

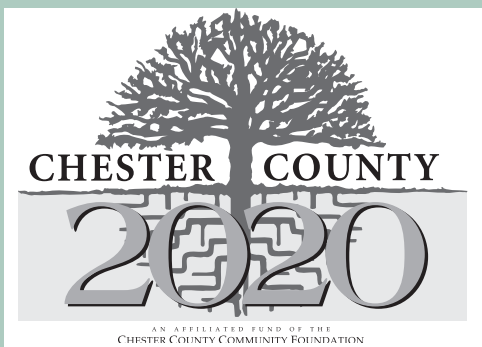


Take Time Out to Talk Community with Dick Vermeil

October 22, 2006

A Community Conversation
presented by
Chester County 2020





Easy Community Support

1. Volunteer an hour at the polls on Election Day.
2. Vote!
3. Attend one township, planning commission or school board meeting a month. You'll be surprised by the dedication of your community volunteers.
4. Invite a new neighbor over for coffee or potluck supper.
5. Take a train.
Take a bus.
Share the ride to work.
6. Tour your township web site.
7. Join the local historical society.
8. Subscribe to a weekly newspaper.
Read hometown news.
9. Don't rely on "sound bites" when you weigh in on an issue.
Take time to get the whole story.
10. Say a sidewalk "good morning" to a stranger – and smile.

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Special thanks to Joy Slater for the lovely setting at Fat Chance Farm

Cover Photo: Michael Kahn
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*We were pleased
to have Dick Vermeil
facilitate the
meeting.*



What is a Community Conversation?

Chester County 2020's community conversations have become a hallmark of activities intended to short-circuit contention in favor of cooperation. A glance at nearly any newspaper sends the message that far too often communication either breaks down or never has a chance in the first place. Our society exhibits a distressing tendency to make judgments on the basis of "sound bites," building walls where there might have been bridges.

It is deeply rewarding when the holders of divergent opinions come together to address apparently intractable issues – and discover significant common ground that leads to solutions and sound potential for teamwork. Disagreement can fade away in the presence of commitment and cooperation.

The best opportunity to recognize the value of a community conversation is to experience one. Over the past four years, Chester County 2020 has sponsored conversations or "summits" – around housing, transportation, comprehensive planning and tough urban issues. The noteworthy information and creative thinking that can be generated in a short period of concentrated effort is impressive. Most Conversations take place from around five-thirty to ten o'clock, suppers included – although timing can be totally flexible.

Conversation in the Country

Take Time to Talk Community with Dick Vermeil diverged from the normal time frame, with good reason. *Take Time* was designed as a mini-conversation that would lead to better understanding and appreciation of the process. The location was Joy Slater's roomy equipment shed, transformed into a festive, friendly meeting environment with the bonus of a delicious, locally grown luncheon. The view over the former King Ranch fields, protected in perpetuity with conservation easements, was itself worth the price of admission, but there was much more. Local farmer Bill Dreisbach lent meticulously restored 1928 and 1935 John Deere tractors from his extensive collection and was quickly surrounded with guests who wanted to "talk tractor." Chester County 2020's Advisory Board members pitched in to create the attractive setting and the tasty menu, while Dick Vermeil supplied and barbecued the beef. At the registration desk, each guest received five sticky dots to distribute among a long list of potential discussion issues prepared in advance. The issues attracting the largest number of dots determined the focus of the breakout sessions. Table seating was carefully planned to nurture lively conversation.

CC2020's executive director Nancy Mohr set the stage for the conversation, reminding the guests that their presence at *Take Time*... reflected interest in preserving the best of Chester County's history and traditions. Some represented generations of the same family in the same place – and that place has changed dramatically, especially in the last ten to fifteen years. Others consciously chose the county as a good place to live, to bring up families – or



Bill Dreisbach brought his 1928 and 1935 John Deere tractors to liven up the scene. Starting them takes a good bit of muscle and perseverance.

moved here in the context of a job opportunity. Some preferred to live in the boroughs and towns because they were reminiscent of a former place and life. Others looked for real country, commuting an hour to city jobs when friends might think they were just a little nuts. In between were the first of the one and two-acre housing developments – a larger home for the family and room to play, and also maybe more grass to mow and gardens to tend than originally imagined.

There weren't so many people making those choices fifteen or twenty years ago. Now the pleasant island that was once a rural county with no clear connection to the Philadelphia region is undergoing rapid change. Since 2000, more than 40,000 new residents have arrived to call Chester County home. Life in the county has changed, and will continue to change. Scenic roads have become scenic highways, many of them two-lane, twisting byways never intended for heavy traffic. The commute into Philadelphia is more like an hour and a half, with an expensive parking garage at the other end. Revival of the commuter trains that ran in the '70s is a multi-million dollar conversation without identifiable sources of funding. Housing is far more expensive, and the teacher, postman, fireman and others who provide services important to the quality of life can't afford to live near their jobs. The burden of real estate taxes is why there will be an opportunity to vote for or against some sort of income tax in a referendum next spring. And perhaps most challenging of all, too few registered voters turn out for elections – abdicating their ability to have a say in how their state, municipalities, and school districts are run. Most people have busy lives, demanding careers and families they care about. There seems to be little or no time to step back and look at the social, economic and natural

environment that nourishes those lives. That is exactly what the guests were being asked to do for one short afternoon – to take time.

The important issues had already been identified, probably the same ones that others might have chosen. They included:

- Preserving open space
- Overdevelopment causing increased flooding and pollution
- How to grow and still preserve traditional the Chester County lifestyle
- Increased traffic congestion

Each breakout group was asked to choose one or two of them or any one of the four if there was consensus about concentrating on a single issue – and go on to develop options and solutions. The value of any community conversation depends upon respect for all ideas, not working the issues, but rather coming up with tangible action items that can be tackled over the months to come. The participants in this conversation possess the potential to lead the way in creating good for Chester County. The broad community draws upon that good without enough attention to replenishment. We take, we benefit; it is time to give back. While they enjoyed the luncheon of produce and culinary contributions from the local community, the guests were invited to explore their tablemates' resources, solidifying The Teams for the afternoon.

Over coffee and dessert, Dick Vermeil took center stage to share his thoughts about guaranteeing the best possible future for this special part of the world. Dick was making a first appearance literally in his own "back yard" since returning to Chester County after nine years coaching in far away places. He began by expressing appreciation to the people in Chester County who have exhibited

*A glimpse of
the working groups –
working.*



intense dedication to preserving rolling hills and open fields – many of whom were in his audience. “Good team members” Vermeil said, “do not shy from commitment, responsibility and accountability. Instead they get involved and give back to the team.” He urged the guests ‘never to become complacent and ignore the wonderful environment that surrounds us.’ Acknowledging Chester County’s role as the fastest growing county in the state, Vermeil recognized regional leaders’ commitment to preserving the county’s highly valued natural, social and economic environment. “Becoming involved in the preservation of our county’s rich history and tremendous land is all part of the giving-back process.”

Following the Vermeil keynote, the audience of farmers, politicians, municipal officials, residents of all ages, historians, lawyers and homebuilders prepared to address the inescapable issues that impact Chester County today – and into tomorrow. The participants came from E. Brandywine, E. Fallowfield, E. Marlborough, E. Nottingham, Highland, London Grove, Lower Oxford, New Garden, Newlin, New London, Pennsbury, Pocopson, S. Coatesville, Tredyffrin, Upper Oxford, Wallace, W. Bradford, West Chester, West Goshen, W. Marlborough, W. Vincent, W. Whiteland, and a friend or two from neighboring Lancaster County.

Launching the Conversation

Without exception, the core issues are so closely related that it was virtually impossible to focus on one without drawing the others into the discussions. Consequently, the comments, solutions, benefits and barriers are also intertwined. The outcome of this particular community conversation was remarkable for its productivity within an extremely

short time frame. Normally, a Conversation runs three to four hours from opening to final reports. Designed as a sample offering to engage people who were not fully familiar with the process, *Take Time...* lasted less than half the usual time. It represented only a beginning in that the solutions were not fully developed, but the participants certainly departed far more aware of the current, county-wide challenges.

Each group began with a discussion of the regional and local trends that impact the issues. They considered priority values in determining a preferred future for the county in years to come; identified important players in both achieving goals and overcoming barriers, searched for common ground and options for progress toward a preferred future. They attempted to make realistic assessments of both the potential accomplishments and the barriers. The summary of the scenarios from which this report is written appear as Appendix II.

Important Regional and Local Trends

No one trend stands alone. It is impossible to determine a single element that has spawned the others – other than perhaps the automobile and once-inexpensive gas. In retrospect, the absence of coordinated regional planning bears the primary responsibility for many of the complaints about sprawl, traffic and the tax implications that accompany unbridled growth. Pennsylvania’s system of many independent municipalities – 73 in Chester County alone –has not until recently supported serious consideration of regional planning. Even now the topic is hardly a full-blown movement.

Families need homes. Parents look for pleasant places to live, where their children’s safety and a good education are givens. As corporations flee the urban centers, their employees follow. For some,



Farming versus industry.

disenchantment may hover in the future, the product of too much lawn to mow, too many hours driving children to all their somewheres, and the unavoidable frustrations of traffic jams and increasing time from home to work and back. It is easy to recommend “make the urban centers more livable;” unfortunately, it is more difficult and expensive to retrofit than to implement good planning in the first place. This applies to the suburbs and the absence of planning, too. In assessing the plan-no-plan cause and effect scenario, most of the trends project specific outcomes.

Residents of most communities think everything is “fine” until a threat appears on the horizon. Insufficient education around current issues contributes to reactive response. However, the desire to be educated does not always exist. Too few people pay attention until there is a crisis when often emotional responses are inspired by sound bites rather than full understanding of the issues.

The mention of “diversity” is bound to set off alarms, and yet what is diversity? Economic, cultural, ethnic, generational, educational? Diversity helped build the country. Does diversity threaten safety, the value of homes, quality of education – or does it represent untapped resources?

The County population is growing by the proverbial leaps and bounds. The 40,000 additional residents since 2000 exceed projections, adding to traffic congestion and concern for safety and the concurrent increased demand for services (police, fire, new schools) as well as the loss of agricultural land converted to housing.

People and corporations moving from the city to the suburbs account for much of the County’s growth, bringing with them with both regional and local challenges. Chester County’s enviable record in land conservation (donated conservation easements and purchased farmland preservation easements) is extremely positive in its preservation of natural and scenic resources. At the same time, preservation of these resources may attract development in the surrounding areas; this is where new residents want to live. Without solid regional vision the “good places” can resemble patchwork growth rather than a connective component in a well-balanced community.

Increased residential development means higher taxes for almost everyone. Residential properties do not carry their weight in supporting municipal services and schools. The rule of thumb has been that for every tax dollar paid by a homeowner, he receives approximately \$1.35 in services. The equivalent tax dollar paid by a farmer (growing crops instead of houses) results in 65 cents in services.

As utilities expand into the more open, less developed areas, new homes and traffic follow. Rapid construction stresses the service providers – especially in small municipalities and school districts.

There is insufficient recognition of the connection between flooding crises and residential and commercial construction. Few would argue that impervious coverage aggravates flooding. Stormwater management has become a major issue in most watersheds. If well-engineered management plans are not in place at the time

*The dot exercise identified
the issues for the
Community Conversation.*



of construction, municipalities are left with the sometimes insurmountable financial burdens of solving the problems.

Increased traffic on narrow roads and clogged major arteries surfaced as an important trend in every breakout group. There was considerable discussion about enforcing speed limits and the value of roundabouts. Widening roads and replacing single lane bridges were not considered valid options. Some of the restrictive nature of the country roads was mentioned as ‘natural traffic calming.’

Vertical growth is creeping into the borough (and city) picture -- another too often ignored chapter in the looking ahead scenario. Where should taller buildings be allowed? How can they co-exist in a manner that preserves small town ambience? Once again, planning and consistency in creating and enforcing ordinances are critical.

Water supplies and sewage treatment are rarely seen as critical issues, except among those who know the territory. The general population, except in rare times of extreme drought, takes a clean, plentiful supply of water for granted.

Findings and Conclusions

The work of the seventeen breakout groups generated a number of clear Findings and Conclusions which include:

1. The response to change may be skepticism as well as active opposition. The pervasive theme is that whatever has been should be maintained. That attitude becomes unrealistic in today's rapidly changing society where money speaks loud and clear. Because an average resident/

taxpayer's days and weeks are consumed with the business of living, there is a tendency to assume that all is well unless and until the impact becomes personal. Historically, if you didn't like what was going on in your town or development, you just packed up and moved farther out. This is no longer an easy option. The trade-off may be longer and more expensive commuting time, less house for the money, higher taxes and fewer personal hours in each day.

2. Diversity was mentioned with little or no attention to its role in community life. It seems to be a fact of the sprawl-oriented existence that people prefer to live with or near others of like economic, social and cultural background. The participants with experience living in urban centers were far more open to the idea that diversity could be interesting, intellectually challenging and a positive force in bringing up a family.

3. Regional planning is viewed as an important tool for the preservation of the county's quality of life – until it is proposed for one's own municipality. Then it becomes acceptable for everyone else. Recently, however, there is increasing recognition that joint planning may have benefits.

4. Interpretations of community problems and potential solutions become highly personal. It is difficult to pull back and think fully in terms of “community good.”

5. Builders are perceived as powerful entities with deep pockets. Some are. Some aren't.



*Getting the most out of
our natural resources and
maintaining our quality of life
is a timely issue.*

Ultimately, it is the municipal governments and planning commissions who possess the authority to create the comprehensive plans and zoning ordinances that support a vision of a balanced community. They can work with developers to fulfill that vision. Most developers submit plans that are tuned to the current zoning, hoping for the shortest route to approvals. With the escalating cost of land in Chester County, there is a pervasive tendency to “build big” in the interest of recapturing the investment and making a profit. Affordable housing is rarely in the mix.

6. Expansion of public transportation is complicated by the everyone-wants-it-but-will-they-use it proposition. Funding is a huge challenge. How do you make sure that the investment pays off? Will you use it?

7. The success of the County’s Vision Partnership Program has inspired more conversation about incentives for regional planning and zoning, with concern that Penn DOT improvements and mass transit are included in the mix.

8. Support for affordable housing is a question of conscience, but “affordable” is difficult to define. The closest synonym is “workforce housing,” but even that falls short. The category includes, for example, housing for teachers, firemen, local shop owners, construction workers, municipal and county employees, and grown children who want to bring families up in their hometowns, for seniors on fixed incomes who prefer to remain where they have lived for a generation or more; essentially anyone whose individual income is

entry level or under (approximately) \$60,000 a year. New home ownership in the current economy, usually requires income earned by both members of a couple to carry the mortgage and associated costs.

9. There is limited awareness that water (supply and quality) might ever become a problem. We have taken clean, plentiful water for granted and look with sympathy but not empathy at the water supply problems in other parts of the country.

10. Urban problems have already arrived in the boroughs and city; the rural municipalities (and beyond) are not exempt from them either.

11. The traffic situation becomes more serious daily. Highways are clogged, commuting takes longer and longer, and careless drivers speed on winding country roads that were originally intended for horse-drawn vehicles. Route 100 is an appalling example of too many cars, going too fast for conditions and resulting in literally hundreds of accidents.

12. The need for convenient, expanded public transportation is critical at the same time that it is difficult to estimate the success of weaning drivers from their cars and onto the trains. Funding for expansion is scarce to non-existent. The highly praised SCOOT and Coatesville Link buses are desperate for 2007 funding.

13. Concern for flooding comes and goes with each emergency. Hundred year storms and their impacts no longer wait the hundred years. They are frequent and exceed official projections.

*Preservation of our
urban centers will
help to control
sprawl.*



Municipalities struggle with the costs of implementing good plans. Rapid development combines with expanded impervious coverage to make it nearly impossible to stay ahead of the game.

14. The court system is not perceived as being supportive of zoning changes. The fair share requirements are seen as a roadblock. Municipalities pursue joint planning to provide for uses where they are appropriate rather than “misappropriating” them just to fulfill the fair share requirements. Implementation involves the desire to cooperate but also requires confidence in the ability to blur the boundary lines without giving up municipal authority. Here, too, in pursuing good planning, many township solicitors are not seen as being supportive of change.

Conclusions

1. There is always an element of pain in change. It’s difficult for long-term residents to accept change. More recent arrivals themselves are quick to resist change to the specific elements of the suburban or country life that attracted them. Older and new residents find it difficult to cooperate in charting the future for their municipality or region.

2. A major challenge exists around the concept of diversity. Rural residents seem less apt to categorize people in economic terms. They revere the sense of history, an enduring work ethic, a passion for farming and small town life that rarely results in material wealth comparable to a corporate executive. Tolerance persists as

an important tool in making friends, in addressing community problems.

3. Anywhere you go in Chester County today, a mix of long-time residents and newer arrivals is prevalent. Longevity counts far less than the willingness to become a part of the fabric of an existing community. It can be perplexing to hear demands for streetlights, sewers, perhaps a township building, from new residents who originally expressed pleasure about joining a rural community. Farmers learn that the new neighbors who thought the scenic value of farms with cows and tractors was appealing aren’t quite so tolerant of them up close and personal. Realistically, we’re all in the business of keeping the county from changing too much. Choose the best of the traditional values, adapt to the changing world that lets many people work from their electronic cottages, help to solve the problems of traffic, pollution, and poverty. In the long run, the bonus is that the next generation will benefit, too.

4. The comments indicate a desire for tax reform but no easy solution emerged. No one likes to pay taxes, but they do support critical services. Tax reform will continue to challenge the legislature. The 2006 legislation is already proving frustrating for school districts and tax payer alike. Closely tied to the diversity question, high real estate taxes frequently make it impossible for low and middle income families to live near their workplaces. School districts benefit from commercial real estate while a fully residential tax base will dictate higher taxes on homes.



*Revitalization of our
Urban areas is a vital
element to preserving
Open Space.*

5. Traffic was the real elephant in the room. No matter where you live today, you cannot avoid the rapidly increasing number of cars and trucks on the road. Crowded roads impact everyone. When the topic of mass transit surfaced, there was strong support – especially for other people using it.

The Report

Each breakout group nominated a reporter to share the substance of the conversation. This is where the common ground surfaced and was generally recognized. As a reporter summarized, heads would nod in agreement. An occasional question would surface, and the discussion would become more general.

It was interesting to watch priority values cluster around specific categories:

Scenic ideals and personal relationships

Townships' charm
Farms' scenic landscapes
Protection of natural resources
Community way of life
Open space
Maintenance of rural life and character
Saving farms means saving the farmer, too.
Waiving the death tax on family farms
Aesthetics

Values within the municipalities

Addressing public safety
Need for regional planning
Zoning as a tool. Planning is the means. Joint planning should receive a higher level of funding (incentives).
Need to compete with developers by taking steps to get ahead for the future

Prohibit building in the flood plain.
Support municipal officials who hold the line.
Require infiltration for sewage planning.
Control amount of growth by limiting numbers of residential units and square footage of commercial buildings.
Tighten up zoning requirements.
Control traffic.

Pollution prevention

Pollution control
Stormwater management to reduce flooding
Ground water protection
Make sure development is focused where there is the infrastructure to handle it.

Combined elements of the preferred future

Encourage growth in cities and suburbs.
Encourage redevelopment instead of use of farmland for new development.
Regional zoning!
Place commercial, industrial, agricultural, residential areas where most appropriate and make the best use of existing infrastructure and highways.
Encourage the close, community way of life.
Put teeth into County-supported regional planning.
Focus development on inner ring suburbs and urban centers while preserving the outer farm lands (i.e., like the United Kingdom).

Who are the important players?

This question became, more appropriately, who wouldn't be a player?

Residents
The County
School boards and teachers
Chambers of commerce
Businesses



Nancy Mohr presented Dick and Carol Vermeil and host Joy Slater with a framed enlargement of Michael's Kahn's Brandywine photo, as well as two small trees that will grow larger and remind them of the day.

PennDOT
 Development community
 Municipal officials
 State government
 Home Builders Association
 State legislature
 The courts
 Chester County 2020
 Engineers
 Designers (environmental management)
 Traffic planners
 Educated citizen participants
 Knowledgeable solicitors working with developers
 for best practices vs. against them

And where will they play?

Public meetings
 Township meetings
 County meetings
 On commissions
 In every venue that determines the future quality
 of life in Chester County

How to take action, make good things happen, to work together

Encourage people to become educated about what
 is happening. Take a friend to a meeting!
 Multi-municipal planning in cooperation with the
 County Planning Commission.
 Identify opportunities for more multi-municipal
 cooperation.
 Support redevelopment of Philadelphia.
 Multi-level education. Community education
 should begin in school.
 Effective, non-confrontational communication
 among all parties involved in development
 Share knowledge about models that have
 demonstrated that they are working.

Encourage more townships to use best practices.
 Townships can and should be working together –
 framework exists but reluctance re coordination.
 Encourage municipal officials.
 Open space: Support conservation easements,
 alternative fuels, fair prices for farmers'
 products.
 Developers should have to pay impact fees.
 If they want houses, they have to pay to support
 the area.
 Important to support farm family's children who are
 interested in continuing the farming tradition.
 Traffic: make sure country roads don't become too
 big or too fast.
 Create an open space defense fund to control
 urban sprawl.
 Bring neighboring communities together to
 support a regional approach to development.
 Incentivize those communities that accept
 development, such as funding for streetscapes,
 traffic calming.
 Utilize transfer of development rights.
 Support "long term" economic development
 thinking

Anticipated barriers and how to deal with them

It is easy enough to recognize potential road-
 blocks. They have been encountered previously, in
 many situations. Where do you fit into the making-
 good-things happen picture?
 Too little planning, too late
 Townships afraid of being sued by developers
 Townships reluctant to enforce their ordinances
 Townships don't have regulations that force
 developers to put in good stormwater measures.
 Conservation community and chambers of
 commerce are working at cross-purposes,

*The beautiful Chester County
countryside –
let's not plow it under.*



need to work together.
Society based on “commuting”
People and jobs are not close together.
Citizen understanding – education
Tax structure
Real estate developer pressuring for growth
Shortage of funding for municipalities
Developers’ desire for profit
Difficulty on of educating the public
Resistance of local township officials
Resistance to change of any kind
Resistance of residents due to potential economic loss
Cost
Aesthetics
Difficulty of enforcing proper maintenance
Solicitors who are not well versed in municipal law
Easier for developers to build on farms than work in or adjacent to boroughs or towns.
Push-back from communities that will receive development (like TDRs)
Dollars from developers compete with conservation dollars.
Fair Share for small municipalities is damaging.
Municipal antipathy to cooperation

Cleaner air and water
Concentration of development in order to preserve open space.
Fewer flood issues as better systems are employed
Utilize existing infrastructure to save land.
Expansion of public transportation – buses, the SEPTA R-5.
Accomplishes goal of addressing need for different lifestyles (farmer, urban)
Wise land use, preservation of open land, and appropriate sharing of all uses.
Ability to deal more effectively with multiple “100 year” storms
Local municipalities and country government focus on preserving their community’s character and open space.

Anticipated accomplishments and benefits

And here is the vision of all the good that could happen, produced in such a short time span as the product of willing participants:
Citizens would understand rural communities, respect rather than attempt to destroy the way of life.
Designated growth areas would become effective.
Service needs would be fulfilled more efficiently.

*The dedicated
Board of Directors
made this Community
Conversation a huge
success.*



So, where were we at the end of the afternoon? Hopefully, at a new beginning. This relatively brief Community Conversation merely hinted of the abundance of experience and expertise existing within a single, random gathering of county residents. Several of the groups continued their discussions after the reports were completed. The on-going challenge will be identification of practical opportunities to harness this impressive energy and good will in the interest of preserving the quality of life that does make the county a very special place to live. Key responses reflected the need for “regional cooperation” and “individual involvement.” A favorite Chester County 2020 refrain is ‘If each of us committed the smallest amount of time within our communities, we could move mountains.’ Dick effectively echoed that refrain as he challenged his audience to contribute to making good things happen. What better advice could he have offered than “give back to the communities that give so much to us.”

To everyone who set aside time to talk community with Dick Vermeil, Chester County 2020’s Board of Advisors extends their appreciation and the hope that we may see you at future Community Conversations.

Sincerely,

Nancy Mohr
Executive Director

Henry F. Thorne
Chair

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ISSUES TO BE CONSIDERED

Increased traffic congestion

Public transportation: supply and usage

Affordable housing

Preserving open space

Scarcity of civic leadership

Property tax burden

Apathy as a pervasive force

Desire for community out of balance with willingness to

Overdevelopment causing increased flooding and pollution

Absence of coordinated planning

Fear of diversity

Development out of scale with existing communities

Reduction of automobile dependency in light of sprawl

How to grow and still preserve traditional Cheese-Country

Diminishing sense of community throughout the County

Fulfillment of recreational needs for all ages

Support vs. opposition to connecting trail systems





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