

A PARTNERSHIP PROGRAM

Chester County 2020 and West Vincent Township Supervisors & Planning Commission ■ October 6, 2009



Community Conversations and Productive Partnerships

Community Conversations are distinctive among Chester County 2020 programs that support effective community cooperation. Every Conversation emphasizes the importance of partnership. Partners may include municipalities and non-profit organizations, focus upon natural resources and farmland preservation, affordable homes, transportation, education, the broad community, or any other element that is important to our daily lives. For this Conversation, CC2020's partner was West Vincent Township.

Community Conversations are CC2020's primary tool to help communities communicate more effectively, strengthen the sense of shared community, and find the common ground that always exists, but may not be easily identified. We explore the future with the participants, helping them to speak the language of understanding and cooperation – by working with respect, creativity and, honesty.

All of us who live and work in this region of Chester County share a mutual interest in economic stability and a healthy sense of community. The West Vincent participants deserve to be commended for having set aside the time and energy to respond to this invitation. More importantly, you are contributing to West Vincent's bright future as a tangible planning resource. Because of your participation, a heightened sense of understanding emerges. Good things happen.

Chester County 2020: Finding Common Ground with Uncommon Resolve

West Vincent holds conversation about space, values – Dozens attend Chester County 2020 event

(Daily Local News, October 12, 2009)

“Continue to preserve open space and rural values” was the overwhelming theme Thursday night as West Vincent held was billed as a “community conversation” in the township building.

Nearly 90 residents attended the event hosted by Chester County 2020, a nonprofit organization founded in 1996 to promote a dialogue about planning and growth throughout the county. The evening was funded by private donations and a (DCED) grant secured by state Sen. Andrew Dinniman, D-19th, of West Whiteland.

At the beginning of the program, residents were encouraged to come up with and define problems or issues that most affected them. The larger list of issues and concerns was narrowed down to six issues that are facing the residents of West Vincent by the residents then voting on the issues that most effected them. The larger list was narrowed down to six issues.

Those six issues were open-space preservation, the preservation of rural values, the importance of a local farm community, the pressure of future growth, affordable housing and traffic burdens. Most smaller focus groups, consisting of eight or nine residents, addressed all of the issues as they related to each other, and seemed to really focus on preserving rural values and open space. “The issues that come to the top are almost always addressed in an inter-related way like they were tonight,” said Chester County 2020’s facilitator, MaryAnna Ralph after the meeting.

Some residents said they took away a sense of community and consensus about the various issues. “We all moved to West Vincent because West Vincent is very attractive, and tonight was all about preserving that beauty,” said resident Sharon Davis.

Other residents spoke about a consensus in their vision from the future. Some said they felt a renewed sense of community involvement. “I think this was a very useful exchange of ideas,” said John Schrogie. “There is nothing quite like community spirit.”

While some residents said they walked away encouraged by that they had seen and heard, township officials were also encouraged by the participation. “You saw people here tonight that don’t come out to regular meetings but still have an interest in the township,” said West Vincent Supervisors’ Chairman Ken Miller. “There were people from all over the township, and they may be on different pages, but it was clear that they are all bound in this same chapter.”

The supervisors have been pursuing a policy of open-space preservation already, but Thursday night was reassurance that they are moving in the direction that residents want. “We would have continued to preserve open space without this, and it’s not quite a mandate, but it shows that it is still important to residents,” Miller said.

West Vincent Planning Commission member and event organizer Kate Damsgaard said she was happy with the turnout of residents and surprised by some of the outcomes. “I was surprised by the consensus in the room,” Damsgaard. “I thought there would be more diverse viewpoints. But this has created an opportunity for an ongoing dialogue, and that is a great thing.”

For her part, Ralph said that at all the other community meetings she has hosted, a consensus has usually emerged among participants. Chester County 2020 has hosted similar conversations in East Fallowfield, Pennsbury, West Bradford and other communities throughout the county

(DLN staff writer Eric S. Smith, esmith@dailylocal.com)

Setting the Scene: West Vincent Township and Chester County

Community Conversations complement the Chester County Board of Commissioners comprehensive plan as adopted first in *Landscapes* in 1996. The original landmark comprehensive plan was the product of a county-wide vision for the future, one that set benchmarks for progress in saving open space and farmland as well as support for sustainable urban centers.

Landscapes2 is a new official, long-range policy plan for Chester County, nearly completed. Interested groups and neighbors from all over the county have contributed to the two year process producing the plan. The resulting plan establishes a dramatic blueprint for bringing growth and preservation together for Chester County.

Landscapes2 outlines three initiatives for guiding the future of the county. These initiatives are accomplished through the collective implementation of policies and actions as follows:

- Build working partnerships. The county will join with municipal governments and stakeholders to develop productive partnerships that champion specific actions to achieve the vision of *Landscapes2*.
- Create sustainable communities. The county will work with the state and municipal governments, and other partners to build and enhance sustainable communities within designated growth areas.
- Keep Chester County green. The county will advocate for a green sustainable future.



Preservation programs, municipalities, land trusts and other non-profit entities will contribute to the future fulfillment of *Landscapes2*. Critical topics addressed in *Landscapes2* include diverse open space and farmland preservation goals, urban center revitalization, affordable homes, infrastructure, transportation, and long-term environmental outcomes. These same topics inspired the West Vincent issues that participants raised for discussion at the Conversation.

And on to the Conversation

The rules were easy:

- Approach the Conversation with an open mind.
- Show respect for others' ideas.
- Be willing to think “outside the box;” to listen and learn.

A preliminary list of issues was created by 90 members of the West Vincent community. These issues were reviewed and revised by the total group. Each participant was given a set of five dots, with each dot representing a vote. CC2020 staff counted dots to determine the top rated issues. The participants broke into smaller discussion groups. During a light supper, the 10 group leaders got to know their members, and encouraged the sharing of background information. The CC2020 staff guided the program, and were available to offer assistance to the breakout groups.

It is important to note that municipal planning in Pennsylvania is guided by the State's Municipal Planning Code (MPC). The MPC, by law, sets the standards for action by the planning commission and supervisors. Often suggestions surface that, by law, cannot be implemented by the elected and appointed officials without changes to the MPC.

The Rated Issues

The results of the vote found the following six items as the top issues in the round table discussions groups. Each issue received the following votes:

- 49 Open space preservation – attitudes about open space
- 42 Preservation of rural values
- 37 Pressure of future growth/affordable housing pro & cons – infrastructure impact



- 35 Storm water control; water quality & supply; long term disposal challenges; stream buffers; responsibility for land & water stewardship; property owner responsibility
- 34 Preservation/importance of the local farm economy and the farms
- 22 Transportation/traffic burden: safety; calming; infrastructure. Share the Road— farm vehicles, bikes, horses, pedestrians; bike paths; sidewalks; commuter bus/shuttle; road maintenance; paving vs. dirt roads



Several issues clustered:

Groups 1, 3, 4 and 8 chose:

- Affordable housing
- Preservation of open space
- Open space as whole system keeping farming viable

Groups 2, 5, 6, 7, 9, and 10 chose:

- Pressure of future growth (“How to get ahead of the curve...”)
- Traffic burden
- Protect the rural character of West Vincent

The groups were tasked to respond to the same list of questions when discussing their priority issues. Answers from participants in the ten groups are compiled below.

Regional & Local Trends

Increased population and growth pressure
 Pressure of future growth
 Increased population and economic growth
 Increased traffic
 Challenged infrastructure

Priority Values

Historic heritage
 Affordable housing
 Diverse housing without forfeiting rural character
 Open space preservation
 Community outreach
 Involved and knowledgeable neighbors
 Maintain rural character, peace between neighbors and diverse opinions
 Preservation of township’s rural charm, limit development and preserve a way of life
 Preserve landscapes and retain active agriculture and rural environment
 Plan open space that is relevant to farming and affordable housing
 Maintain farms and open space while respecting rights of growing community to access open space
 Protect water and air quality
 Resist/avoid the pressure for continual growth by managed, sustainable growth
 Maintain affordable housing at current price level
 Transportation planning
 Commercial zones

An educated and participating citizenry
Preservation of dark night skies
Drinking water quality and availability
Fiscal responsibility and understanding
Maintain safety
Keep everything small: dirt roads, farms, etc.
Reduce carbon footprint



Preferred Future

A sustainable township with rural atmosphere
A friendlier place to live with farms and open space
and old and new people communicating with each other
A public willingness to pay taxes for purchase of development rights
A safe, walkable community with pedestrian and bike access to recreation areas, shopping,
and schools
Better traffic flow with less traffic congestion; safer and slower traffic; sharing the roadways
with pedestrians, bikes and farm equipment
Less light and noise pollution
Slower development pace
Respect between farming and residential areas
Smart growth with more balanced development
Involved residents. Increased communication between residents and supervisors
Controlled growth set to regional plan
Healthier environment with more preservation of natural environment and better energy
conservation

Ways to Work Together

Community meetings and dialogue
More communication through newsletters and website
Members of the community coming together at meetings like this Community
Conversation
Revive historic spirit of community; work together for their common benefit

Barriers

Current planning for housing does not consider open space
Limits of current zoning
Limits of current infrastructure
High taxes
Leadership concerns
Resistance to change
Apathy
Banking and interest rates

Action Items

More productive dialogue around planning
Actively pursue open space
Work with Regional Planning Commission to seek state and county grants
Promote neighbor-to-neighbor respect and understanding
Determine the extent of your potential contributions to strengthening your community



The Players

Municipal officials (elected, appointed, enforcement staff and volunteers), as well as state and county officials; school boards, and adjoining school boards; cooperative municipalities
Township residents and representatives from major residential areas
Agricultural and commercial communities
Land trusts and conservation organizations
Business and industrial leaders, i.e., banks, services, etc.

Suggestions

After recording the Community Conversation dialogue, CC2020 staff offered these suggestions:

1. Increase the resident awareness of West Vincent official efforts to manage growth, beyond identifying and protecting natural resources. Managing growth must address all aspects of West Vincent development.
 - a) Consider individual proposals for development in a larger context than the immediately adjacent properties.
 - b) Institutionalize West Vincent's comprehensive planning in the decision-making process by requiring each land use change or development have a component of the decision that relates the project in compliance to the comprehensive plan, i.e., is the decision in accord with the comprehensive plan or not in accord with the plan? Does it meet the goals of the plan? Include a specific determination in township planning commission recommendations and other advisory board recommendations.
2. Make the most of the various agricultural preservation incentive programs:
 - a) Chester County Agricultural Preservation Program. Have a township agency bring this program to the attention of the current land owners.
 - b) PA Clean and Green Act 319 and Act 515. Identify farmland owners' opportunities for application to these programs.
3. Recognize and educate residents about the heritage and economic value of retaining agricultural interests in West Vincent.

For years, West Vincent township officials have been preserving agricultural lands and other significant natural lands through work with its own township land trust, and with major land trusts like French & Pickering Creeks Conservation Trust, Brandywine Conservancy, Green Valley Association, Natural Lands Trust, and others — as well as the Chester County's Agricultural Preservation Program. Land placed under easement by donation bears no cost to the township. In 2007, legislation improved benefits available to the donating landowner. When agricultural development rights are purchased either by the county alone or in partnership with municipalities, the ownership stays with the farmer. In both instances, the owner is responsible for land stewardship that meets sound environmental standards. High quality soils are preserved to grow crops rather than houses, school taxes and traffic are not increased, nor does the township face the financial challenges of providing additional services. The township works to retain its rural character and protect natural resources. West Vincent residents and officials should be commended for these efforts.

4. A group should be assigned to meet informally with the various property owners to discuss ways to achieve West Vincent preservation objectives.

5. In the absence of an overall watershed plan, storm water management issues can be addressed as follows:
 - a) Inventory problems and problem areas, as well as potential problem areas.
 - b) Establish strong storm water management requirements to preclude adverse impact from new development. Apply best management practices. These exist in a number of sources.
 - c) In the West Vincent capital program, address funds for priority items designed to correct the storm water problems. Check with Jan Bowers, Chester County Water Resources Authority; promote the need and budget.
6. Use the provisions of the MPC to increase coordination with Penn DOT for development requiring a highway occupancy permit. West Vincent should share its permit program with Penn DOT.
7. Schedule a follow-up session to establish the progress made on the various objectives identified by the Community Conversation. Set new target dates and assign responsibilities to advance the implementation of the selected objective.
8. Develop strategic plans for selected goals identified in the Community Conversation. Plans should include:
 - a) Most responsible agency or person
 - b) Actions required to achieve the goal
 - c) A schedule to advance and periodically check the progress.
 - d) Priorities should come from the comprehensive plan or endorsement by the West Vincent Board of Supervisors
9. Develop a plan for each of the municipalities' endorsed objectives, as well as those resulting from the Community Conversation. Well-intended objectives often fail for lack of identifying a schedule and what is required. It is also important to identify who is the most appropriate person/agency responsible to shepherd the project along, such as sustainability.
10. West Vincent may want to sponsor a series of planning and land development educational courses for citizens and officials, as well as those from adjacent municipalities.
11. Planning education for supervisors and all ABC members (Authorities, Boards, and Commissions) is an excellent investment. Funding should be set aside for this purpose. Readily available resources include the Master Planner Program www.CC2020.org; American Planning Association of PA courses at www.planning.org and the offerings of the Pennsylvania State Association of Township Supervisors (PSATS) at www.psats.org. The Pennsylvania State Boroughs association (PSAB) and Pennsylvania Municipalities Education Institute (PMPEI). Most of these provide for continuing education credit.



12. Continue to strengthen the sense of community. Try some of the following:
 - Attend one township, planning commission or school board meeting a month. Take a friend along.
 - Invite a new neighbor over for coffee or potluck supper.
 - Share the ride to work.
 - Tour your township web site — regularly.
 - Subscribe to the local or county newspaper. Read hometown news.
 - Don't rely on "sound bites" when you weigh in on an issue. Take time to get the whole story.
 - Say "good morning" to a neighbor you don't know— and smile.

13. A Community Conversation addresses potential problems before the rumors start flying. It allows residents a chance to identify issues and prioritize their concerns (dot exercise). This gives both the township and the residents the opportunity to provide answers in a non-confrontational manner. This might even be a two-meeting process; the first to establish the issues, the second to share information and, if necessary, generate ideas about solutions where common ground seems elusive. Lengthy often difficult conditional use hearings are minimized, with all the participants benefiting.

14. Address public involvement. Leaders and involved residents should mine the wealth of expertise and energy of your old and new neighbors. Everyone can do something. People are often just waiting to be asked. Many small tasks add up. Success in small things can provide the impetus to do more. Don't assume that your neighbors are not interested. Maybe they just need an enthusiastic invitation and a little encouragement.

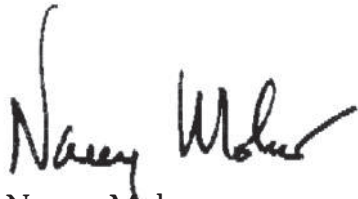
15. Take advantage of the participants' enthusiasm generated by this Community Conversation. Resident initiatives can support existing committees. In the Appendix, the issues suggest additional initiatives for the future.

16. Don't let change "just happen." You have choices. Choose change carefully. Get going now.

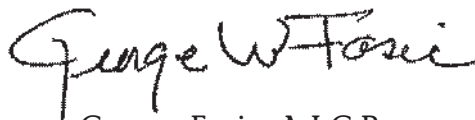
Conclusions

West Vincent has developed an impressive product. The sense of community and consensus is tangible, a treasure that dollars cannot buy. The rich menu of responses from this Community Conversations can help guide township officials and residents as they move ahead in crafting and implementing well considered goals.

Chester County 2020, staff and Board, look forward to keeping in touch while you undertake the admirable tasks of preserving the valued characteristics of your community.



Nancy Mohr
 President
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George Fasic, A.I.C.P.
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Appendix

All Issues Rated

Ratings	Issues
49	Open space preservation – attitudes about open space
42	Preservation of rural values
37	Pressure of future growth/affordable housing pro & cons – infrastructure impact
35	Storm water control; water quality & supply; long term disposal challenges; stream buffers; responsibility for land & water stewardship; property owner responsibility
34	Preservation/importance of the local farm economy and the farms
22	Transportation/traffic burden: safety; calming; infrastructure. Share the road — farm vehicles, bikes, horses, pedestrians; bike paths; sidewalks; commuter bus/shuttle; road maintenance; paving vs. dirt roads
16	Trails access /trails abuse
15	Alternative energy
15	Reducing our carbon footprint
11	Value of historic preservation
9	Lighting vs. dark sky, review current ordinance
8	Rising taxes
5	Diversity in housing – need for respect and understanding
5	Fire company volunteer retention & growth
5	Support for local businesses
4	Law enforcement - our own force?
3	Creating a sense of community for all residents
3	Green building
3	Fiscal understanding
3	More community-oriented events - family-centered activities
3	Animal control issues
2	Recycling opportunities
1	Community garden
1	Institutional/commercial energy conservation/education
1	Private energy conservation
1	Too little resident participation
1	Coordinated trash collection





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Chester County 2020: Finding Common Ground with Uncommon Resolve