Community Conversations Summary

Staff acted as facilitators for fifteen Community Conversations conducted in October and November 2022. Using methodology developed by [The Harwood Institute for Public Innovation](#), We asked small groups of participants to talk about their concerns, hopes and aspirations about their communities. These were not *library* focus groups; rather we used these conversations as a way to learn more about ways SCLSNJ can make a difference in their communities that may not already be reflected in our core services and strategic priorities.

Library Advisory Board presidents, township administrators, mayors, and Friends of the Library presidents were asked to provide us with names to invite to these conversations. In addition, we were particularly intentional about hearing from under-represented and underserved populations. We spoke with English language learners, senior citizens, members of the LGBT community, new immigrants, teens, residents who are undocumented and residents from various other diverse backgrounds. We also spoke with representatives from organizations that support those experiencing homelessness, at risk youth, individuals with mental health and/or drug addiction issues and individuals with developmental disabilities.

In many of our conversations, participants struggled with the idea of focusing on their aspirations for the community rather than thoughts about how to improve library services, in spite of our attempts to clearly communicate our intent. Despite this, a few trends and aspirations appeared to be consistent across all fifteen conversations.

This report summarizes the themes and ideas that emerged from the conversations.

People's Shared Aspirations

People want to live in a place that has a sense of community. This was expressed in terms of connectedness, feeling welcomed, and being engaged and involved with community activities. People want to live in a place where diversity is accepted and they can get to know their neighbors, and where local residents are involved in civic and volunteer activities focused on community improvements.

Main Concerns

- Lack of opportunities for civil discourse
- Overcrowding & overdevelopment

- Lack of civic involvement/engagement from community members
- Lack of community center/downtown
- Lack of access to the community and services:
    - Poor public transportation
    - Lack of English language skills needed to navigate society
    - Lack of access to nutritious food
    - Lack of affordable housing, day care, elder care, health care
- Lack of understanding about people who are different
    - Bullying
    - Racism
- Isolation and loneliness - a feeling of being disconnected
    - People stay home more than ever
    - There is no sense of community

Actions and Groups

There were two broad categories of action suggested by participants that would help alleviate concerns and make progress toward their aspirations for their communities particularly in a post covid world.

Create opportunities for community and civic engagement, as well as social engagement and inclusion
This category includes actions such as developing a community center that caters to people from across the community, making it easier for people to participate in local government and civic activities, and giving people meaningful opportunities for volunteering as well as a way to get to know their neighbors, learn about the experiences of diverse populations and socially engage.

Improve communication, information access and outreach
This category includes actions such as highlighting a wider array of information channels coming from local government, making sure that messaging about community activities and events are placed where the entire community can find them, and working more cohesively among community organizations to streamline communication. In a post COVID-19 world, staff connections with patrons and community partners need to be reestablished.

Groups
When asked what groups participants trusted to take these actions, the response was varied. Many felt local government should be instrumental in making large-scale change happen. However, in a few of the communities, there was also concern that local officials are not aware of the needs and concerns among their constituents. Participants expressed trust in other organizations, including civic and community groups, local nonprofits, faith groups, schools and libraries. Nearly all of the participants trust SCLSNJ as an organization that could effect change.

What does this mean for the Library?

While a number of the concerns, aspirations and actions suggested by participants fall outside of the Library's sphere of activities, we learned a great deal from our conversations that will inform our strategic planning process.

Not surprisingly, even as COVID cases drop and we return to pre-COVID policies and procedures, nearly all of the participants expressed concerns about feelings of isolation, and loneliness, and a lack of community cohesiveness and involvement.

SCLSNJ's current strategic plan already addresses many of the issues and problems as identified by our community conversation participants in this recent round of community conversations. Results indicate that a more concerted, targeted approach could be made in a few of our priorities including shaping our spaces, providing more opportunities to connect, welcoming new residents and addressing the shifting demographics of our communities.

- Promote Social & Civic Engagement

  SCLSNJ has always been a natural platform for facilitating community connectedness. We have developed meaningful opportunities for community members to connect with each other, not just with the Library. The Library can and should continue to respond to a wide range of ongoing and emerging needs, not just as providers of information but as providers of experiences where social engagement is the priority. This is particularly important in a post-COVID world because humans, by nature, are social animals. Studies show that social isolation contributes to cognitive decline, depression, impaired executive function, increased anxiety, an increase in perceived stress, memory loss and loneliness.

  Participants in nearly all conversations expressed concerns about a lack of community engagement, lack of community connectedness and an inability to get to know their neighbors and/or fellow students. Diverse community members reported feelings of not belonging in their communities in addition to reporting a lack of compassion and understanding for those who do not speak English well. Teens reported an inability to get to know fellow students. Senior patrons indicated that they can go days without talking to someone else and often feel "left out". Many reported a lack of civic engagement and a diminishing sense of community. Not surprisingly, many of the participants suggested regular community conversations as a way to connect with other community members.

  Ideas to promote social engagement that were suggested by participants included hosting various events in which engagement and discussion were an important component of the event.

Many of the participants in the conversations also expressed concern about what they perceived to be a lack of civic engagement and civic involvement in their communities.

Civic engagement provides community members with the opportunity to collaborate in safe spaces so that community members can identify, discuss and address particular issues that are of public interest to improve the quality of life in a community. These spaces are often resource centers, such as neighborhood associations or school boards, but why can't the Library fill this role?

Research indicates that "in addition to hosting community-wide reading programs, libraries are: convening groups to consider local issues and teach civic skills; creating digital neighborhood directories and community information services; educating voters; serving as polling places; and partnering on civic projects with local museums and public broadcasting stations."*

- Further develop its role as Community Center

  People continue to want safe spaces for community interaction and social support where they feel welcome. This is particularly important in the communities that have no central downtown as well as communities that do not have indoor public gathering space. SCLSNJ branches are public resources open to everyone. We should continue improving access to our branch spaces by creating environments where people feel welcome and feel comfortable gathering. It should be noted that our spaces, more than ever, need to be flexible as we meet the ever growing and sometimes competing needs of a very diverse public. A mix of spaces (both quiet and loud) where users can study and work while other users can engage in play and socialize has become increasingly important.

- Continue & further develop the Library system's role as Information provider

  SCLSNJ should continue to act as a clearinghouse for information about community activities, events, issues and policies. This is particularly important as more and more information moves to the digital sphere and our community members experience a reported increase in information overload and experience barriers to finding information.

- Increase the library's role as community connector

  According to perceptions conveyed by many of our community conversation participants, many of our community members and organizations are still unaware of what Library services are available to them. To stay a relevant

part of the community, the Library not only needs to continually reinvent itself (while still providing traditional library services) but the organization as a whole needs to increase its efforts to celebrate and promote everything it offers and does.

Conclusion

SCLSNJ's strategic priorities and core services as identified in the 2018 strategic plan should continue to be a focus for all Library staff, particularly those services and priorities that target new residents and shifting demographics, shape our spaces and provide opportunities for individuals to connect.

Many of the concerns and aspirations brought forth during the community conversations are currently being addressed by the current strategic plan. We recommend that there be a more targeted and focused effort as community center and information provider. See the suggestions above in the section titled "What does this mean for the library?"

The Library system can and should address the issues of disconnectedness and isolation mentioned by many of our residents by making socialization an aspect of the library programs we offer. Programs, events, experiences and initiatives that offer opportunities for attendees to connect, socialize, engage and discuss should be a priority.

By providing regular opportunities to engage and encourage civic involvement, the Library can also help improve the social capital of our member municipalities. Improved social capital contributes to a community's quality of life. It can stimulate social development, civic attitudes and social engagement and build a more civic minded and civil society.

Research indicates that libraries are perfectly situated as a platform to build social capital in a community. Some of the ways in which SCLSNJ is already contributing to social capital among our communities include: building patrons' trust in the library and its staff, connecting people to both community and library resources, providing social support for patrons, home delivery services, support for English language learners, helping patrons gain skills to function in an increasingly digital world, and providing a positive place for neighborhood residents to gather. SCLSNJ can improve by building social cohesion, acting as a social connector among different diverse groups, increasing opportunities for civic engagement, and increasing chances for civic dialogue.

In a post-COVID world with diminishing resources, increasing need among marginalized populations, diminished community resilience, an increase in catastrophic weather events, and feelings of disconnectedness and isolation, should creating social capital be added as one of SCLSNJ's strategic priorities?

More about social capital and public libraries

Proceedings of the Ninth International Conference on Conceptions of Library and Information Science, Uppsala, Sweden, June 27-29, 2016
Public libraries, community resilience, and social capital
http://informationr.net/ir/22-1/colis/colis1642.html

Stuart Ferguson (2012) Are public libraries developers of social capital? A review of their contribution and attempts to demonstrate it, The Australian Library Journal, 61:1, 22-33, DOI: 10.1080/00049670.2012.10722299

More about civic engagement

Civic Partnerships: The Role of Libraries in Promoting Civic Engagement
Nancy Kranich
Resource Sharing & Information Networks, Vol.18(1-2), pp.89-103;
2005;
DOI: https://doi.org/10.7282/T3FF3V6S