



TICKET TO TOMORROW

A South Coatesville & Modena Community Conversation
March 25, 2008



A multi-municipal partnership program of
South Coatesville & Modena Supervisors and Planning Commission
with Chester County 2020



Community Conversations and Productive Partnerships

Community Conversations are distinctive among Chester County 2020's programs that support effective community cooperation. They are especially helpful to diverse interests that may not have found common ground easy to identify. When people of varying backgrounds and experience come together, the results are always interesting; each Community Conversation produces welcome surprises. The residents of South Coatesville and Modena confirmed predictions for this conversation. Their shared wisdom produced agreement about "what should be done," and recognized the value of spending an evening exploring issues that concern the two neighboring boroughs. The boroughs' leadership should be commended on the decision to approach this exercise together; it is the first fully multi-municipal Community Conversation.

Community Conversations are most often at the municipal level but may also be regional or involve a single topic such as transportation or housing. Conversations in the Western Chester County municipalities are supported by grants from the Robert and Jennifer McNeil Foundation, H.F. Lenfest, and Chester County 2020's annual partners including PECO, Saul Ewing LLP, J.D. Wood & Co., Bryn Mawr Trust Company, Fulton Bank, Herr's Foods, Inc, Michael & Nancy Pia Foundation, and Sher-Rockee Mushrooms.

Setting the Scene

Chester County 2020's executive director, Nancy Mohr, set the scene for *Ticket to Tomorrow* by emphasizing the importance of the current, ten-year review of *Landscapes*, the county's award winning comprehensive plan. For all that the county's preservation programs, municipalities, land trusts and other non-profit entities have accomplished in contributing to the fulfillment of *Landscapes*, critical components are being addressed by the highly diverse *Landscapes2* Steering Committee. Significant policy drafts have been completed around urban center revitalization, affordable homes, infrastructure, transportation, and long-term environmental outcomes – all of which relate directly to the issues that the residents raised for discussion at the Conversation.

Every municipality has been changed in some way by population increases. Since 2000, more than 49,000 new residents have arrived in the county, considerably ahead of projections. This growth inevitably increases the financial challenges for municipalities, the County and school districts. The decline in construction of new homes and overall housing sales has heavily impacted the transfer tax income in most municipalities, tightening budgets in often critical areas.

Chester County 2020's executive director served as the facilitator for the South Coatesville-Modena Conversation, with staff and a board member present to offer guidance to the breakout groups. As always, an important ground rule centered on recognition that all 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



Inevitably, suggestions surface that sound appealing but cannot be utilized by the elected and appointed officials.

This Conversation offered an opportunity to discuss challenges ranging from open space to traffic with 65 residents participating. The generosity of Mittal Steel USA made it possible to hold the conversation in their Human Resources & Training Building. Breakout groups of 8-10 were pre-assigned to reflect a mix of experience and repre-

sentation. The format produced thought-provoking ideas as well as excellent anecdotal material.

Rating the Issues

The Conversation began with identification of issues that the audience considered important to the municipalities' future — projected on a screen so that everyone could keep track of the contributions and then transferred to large sheets of paper. The participants were invited to select the five issues they considered most important by placing colored dots next to their choices. Four interrelated items attracted the largest concentration of dots; they became the focus of the discussion. Substantial common ground evolved around the basic issues, as demonstrated in the breakout group reports.

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Trends

The most significant trend is illustrated by the decision of these two boroughs to develop visions for the future together. Regional planning is coming of age. A group of municipalities can exert stronger influence on their future than any one alone. The shared trends involve the push-pull of wanting or not wanting to welcome increased development with all its impacts. The accompanying costs to existing homeowners involving traffic and safety issues, higher taxes, and stormwater problems are difficult to address. Historically, regional planning has often encountered resistance; seeming to fly in the face of municipal independence. It is only recently that regional or joint planning has become attractive as community leaders realize that neighboring municipalities' decisions have a direct effect across those invisible borders. In addition, changes in the Municipal Planning Code have provided more flexibility when multi-municipal planning tools are utilized.

The following are the perceived trends in the township. It is interesting that the participants focused almost entirely on trends within the limits of the two boroughs. The larger, more sprawling municipalities tend to be more aware of outside pressures on their quality of life. In South Coatesville and Modena the trends are seen as affecting daily life, close to home.

New interest in creating a town center.

- Recognition of the importance of a retail area with a grocery store as the critical anchor.
- Desire for a more walkable community in light of rising energy costs.
- Concern over the appearance of abandoned or blighted properties.
- Emerging recognition of the value of multi-municipal cooperation.
- Increasing importance of recreational opportunities for children, teenagers and seniors.
- The increasing burden of higher taxes, especially on senior citizens and lower income residents.
- Lack of transportation.
- Too few residents attending municipal meetings or becoming involved as volunteers.
- Deteriorating road conditions and the lack of tree trimming, roadside maintenance

Priority Values Translate into Common Ground

The participants exhibited strong agreement about the following priorities:

- Honest, competent government
- Quality education for all the children
- Preservation of historic resources
- Deal with the blight of abandoned buildings
- Affordable taxes
- Youth education and recreation
- A healthy, cooperative community environment
- Coordinated revitalization
- Shared responsibility
- Importance of generational diversity and retention of the younger generation in the community
- Better conditions for senior citizens
- The positive role that some level of public transportation could play.





Findings

1. These two boroughs share unique opportunities. Their size allows an opportunity to develop an effective scale of communication and cooperation that tends to be difficult to achieve in larger, more sprawling communities.
2. The enthusiasm expressed in the breakout groups speaks to a growing desire for cooperation in meeting community goals. The major goal is revitalization around a town center that recognizes the value of community relationships in the context of developing a better tax base.
3. If there is any one need or desire that attracted full agreement, it is the urgency attached to attracting a grocery store. A small chain store that could include a pharmacy has great appeal.
4. Strong consensus existed about the importance of recreational opportunities for children, teenagers and seniors. With careful, practical planning supported by the search for specialized funding, orderly attention to recreational priorities can serve as the basis for an increased, productive sense of community.
5. Concern over the lack of pride or sense of responsibility on the part of absentee property owners who do not take care of their rentals is not surprising. The non-response to attempts by tenants or municipal officials to try to communicate and gain cooperation has proved frustrating, to say the least. Neighbors spoke of the personal discomfort in passing by or through the blighted areas that reflect poorly on the property owners and tenants who do take their responsibility seriously. It bothers them, too, to have friends and family see them living in a neighborhood where some property owners “just don’t care.”
6. There was interest in establishing a historic district to call attention to the existence of historically important buildings – and to explore the potential for grants to help with restoration.
7. The increasing burden of ever higher taxes, especially on senior citizens and lower income residents is worrisome. Tax-oriented complaints are a nearly universal concern, especially in communities such as these where there is little or no commercial tax base. Solutions to tax issues can hardly be found in a single evening, and getting statewide support in the General Assembly is a frustrating, too often non-productive exercise.
8. Good ideas do need funding. Professional resources are critical to research and grant writing.
9. The attitudes around over-building can be confusing. At the same time that residents realize that the residential real estate tax does not produce the necessary revenue to support municipal and school district services, the boroughs are eager to attract new multi-generational residents – to increase the number of families able to contribute economically, educationally and socially; people who want to be contributing members in every way.
10. Transportation is an urgent need. Car ownership is not necessarily a given. The impact of rising fuel prices is serious. A surprising number of residents do not have any ready transportation at their disposal.
11. Insufficient attendance at borough council meetings plays into insufficient communication and volunteer involvement. The municipal officials attending the

Conversation were impressed with the attendance – and hopeful that it would translate into increased interest in planning commission and borough meetings.

12. Repeated interest in welcoming youth into the process, making them feel they have roles to play with, for instance, a “youth council.”
13. Expressed interest in historic preservation connects to “pride of place.” As the blighted areas are dealt with, and buildings that should be rehabilitated and preserved are identified, there will be new energy applied to the entire revitalization process.
14. Effective communication is a challenge. For all that the municipalities may attempt to get the word out via the websites, not enough residents are reached. This is a result of a combination of apathy and, in many instances, no access to the Internet.
15. The idea surfaced that South Coatesville should create distance from the City of Coatesville by changing the name, perhaps to a name of long ago – Hustonville.

Conclusions and Suggestions from the Breakout Groups

1. Improved recreational facilities and programs

The benefits would include

- a. Structured activities for children would occupy their time, teach them civic responsibility and diminish the prospects for vandalism and crime.
- b. Recreation leads to a sense of community and a more civic-minded population.
- c. Children learning from social interaction.

Barriers include:

- a. An inactive recreation committee
- b. Lack of funding for construction and paid employees.
- c. Too few adult volunteers
- d. Need to have standards for employees and volunteers who work with children.

2. Abandoned properties and blighted areas

A program to deal with the abandoned or neglected properties should be developed. It might include the following:

- a. Review and, if necessary, revise the appropriate ordinances.
- b. Cite property owners and landlords who do not support the mandated standards.
- c. Hire a local management supervisor to enforce the ordinances.
- d. Hold contractors accountable for their work.
- e. Research and develop legal options for taking control of and rehabbing or tearing down abandoned buildings.
- f. Incentives to move into blighted areas to improve and live in rehabilitated buildings
- g. Enlist Vo-tech and Habitat for Humanity for the “team.”

3. Revitalization

- a. Develop a plan to fit the already designated town center area that would serve both boroughs.
- b. Plan the open space, parks and recreation area as carefully as the town center.
- c. Build or renovate an existing building for a multi-purpose center that would span the generations from youth to seniors.
- d. The idea of generating new, local jobs is exciting.
- e. The third element of successful revitalization is effective enlistment of community enthusiasm and the determination to keep everyone aware of progress





Overall, communication will be the glue that holds the many pieces together.

4. Special project: grocery store and town center
 - a. Secure an acceptable location for a grocery store
 - b. Establish the demographics and market studies to convince a small grocery chain.
 - c. Use community involvement and the potential for jobs and additional facilities to help sell the project.
- d. Challenges included acquisition of the land, the possible use of condemnation and establishment of reasonable expectations for the municipalities and the eventual developer.

5. The players

Fulfilling the South Coatesville-Modena goals will require input from a wide variety of players including county and municipal officials, local and county planning commissions, residents, the business community, professional consultants, and a visionary, financially capable developer for the town center.

Action Items involving the participation of both boroughs.

1. Approach the Chester County Planning Commission for advice about development of a multi-municipal plan. This is so much in line with Landscapes2.
2. Contact the University of Pennsylvania City and Regional Planning Department of Penn Design to discuss the potential for the multi-municipal planning to serve as a graduate school project.
3. Convene a mini-Community Conversation with the identified potential players in all categories. Prepare a list of possible options and resources for use in the Conversation.
4. In the context of abandoned or blighted housing, consider a few basic questions:
 - a. Municipal building code, Have the boroughs adopted the new state wide code?
 - b. Is a building code current in use?
 - c. Is the code officer trained?
 - d. Are inspectors adequately trained?
 - e. Have the municipalities set rules for enforcement?
 - f. Is enforcement political? It requires citizen backing (from the discussion, the citizens are willing).
5. Revisit the individual municipal comprehensive plans.
 - a. Is the most recent comprehensive plan seen as a living document, or does it sit on the shelf?
 - b. Are the municipalities using all the planning tools available to them? The county Planning Commission's Toolbox is an amazing resource.
6. Do the boroughs require mandatory training for volunteer members of boards, commissions and authorities? As part of any planning activity, try incorporating a training element, even if for refresher purposes. Take advantage, too, of the Master Planner Program sponsored by CC2020, Chester County Planning Commission, Chester County Association of Townships (CCATO), and the West Chester University's College of Business & Public Affairs and Department of Geography & Planning. Visit www.CC2020.org for details.

7. Meanwhile, move ahead with the most easily addressed activities to maintain the community enthusiasm and sense of accomplishment.

Around recreation

Reactivate / reorganize the Recreation Committee with 2 Council members and at least 2 residents from each borough. The committee should not only assess and plan recreational opportunities but also seek professional advice in applying for grants and soliciting private donations. There should be regular scheduled meetings.

Clean-up

Check with PennDOT about support for clean-up days. The supplies are as close as the facility on Route 162 at Embreeville.

Around blighted and abandoned properties

Combine planning and zoning for blighted areas with revitalization of properties

Renovate buildings along First Avenue and Youngsburg Road wherever funding can be made available, and the owners are willing partners.

8. Inventory the potential open space in the boroughs and prioritize its preservation.
9. What are the possibilities for the Mittal Steel USA land adjacent to First Avenue? Can the County help initiate discussion?
10. Make a realistic assessment of funding sources, both public and private for the prioritized list of projects.
11. Seriously consider formalizing the cooperative relationship that characterized this Conversation. The energy was so impressive.
12. Utilize the energy and knowledge of the Under One Roof² Planning Committee to help move ahead with the revitalization effort.
13. Work toward establishing a joint website that targets the products of the Conversation, keeps residents (and your neighboring municipalities) informed. Among the residents, there must be a couple of website-familiar volunteers who would help you get going with a simple design. Begin with the list of volunteers from the Conversation.

We at Chester County 2020 appreciate the opportunity to work with the boroughs on this landmark example of two boroughs planning for a cooperative future. We look forward to supporting the officials, planning commission and residents as they move forward with their well-considered choices.





Landscapes, Chester County's landmark comprehensive plan, is 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. Today *Landscapes* is experiencing its ten-year review by a highly diverse, multi-constituency steering committee. In addition to continuing support and concern for open space and farmland preservation other critical components are urban center revitalization, affordable homes infrastructure, transportation, and long-term environmental outcomes. Few municipalities have escaped the impact of the dramatic population increases. Between April 2000 and June 2006, more than 49,000 new residents arrived in the county, considerably ahead of projections and increasing the financial challenges for municipalities, the County, and school districts. Every county resident can keep track of the progress of the Planning Commission staff and steering committee by visiting www.Landscapes2.org