



Community Relations Coalition

Lessons from a Community Conversation

we all live here

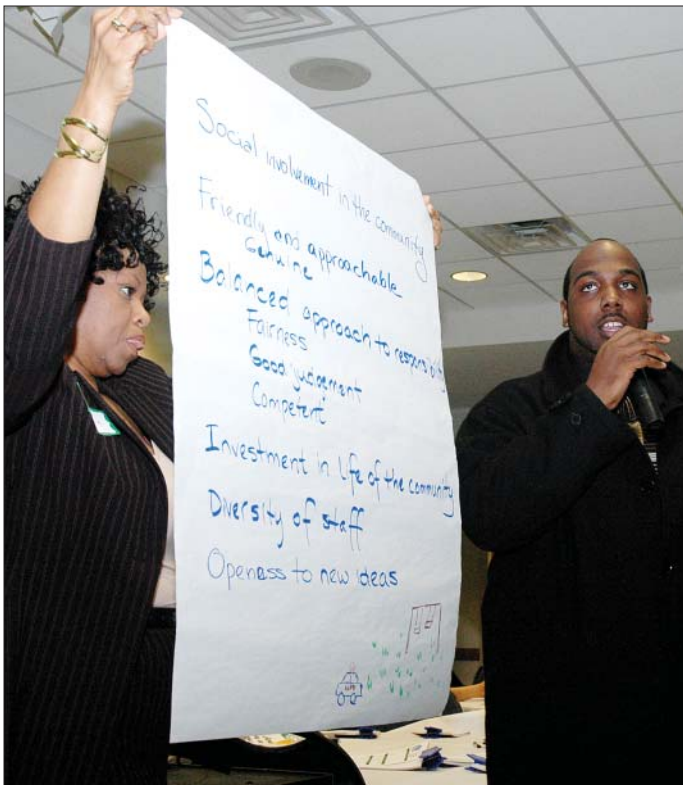
I. Introduction

In March of 2009 approximately 70 Community Relations Coalition (CRC) stakeholders met to strengthen and enhance relationships by sharing what they value about living together in the community, as well as how we can work together to maintain those things we value. Stakeholders included permanent residents, students, university officials, city administrators, business owners, landlords, police officers,

firefighters and PACE officers. For the purpose of discussion, each stakeholder took on the role of “neighbor”. After being asked to describe “what’s in a neighborhood,” participants were reconfigured at tables so that as many stakeholder/neighbors possible were represented at each. Each group was then asked to identify the ideal stakeholder/neighbor (student, permanent resident, etc.) and then report out to the group. Here are the finalized results from the community conversation:



What are the essential ingredients of a good neighborhood?



- Communication
- Tolerance
- Mutual Respect
- Shared Activities
- Diversity
- Common Values
- Knowing Each Other’s Values
- Cleanliness
- Parks and Greenspace
- Safety
- Schools
- Equality
- Shared Vision
- Meeting Place (literally and euphemistically)
- Cooperation

What constitutes the very best, most perfect student neighbor imaginable?

- Respectful
- Clean/Doesn't Litter
- Maintains House/Pride in Property
- Communicates - Expresses Concerns
- Friendly and Engaged in Neighborhood
- Helpful
- Trustworthy
- Learns from Mistakes
- Cares About the Community
- Plans to Stay!
- Conscious of Time and Noise Levels
- Takes in Trash/Shovels Snow
- Cooks/Bakes
- Bikes or Walks
- Environmentally Conscious



What constitutes the very best, most perfect long-term resident/neighbor imaginable?



- Respectful
- Friendly and Positive
- Maintains Property
- Convenes, Attends Neighborhood Events
- Chatty, But Not Nosey
- Controls Animals
- Shares Tools/Loans Sugar
- Is Handy with "Fix-it" Projects
- Is a Secret "Snow Blower"
- Likes Young Kids and Old People
- Thinks Students are Fun to Be Around
- Loves the Green & White!
- Handles Problems Logically, Calmly
- Doesn't Call PACE if You Forget to...
- Helpful in Hard Times

What constitutes the very best, most perfect landlord/neighbor imaginable?

- Respectful
- Communicates
- Maintains High Standards
- Fair with Rent and Repairs
- Safety-Oriented (Lead Paint, Break-ins, ect.)
- Environmentally Sensitive
- Flexible
- Attentive - Not Absent
- Involved Community Stakeholder
- Outgoing
- Caring - Maintains Good Relationships
- Forward Thinking
- Educator - Bridge Between Students and Community



What constitutes the very best, most perfect business owner/neighbor imaginable?



- Mindful of Neighbors (Landscape, Lighting, Aesthetics)
- Community Partner - Be Part of CRC!
- Upholds the Minimum Code
- Shows Community Pride as Ambassador of Region
- Invests in Community Improvement
- Exemplifies Diversity and Diversification
- Hires and Buys Local
- Supports Other Local Businesses
- Lives in the Community
- Upholds High Ethical Standards
- Retail Values in Line with Values of Community
- Employs Responsible Hospitality Practices

What constitutes the very best, most perfect city personnel/neighbor imaginable?

- Approachable/Friendly
- Communicates
- Responsive/Attentive
- Proactive
- Receptive to Input
- Qualified and Professional
- Concerned/Enforces Safety and Cleanliness
- Multi-Generational
- Knowledgeable
- Available/Sensitive
- Open Minded and Understanding
- Takes Initiative
- Serves as a Liaison
- Persuasive/Dedicated/Honest



What constitutes the very best, most perfect university administrator/neighbor imaginable?



- Friendly/Not Insulated
- Honest
- Understanding
- Inclusive
- Responsible (Tidy, Helpful)
- Solicits Input (Specifically Relating to the University)
- Has a Broad Understanding of the Community (Beyond Neighborhood)
- Community-Oriented Policy Maker
- Holds Shared Values about the Health of the Community
- Involved and Engaged
- Has Energy and Excitement for the Community

What constitutes the very best, most perfect police/fire/PACE neighbor imaginable?

- Friendly/Approachable/Genuine
- Open to New Ideas
- Social Involvement in the Community
- Employs Balanced Approach to Responsibility
- Fair, Good Judgement, Competent
- Diversity of Staff
- Maintains Positive, Proactive Interactions/Community Relations
- Educates/Conveys Expectations
- Translates Theory into Practice (Service & Enforcement)
- Balances the Needs of ALL Residents



II. Lessons to Be Shared

By exploring and describing the concept of what each stakeholder is, we learned to view each other as invested community members rather than commodities. We learned that we have many shared ideas about what we value most about living, working and playing together in our community. Remember: "Commodities can't share sugar or do favors for one another, only people can do that."

Did you know that:

- The "ideal" permanent residents and students have similar "likes" and "dislikes," including loose beer cans and dog poop!
- The classroom isn't the only place to learn. With many residents serving as MSU faculty, opportunities for engaged learning are abundant in the community!
- We've come a long way baby! Over the past decade, we have learned to view each other as stakeholders with shared interests, rather than commodities. Let's keep up the good work!

- We can stop the Brain Drain! Yes indeed – all of us have a stake in students' success. We all share an interest in a positive, successful academic and community experience. Remember that today's students may become tomorrow's permanent residents and it is paramount to let them help us create a "place" in which they will want to stay. It is also important to remember how much the students contribute to the community's vibrancy and energy.
- We all benefit by listening without prejudice! Just like classic brainstorming, conversations such as this help us to realize that we share a common vision for East Lansing and shifts participants away from their own self-interest.
- There is no better place to live and raise children than our community!
- "Friendliness" is a value that appeared on virtually every description!
- Students do have a voice in East Lansing – the mayor in particular has been very welcoming and supportive of students' voice in community affairs.

• Our ideal neighbor is a cross between Mr. Rogers and Martha Stewart! He or she cooks, bakes and is a secret snowblower, who shares tools and sugar

and is handy with fix-it projects. It's truly the small gestures that make a difference!

III. Where Do We Go From Here?

It is difficult to summarize in brief all that we learned from this open, positive and informal exchange among permanent and student community members. While it was observed that participants were part of a self-selected group, it was also acknowledged that "it's okay to preach to the choir because the choir still needs to practice". Indeed, staying in tune, so to speak, translates for our purposes into a responsibility to carry forward these lessons, morsels of wisdom and a willingness to engage each of our stakeholder groups in community building.

This community dialog also provided an opportunity to, using the choir metaphor again, "learn each other's parts". In other words, we had the opportunity to see versions of ourselves (albeit idealized, but this gives us something to shoot for!) through the lenses of other stakeholders. And in the

final analysis, we are all looking for the same things in our neighbors; friendliness, open communication and respect. How refreshingly human!

It is often difficult for groups to reach out to one another and to unlearn the "us vs. them" mentality, which can be perpetuated by outside forces like the media, however, we have tremendous resources in this community to facilitate relationships, not the least of which is the CRC. Residence Life also works to educate students about the concept of community as an inclusive, important part of off-campus living. So going forward, this "choir" needs to sing in harmony, if not in unison to teach our fellow community members that dissonance can be the exception not the rule. For, "When there is tension, it is possible that it is because people grew up in areas where the concept of a cooperative, connective community wasn't learned."

Remember, it's the small things that make a difference so **FIND A WAY TO MAKE A DIFFERENCE!**



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