recommended had to do with connecting people to information, to resources, and to each other.

Many people who participated said solutions to even our most challenging problems – such as poverty and discrimination – start with acknowledging these problems exist and listening to each other.

Many of the recommended actions we heard followed a theme of welcoming people – helping people feel safe, included, and embraced as valued contributors to our city. As Bellingham grows and changes, more people are moving here from other places. Many people expressed interest in better ways to welcome new people to our city, such as by “welcome wagon” services.

The need for effective, inclusive ways to collect, fact-check, and disseminate objective, reliable information also was a consistent theme throughout this project and in actions participants recommended. Many people noted a need for central community hubs for information and resources.

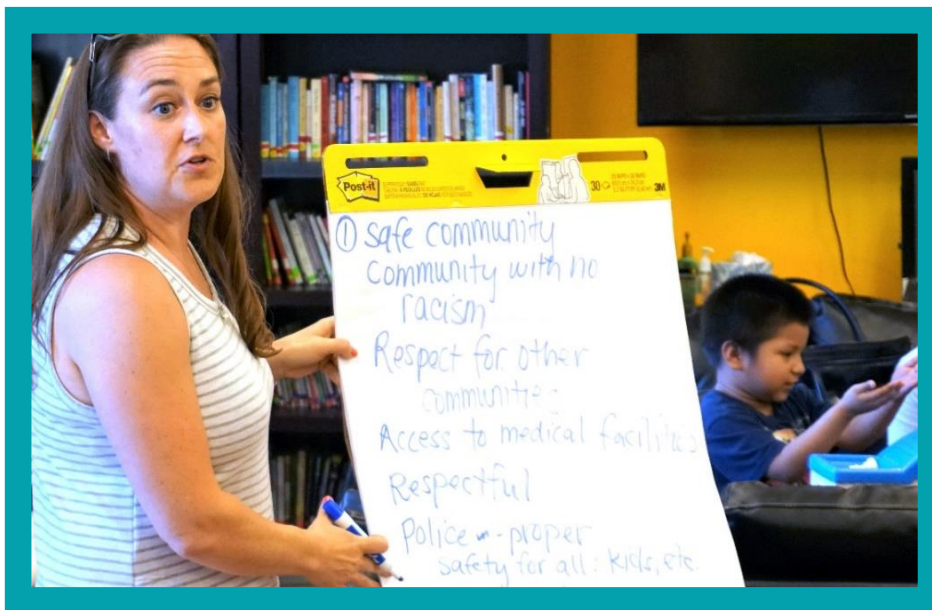
Many participants said access to additional safe, convivial, and convenient places – indoors and outside – to gather and share our stories, is important to a healthy, connected community.

Participants noted that all actions require resources, and they recommend our community commit financial and other resources to the concerns and actions identified.

Actions quotes

“Need places to meet, gather, and participate in civic life on both a local level and a national level. Need places to connect socially that promote inclusiveness, not divisiveness.”

“Bold and visionary leadership, at all levels, understanding that some will not approve but willing to take risks. Actively search for new perspectives and ask new people to participate. Infrastructure needs to be supported in our growth: water, roads, sewers, police, fire, hospital – must get in front of it, plan for it. Growth and change are -ing words, community is always changing and growing.”



“Recognize that people who aren’t like us exist. People say there is no diversity in Bellingham but there is, and it needs to be recognized. Who are the audiences we don’t know? There are a whole bunch of ways that we don’t see each other.”

“Funding that is stable. More supportive, permanent, subsidized housing that’s easy to access. Increase access to legal assistance, such as Street Law program. Easier access to social services. Continued and increased legislative efforts.”

“Ask the people who are experiencing racism and low incomes to tell their stories to help change the situation. If we create deeper and more authentic relationships, we can ask them what would work.”

“Political support for additional neighborhood spaces, better communication within the community, more resident involvement and engagement.”

“More conversations, more education, more opportunities for interaction to foster understanding, civil dialog, respectful communications, conflict resolution. Find ways to bring people together, not separate further. Provide access to services/facilities for everyone. Like public libraries and parks: everyone welcome, no barriers based on who you are, language, money, etc. Consider meeting people’s basic needs an urgent priority and get better at doing it. Foster community involvement, community activism, community solutions, and don’t reinvent the wheel. Find groups who have experience/systems in place and collaborate.”

“Build community! We need to get to know our neighbors even if it is outside of your comfort zone. Get businesses involved in helping out the community. Find out and evaluate the basic needs to thrive - water, phone charging stations, etc. Take steps to make connections and understand each other’s experiences. Education! Listen and talk to each other without assuming the worst.”

“Emphasize personal connection rather than digital connection. Equitable opportunity: helping each other learn more about ways to welcome other people, other cultures, other backgrounds, other life circumstances. Try not to simply replicate our own bubbles. Ask ‘who isn’t here?’ Value differences, different points of view, diversity. It’s hard work; we’re all drawn to people like us.”



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WHAT WE HEARD

Who people trust to act

... And if non-profits, faith-based organizations, people in leadership positions, our government, and our good and creative neighbors played a part in those actions, folks would be more likely to trust the effort and step forward."

Participants in our conversations have faith in many organizations and individuals to work together to meet their aspirations. Many local and regional non-profit organizations were mentioned repeatedly as trusted and well-regarded and are expected to play important roles in our community's future.



Our community looks to our schools as places for connection, innovation, and leadership, with Bellingham Public Schools noted often. Some people shared concerns about behaviors that occur within our schools, a reminder that our community's work to foster respect and inclusion is not complete.

People highlighted our local higher education institutions as trusted organizations and valued community contributors.

City and county governments received cautious praise. City departments, other area public agencies, and individual leaders were noted often as being trusted. Yet some participants also cautioned that governments need watchdogs, and there are important roles for advocates and activists.

Many people we spoke with have confidence in themselves, in each other, in their neighborhoods, and in local businesses. As one person said, "It's not all on one person or group, we are all part of this community and need to work to make changes."

Quotes from “Who do you trust to take action?”

“Younger people need to be at the table who aren’t jaded by fear, who are willing to take risks and have tenacity to get things done. But we don’t want to discredit the established voices. Younger and established voices together, mentoring each other.”

“I trust those who are collaborative, collegial, and inclusive.”

“Lots of people are doing really good work. Whatcom County has a vibrant non-profit network. We need to believe and trust in our community as a whole, instead of pointing to individual groups.”

“(I trust) the faith community, city and county government, Opportunity Council, Catholic Community Services, Lydia Place, Lighthouse Mission, schools, Habitat for Humanity, Community Land Trust, WWU, Food Bank, and United Way.”

“The juvenile court system, where the focus is helping youth not simply punishment. Senior centers. Privately run voluntary programs, not government requirements or restrictions. Churches, which are good at social well-being.”

“Anyone who starts making change. Faithlife employees, Kulshan Land Trust, Lighthouse Mission, Food Bank, private employers.”

“(I trust) neighborhood associations, Nooksack Salmon Enhancement Association, League of Women Voters, Sustainable Connections, RESources, Unitarians, City Club, Unity Care, Riveters, WWU, libraries, YMCA, and the Senior Center.”

“I trust shared processes. People who have investment in topics and wide experiences. People who represent different backgrounds and identities. People from the community are more trusted than outsiders.”



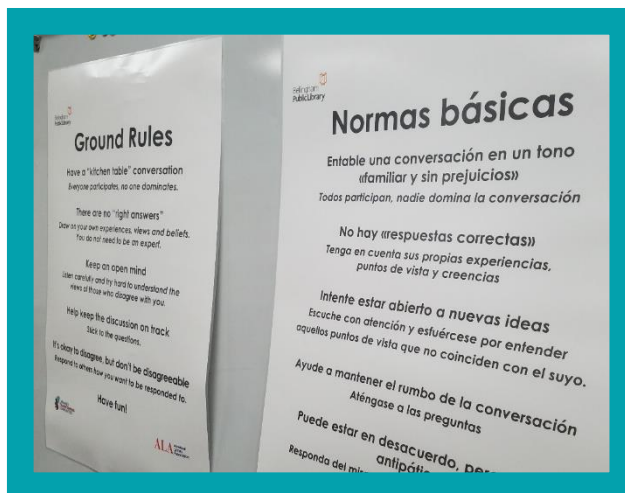
PROJECT BACKGROUND



PROJECT GOALS

✓ Incorporate diverse voices

- We strived to talk with people who may not often be asked their opinions, particularly seeking people from traditionally under-represented groups and people on the front lines of providing services in our community.
- We reached out to a diverse cross-section of our community. We spoke with people who work downtown, people of color, teachers, business people, people with disabilities, moms, dads and grandparents, people experiencing homelessness, technology entrepreneurs, people who speak a primary language other than English, adult students, social services providers, and many others.
- As with any time-limited outreach project of this nature, there is more to be done. We identified gaps that we will fill in subsequent efforts. Our future outreach will benefit from even greater age, socio-economic, and cultural diversity.



✓ Offer many opportunities to participate

- We hosted 35 group Community Conversations, including nine widely advertised drop-in sessions open to the public. Spanish language interpretation was provided at five Community Conversations, and one session was conducted in Punjabi.
- We conducted 79 Ask Interviews, including several in Spanish, Chinese and Farsi.

✓ Gather quality feedback

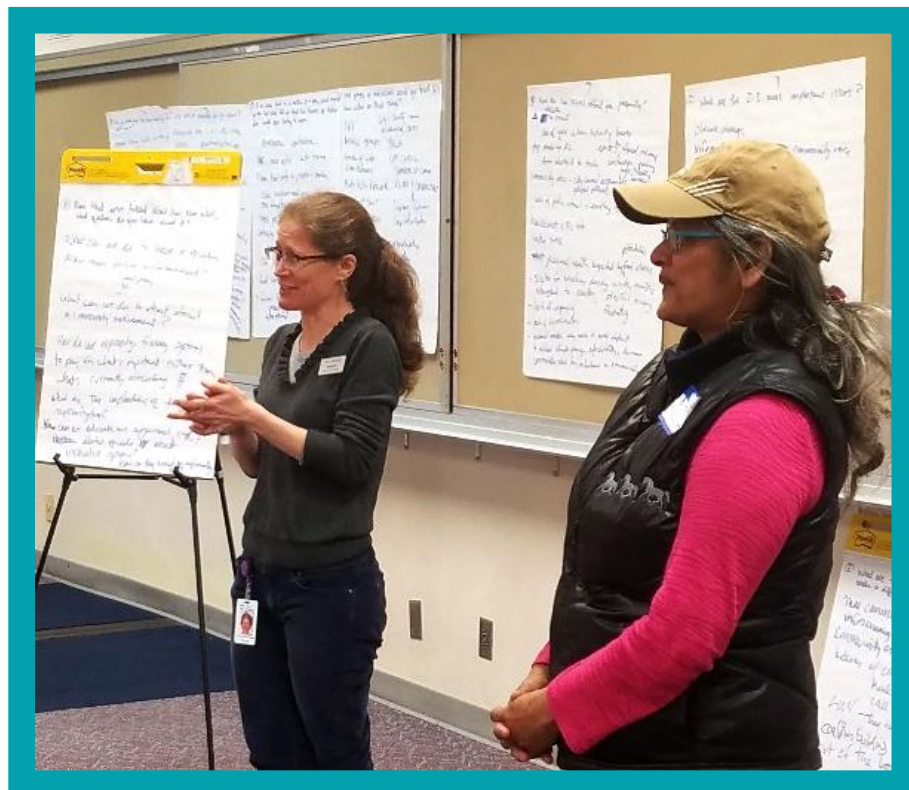
- We gathered specific public knowledge to contribute quality information about community needs for the library strategic plan and to share with other departments and organizations.

✓ Inspire new partnerships

- We fostered several new collaborations, strengthened existing partnerships, and motivated community building among group participants.

✓ Create a positive vibe

- The project supported team building and camaraderie among all staff and people involved.
- Many people who participated said they enjoyed thinking and talking about the questions we asked. The group conversations were generally warm and friendly, with light-hearted moments of laughter and shared experiences.
- We created safe, welcoming environments for authentic conversations. Even when the content was hard to share and hear, people engaged in rich, meaningful ways.
- Participant feedback was very positive, with many requests to receive results. Non-participants who heard about the effort often were eager to learn more, impressed that the library took on this effort.
- Some people asked how they could help or contribute further. After experiencing the Community Conversation format, many people offered to help get word out about future sessions. One group, after the Community Conversation ended, started brainstorming community volunteer projects they could tackle together based on the aspirations they had discussed. Others simply wished to further support the library.



PROJECT TOOLS

Ask Interviews

- Simple questions you ask one or two people to learn what kind of community they want.
- A starting point for learning about your community's aspirations.
- Takes as little as 5-10 minutes, though many people wish to share more.
- Our team conducted 79 Ask Interviews during our three-month project.



**What do you
care about?**

Libraries can help.

**SPRING 2019
COMMUNITY
CONVERSATIONS**

**Join us to talk about your
aspirations for our
community and how
we can work together
to strengthen it.**



Community Conversations

- 60- to 90-minute conversations with groups of three or more people about their community: their aspirations, the challenges they face in realizing these aspirations, and what changes are needed to overcome challenges.
- Engage groups in collaborating on community aspirations and challenges.
- Help develop partners and strategies to strengthen the library's significance in the community.
- Our team hosted 35 Community Conversations during the three-month project.

Facilitation Team

- A team of 10 Bellingham Public Library staff members and two graduate student volunteers. All received training and participated in Ask Interviews and Community Conversations.

WHAT WE ASKED

Group conversations

- What kind of community do you want to live in?
- Given what we just said, what are the two or three most important issues in our community?
- What concerns do you have about these issues, and why?
- How do the issues we're talking about affect you personally?
- When you think about these things, how do you feel about what's going on?
- What do you think is keeping us from making the progress we want?
- When you think about what we've talked about, what are the kinds of things that could be done to make a difference?
- What groups or individuals would you trust to take action on these things?
- If we came back together in six months or a year, what might you see that would tell you that the things we talked about are starting to happen?
- What questions do you have, about these issues, these conversations, or the library?

Individual interviews/group short format

- What kind of community do you want to live in?
- Why is that important to you?
- How is that different from how you see things now?
- What are some of the things that need to happen to create those changes?
- What groups or individuals would you trust to take action on these things?

PROCESSING CONVERSATIONS

Theming Categories

Facilitation team members organized their notes into the six Theming Categories listed in the box at right. All information collected organized into these categories can be found in the Appendix, beginning on page 33.

THEMING CATEGORIES

Aspirations

Main concerns

Specific issues

Actions that would make a difference

Who people trust to act

Questions people have

From American Library Association Libraries Transforming Communities

Community Narrative Stories

For each group Community Conversations, the teams reviewed their categorized notes and filled in the blanks of the template below to tell a story about the conversation. Summarizing the group's conversation using clear language that people use every day is a powerful way to stay focused on the essence of the conversation and make sense of what we are learning.

Community narrative stories were written for group Community Conversations, not individual interviews. All Community Narrative Stories developed through this project are listed in the Appendix, beginning on page 33.

Identifying Our Community Story

With all the above information collected over the three-month project, we set out to analyze and summarize what we heard. While this task may sound daunting, clear over-arching main themes emerged. We developed Our Community Story (on page 7) using the template below, built from the Main Themes we heard throughout the project.

COMMUNITY NARRATIVE STORY TEMPLATE

People want (aspirations), but they are concerned that (main concerns). As people talk more about those concerns, they talk specifically about (specific issues). They believe we need to focus on (actions) and if (groups/individuals) played a part in those actions that folks would be more likely to trust the effort and step forward.

From American Library Association Libraries Transforming Communities

PUBLIC KNOWLEDGE STEWARDS

Trusted conveners and contributors

Various definitions of stewardship include descriptions like “the careful and responsible management of something entrusted to one’s care.”

People who participated in Community Conversations shared with our teams in good faith, counting on us to gather, share, and use the public knowledge we gained, doing so carefully and in ways that contribute to the common good.

In this spirit, this report includes the text of all the categorized comments we gathered during this project. It is the same data we used to develop Our Community Story and the overarching themes that contributed to it. Our process of notetaking and theming captures the essence of what people said without singling out specific individuals.

Using and sharing public knowledge

Here are the ways we will use the information gathered in Community Conversations:

Incorporate into Library Strategic Plan 2019-2023

Our goal when initiating this project was to gather public knowledge about our community to shape our strategic plan. Our planning process is underway, with a final strategic plan anticipated to be approved in early 2020. The knowledge from these Community Conversations provides an invaluable contribution to planning for future library services.

Share with participants and others

We committed to everyone who participated in our Community Conversations that the information would be shared with them, which is part of the purpose of this report. The final report will be distributed directly to those participants who provided contact information, as well as posted on the library website. Presentations with highlights of this report are expected to be provided to the Bellingham Public Library Board of Trustees, Bellingham City Council, and other library and city stakeholders.

ABOUT THE INITIATIVE

The Bellingham Public Library Community Conversations project format, process, training materials, interview questions, and other tools were adapted from the Libraries Transforming Communities initiative, developed by the American Library Association and Harwood Institute for Public Innovation.

About Libraries Transforming Communities

Libraries Transforming Communities (LTC) is an American Library Association initiative that seeks to strengthen libraries' roles as core community leaders and change-agents. LTC addresses a critical need within the library field by developing and distributing new tools, resources, and support for librarians to engage with the communities in new ways.

As a result, we believe libraries will become more reflective of and connected to their communities and build stronger partnerships with local civic agencies, non-profits, funders, and corporations. The initiative is made possible through a grant from the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation.

About the American Library Association

The American Library Association (ALA) is the oldest and largest library association in the world, with approximately 58,000 members in academic, public, school, government, and special libraries. The mission of the American Library Association is to provide leadership for the development, promotion, and improvement of library and information services and the profession of librarianship in order to enhance learning and ensure access to information for all.

About Harwood Institute for Public Innovation

The Harwood Institute for Public Innovation is a national non-profit organization based in Bethesda, Md., that teaches and coaches people and organizations to solve pressing problems and change how communities work together. The Institute is guided by Richard C. Harwood, whose transformational work during almost 30 years has spread to thousands of communities nationally and worldwide, from small towns to large cities.