

Your Voice **Ohio:** **Vibrant** **Akron**

**Exploring how to
make Akron a thriving
community for all**

October 1, 2018



A lot has changed about Ohio's economy over the last 20 years. There are nearly 152,000 fewer jobs, there's a lower average household income and higher student debt, and the state is falling behind in education. For the first time in at least a half century, Ohio did not recover from one recession before it entered the next recession. Complicating matters, the correlation between economic struggle and the addiction crisis, which is claiming lives and sucking financial vibrancy from families, communities and the state, has become clear.

But many people don't need to read these statements to tell them what's going on. We see it in our neighborhoods, from vacant blocks to payday lenders to shuttered factories.

It's true residents in Akron are seeing a lower unemployment rate compared to the rest of the state, likely due to the addition of thousands of local jobs since 2010. The city also draws people because of the University of Akron, its proximity to Cleveland, its role as a manufacturing hub, and as the headquarters of large companies including FirstEnergy.

However, as manufacturing faces challenges such as skills gaps and addiction, and large companies consolidate and move elsewhere, many Akron citizens see room for improvement. This includes the need to strengthen community connections, install a better public transit system, and support local businesses. To take a look at what's working in the city and how citizens can thrive in the face of these challenges, local journalists joined together to host the community event, Your Voice Ohio: Vibrant Akron.

On Monday, October 1, 2018, a few dozen Akron residents met with members of the media to explore what Akron would like it if it was thriving for everyone in the community.

The word "economy" can be intimidating to many because it means different things, including jobs, the overall economy, debt, poverty, income inequality, trade, and perhaps even the cost of health care. This can make it difficult for community members to easily find and provide information about what they're experiencing.

Our goal, through these community conversations, is to put people at the center of local reporting. Our collaborative aims to supply people with the information and resources they need to create smart, shared, and sustainable solutions to the struggles facing folks across Ohio.

EVENT SUMMARY

On October 1, 2018, community members gathered at Guy's Party Center ballroom in Akron, and over the course of 2 hours, discussed their experiences and identified local economic solutions.

We asked these four questions to prompt the discussion:

- 1. What would Akron look like if it was thriving for everyone in the community?**
- 2. What's one thing you would improve or change in Akron to make it more vibrant?**
- 3. What assets, resources, and strengths exist in Akron?**
- 4. What actions might we take to make Akron more vibrant?**

The conversation generated important questions for the local media to explore. In the following pages, you'll find stories and ideas shared by participants during the event.



RESPONSES

WHAT WOULD AKRON LOOK LIKE IF IT WAS THRIVING FOR EVERYONE IN THE COMMUNITY?

- » Earning enough income for necessities and leisure and giving
- » Celebration of Akron's cultural diversity (i.e. refugees often resettled here, black, white, latinx)
- » Variety of strong local businesses not afraid will shut down soon
- » Public spaces and time for majority of citizens to deliberate and make decisions together
- » People able to be physically engaged throughout the year (i.e. dance, hiking, b-ball, and other sports)
- » Diversification of NE Ohio economy (beyond healthcare, higher education)
- » More inclusive/welcoming community with immigrants, with the help of the government
- » Thinking more about sustainability and conversationism with the wildlife (specifically Stow/deer)
- » Government that empowers people
- » Teaching community about resources to economic development, such as e-commerce
- » Include more community with universities
- » Return of manufacturing jobs with wages that would attract a growing workforce
- » Improved infrastructure - airport
- » Solve the Medicare/Medicaid situation before it becomes a financial crisis
- » Make the regional economy less dependent on government, health care and education sectors
- » Beautiful neighborhoods (clean and happy)
- » Everyone has a living wage job
- » Minimal crime
- » Safe streets
- » Open and safe
- » Lots of parks
- » Smooth roads
- » No boarded up homes
- » Bike lanes with cars that respect them
- » I think that there would be better housing, job opportunities, and the city would be driving more people in providing better funding to continue improving roads, infrastructure, etc.
- » Less closed businesses and vacant homes, malls
- » More local business for local jobs

- » Happy yappy dogs
- » Lighted walkable streets
- » Safe schools, parks, and libraries
- » Crime would be less prevalent
- » People would be happier/more tolerant
- » Existing residents would not be looking for a way to leave Akron
- » Outsiders would be looking to move to Akron
- » Akron would be the center of a larger metro Cleveland (i.e. metro Louisville, metro Nashville, metro Atlanta)
- » No potholes in streets
- » More progressive
- » Maybe a high speed train to Cleveland, Columbus, and other cities in state
- » High school and college grads would stay in area after graduation
- » Companies would stay/move into area
- » Area has good transportation: highways, interstates, turnpikes, freeways
- » Business and community organizations grow; profits stay local; people feel connection to companies and other organizations, and vice versa
- » Akron would be one of the most prosperous cities in Ohio. The city has the potential to be as grand as Cleveland and Columbus
- » Housing rehab to cut down on homelessness
- » Improved streets, less disruption while improvements are made
- » More public service announcements to promote existing opportunities that do exist (Lock 3, Lock 4, Civic)
- » Real public debate on issues at City Council
- » No homeless on the street corners
- » A busy bustling downtown
- » Community parks used by youth and elderly
- » A feeling of safety in your neighborhoods
- » Expanding businesses and job opportunities
- » City provide housing / job training
- » Clean
- » Pride in who we are
- » Engaged families - care
- » Fun in all
- » Second Home Village
- » More good news than bad

- » Government get along - City Council, set example
- » Stop the hate and mudslinging
- » People can afford a home
- » [Indecipherable] in schools and quality education
- » Lower crime
- » Economy
- » Homes
- » Literacy
- » Full employment/retirement
- » Strong stores
- » Support for businesses
- » Walkable neighborhoods with access to public transit, ie streetcars
- » Diverse: not segregated, mixed neighborhoods, black/white, gay/straight
- » Good public schools
- » Clean air, water
- » Smaller income divide
- » Mix of homes and businesses (not separate)
- » Storefronts full
- » Rail transit system
- » Lower crime, homes kept up
- » More bike laws
- » Swans in the Canal
- » No homelessness/enough housing
- » 100% literacy
- » Full employment/ability to retire when you want
- » Support for starting a business, e.g. healthcare, skilled workers
- » No food deserts, everyone can walk to a grocery store
- » No vacancies in core business districts/on Main Streets
- » You would have good paying jobs that support the community and the businesses so everyone succeeds. It all boils down to the economy. When you automate all those jobs, what happens to the displaced workers
- » Reduced crime
- » No need for tent city for homeless
- » Resources reallocated away from social needs to quality of life development

- » Abundant opportunities for all avenues of work
- » Desire to support growth/innovation
- » Harmony in the neighborhoods: folks use conflict transformation skills to recreate their experiences; restorative justice is part of the social fabric
- » Community centers are much more developed for across the lifespan
- » Lots of colorful gardens, bikes, trees; safe, happy, healthy parks for children and families
- » Rental housing and owner-occupied, or even unoccupied housing, would be maintained/painted/etc
- » Community resources are available to all -- there are no access issues
- » More diverse workplaces
- » Influx of new citizens and businesses
- » Build up forgotten neighborhoods
- » Better streets
- » Rising middle class
- » Population growth
- » Vibrant nightlife
- » Great parks and sidewalks everywhere
- » In demand school programs
- » Various entertainment options -- sports, music, theatre (watching and participating)
- » Fuller, greener, younger, healthier, fresher
- » It would have active retirees doing community service.
- » Someone would have creative neighborhood projects/focus programs
- » Personal transit will evolve to new modalities



WHAT'S ONE THING YOU WOULD IMPROVE OR CHANGE IN AKRON TO MAKE IT MORE VIBRANT?

Individuals wrote...

- » Akron U has dropped programs and left students with no way to finish
- » Advertise the city or Akron U. They are not well-represented
- » Economy development of the area. Creating a work team with the community to achieve this.
- » Friendly community, avoiding violence, feeling more identified with the community.
- » Public transportation
- » More activities to get to know more people
- » Business open later (etc. malls)
- » Public transportation/bike trails
- » Region-wide committee on economic development with monthly public meetings (5 county? 17 county?)
- » Redraw congressional districts
- » Look for common goals that serve as rallying points to bring the area's diverse backgrounds/economic situations together.
- » Train service
- » Public transportation
- » Economic development
- » Advertise resources - what's here
- » Teaming local businesses with business students
- » Transportation
- » Let people know about, and make more options, for restaurants and entertainment
- » Transportation to bring sprawl back into city
- » Advertise the colleges
- » Support business incubators
- » Promote/pair retirees with people who want to take over
- » Ease of getting around - into City/out of City (like Washington DC Rapid Transit)
- » Education - trade schools (community college vs college)
- » Improved streets and prosperous buildings
- » Advertising
- » More jobs opportunities/counseling here so graduates stay
- » Free public transportation
- » Partnership between the businesses and university

- » Regional chamber of development
- » Increased public transportation
- » Improve of advertising of Akron
- » Supporting local business with college students
- » Shops and restaurants in downtown
- » Community gatherings - trained support for problems in a community
- » More high wage jobs
- » Better zoning enforcement
- » Better Ohio Condo law/homeowner associations law → mandatory financial statements to owners
- » Quality in education/all we do
- » Economy
- » Trust in leaders - business/elected set example
- » Public transportation: walkable streets, bring back the street car
- » Clean air and water
- » Zoning separation of homes/business/apartments
- » Income inequality
- » How do we get high-paying jobs back? Or do they still exist, we're just spending too much money on education/healthcare/housing? How do we keep people from leaving?
- » Lose the provincialism
- » Appreciate our neighbors: Canton, Youngstown, Cleveland, Lorain/Sandusky, Mansfield
- » We need to have our infrastructure improved (roads, bridges, underground utilities)
- » Mass transit needs to be better and get to all places
- » Roads/access/ease of getting around
- » Cooperation and collaboration among communities
- » Diverse communities
- » Improve overall education (cradle to career), whole child support, connections to jobs
- » Improve neighborhood resources, shops, restaurants, transport to commercial areas
- » Downtown stores and shops
- » Better use of John S Knight Center
- » Downtown arena
- » Diverse cost effective restaurants
- » More food trucks
- » Recognize Columbus/Franklin County simplicity in not having many municipalities

- » Consolidate municipal entities
- » Improved housing options
- » Neighborhood development
- » Greater support for entrepreneurs
- » Link transportation to larger cities, ie Cleveland, Toledo
- » Companies - greater involvement with education
- » Communicate how connected Akron is to the region
- » More to do/more places to eat in downtown
- » Better entertainment, bar scene, restaurants
- » Transportation
- » Political diversity
- » More stakeholders (homeowners, business owners)
- » Welcome newcomers (Nepali, Asian refugee community)
- » Increase local university collaboration with surrounding communities
- » Increase strong, sustained support of local entrepreneurs and diversification of the economy (beyond healthcare and higher education)
- » Region-wide collaboration (i.e. committee) on economic development
- » Increase public transport (extensive, connected system)
- » More entertainment districts
- » Safer neighborhoods
- » Groups like this, but with true diversity → with folks who normally don't participate to strengthen and broaden community perspective
- » Residents to work together on local neighborhood issues with trained facilitator and ongoing support
- » Even more community gardens and parks
- » Clean and safe streets

Large group responses...

- » Regional planning by a diverse group – not just business people
- » Need comprehensive transportation to connect
- » Need to market what is happening – bring awareness
- » Support local business with university help
- » Shops, restaurants –need more options downtown
- » Sprawl
- » People – more participation, community gatherings, facilitated conversations

Community issues prioritized by votes:

- 14** Build community connections
- 12** Transportation system
- 10** Market/advertise what's happening here
- 9** Regional planning by diverse public group
- 8** Support local business
- 2** More shops and restaurants
- 1** Address sprawl



WHAT ASSETS, RESOURCES, AND STRENGTHS EXIST IN AKRON?

Individuals wrote...

- » Public transit
- » Parks
- » Availability of land
- » Strong region
- » Good colleges
- » Money, foundations
- » Input structure
- » Non-profit organizations
- » Close to Cleveland
- » Empty buildings
- » University of Akron
- » Library system
- » Fortune 100 companies
- » Common interests (sports teams)
- » Well funded public transportation system
- » Park system
- » Mild climate
- » Northeast Ohio sensibilities
- » People: Talented, energetic, caring
- » Institutions: universities, organizations with strong histories
- » Supportive foundations
- » Neighborhoods that people love
- » Cultural assets -- parks
- » Space -- affordable
- » Self reflection
- » Metro parks and Cuyahoga Valley NP
- » Diverse community
- » Univ of Akron
- » Great neighborhoods
- » Downtown library

- » Cost of living
- » Rubber Ducks
- » Big family networks
- » Parks and the outdoors
- » Low cost of living
- » Universities, but.....
- » Huge arts/music scene if you can find it
- » Low cost of living
- » 2 universities can pull for workforce
- » A lot of vacant buildings to draw companies to relocate to
- » Hospital hub (visitors to go in downtown)
- » Professional baseball team
- » Have funding (grants and taxes)
- » Vested interest in the community
- » Trustworthy leadership
- » Diverse neighborhoods, grassroots bottoms-up group
- » Levels of participation
- » Facilitation
- » YSU for business, KSU for art, UA for chemical engineering, CSU for education, NEOMED and CWRU for medicine
- » Can reach out to our neighbors: Akron, Canton, Youngstown, Cleveland, Lorain/Sandusky, Mansfield
- » Universities
- » Wildlife and natural resources
- » Tourist sites
- » Seasons
- » Location
- » Low prices
- » Public transportation
- » Parks
- » Available land -- urban and rural
- » Strong region
- » Good colleges
- » Medicine
- » Basic infrastructure

- » Higher education
- » Non-profits, foundations
- » Money
- » Location
- » Weather
- » Parks, scenic
- » Empty buildings to fill
- » Strong region, 4 million people from Mansfield to Lorain to Youngstown
- » Beautiful parks
- » Available land urban and rural
- » Public transportation -- we have the infrastructure
- » Ohio has good highways to Pittsburgh, Columbus, New York, Boston, Baltimore, Detroit
- » Educated people
- » Good work ethic
- » Beautiful
- » UA, KSU, Stark State
- » Hospital systems
- » Foundations
- » Artists and arts, parks, towpath
- » Can buy a home, inexpensive to raise a family
- » Public transportation is about getting work done, not driving
- » If you try intercity transportation, lots of cities nearby. Not Chicago to Pitt, or Cleveland-Akron-Pitt
- » Local communities
- » Sports
- » Arts
- » Colleges
- » Cuyahoga Valley National Park
- » Location
- » Hospital systems
- » Foundation, non-profits
- » Downtown -- low cost of living, history
- » Zoo
- » Education

- » Location
- » Water
- » Medical expertise
- » Low-cost housing
- » Diverse population
- » Parks
- » Foundations
- » Art
- » Local government resources
- » Colleges
- » Towpath and parks
- » Low cost housing
- » Schools/universities
- » Cool history
- » Distance to Cleveland
- » Cuyahoga Valley National Park
- » Higher education institutions (especially public)
- » Diverse population (Black, white, Latino, refugees, international)
- » Public green spaces
- » Entrepreneurs
- » Music
- » Young people who care/all ages of people who care
- » The Devil Strip
- » Assistance for what is necessary
- » More international because of schools
- » Horse equestrian classes
- » Parks
- » Entertainment venues/vibrant music and arts scene
- » Krispy Kreme
- » University
- » Lock 3 Park
- » Paths for walking and biking
- » Infrastructure -- library system, community learning centers/schools

- » Many churches
- » Diversity -- background/experience/perspective
- » Stan Hywett Hall
- » Library
- » 3-season climate
- » Foundations -- Knight, GAR, LeBron
- » Economically affordable
- » Hospital system
- » Scenic railroad
- » Neighborhoods
- » Philanthropic: Knight, GAR, Akron Comm Foundation
- » Cultural assets -- music, zoo, towpath,
- » Geography, size
- » History
- » Universities
- » Corporate headquarters -- Goodyear, GoJo, Signet
- » Akron U: Engineering, polymer science
- » Akron public schools
- » UA
- » Civic, EJ Thomas and Blossom venues
- » Immigrant population
- » Ballpark
- » Lock 3
- » Stark State College
- » Goodyear
- » Parks and walking trails
- » Natural resources -- parks, trails, CVNP
- » Library system
- » 2 major universities
- » Immigrants and transplants
- » Climate
- » Low housing costs
- » Metro parks

- » Portage Lakes
- » Scenic railroad
- » Growing downtown -- museum, UA, library
- » Low cost of housing
- » Foundations
- » Empty buildings
- » Schools
- » Transportation good
- » Parks/Towpath
- » Neighborhoods
- » Universities
- » Schools
- » Hospitals
- » Foundations
- » Workers and location and empty buildings with transportation capability and compactness
- » Parks, railroad, Portage Lakes
- » Downtown growing
- » Neighborhoods
- » We have great higher education, maybe we can use the student talent, faculty to help out to attract young people to the area
- » Need to become younger because we're becoming older
- » Empty buildings can be put to good use
- » Non-profit system
- » Metro (transit) is stronger than some folks believe, tax supported
- » Beacon Journal still a strong asset (lacking locally produced radio)

The large group prioritized...

- » Hospital systems – highly ranked
- » Metro parks
- » Education – higher education institutions, Kent, UA, Case, Cleveland
- » Public transportation – good foundation
- » Public schools
- » Non-profits and foundations
- » Location

- » Weather
- » Natural resources – lakes, canal
- » Infrastructure of downtown and neighborhoods
- » Available real estate
- » Cultural assets: Museum, civic theater, arts are accessible
- » Size: Compactness makes it easy to get around
- » Low cost of living
- » Immigrants/cultural diversity
- » Neighborhood pride



WHAT ACTIONS MIGHT WE TAKE TO MAKE AKRON MORE VIBRANT?

Build community connections

- » Many venues available
- » Organizations, conference rooms, many large buildings, community learning centers
- » Publicize events, issues in neighborhoods
- » Council persons – curb negativity in ward meetings, move to promote positive initiatives
- » Neighborhood liaisons as trained facilitators, help community prioritize, facilitate solutions and implementation
- » Other types of outreach other than meeting format, in parks, pot luck
- » Diversity: churches publicize, focus on issues like grocery stores

Transportation system

- » Connect to other cities – Cleveland, Cincinnati, Toledo
- » Connect to airports
- » Better public funding for transit, street cars, bike system; state and federal, private, Ohio is one of the worst states in nation for transit funding
- » Market existing transit services so people know they have choices; attract business with our existing system
- » Need rail system, bring back street car system, not on roads, train stations to reduce confusion, connect Cleveland, Toledo Cincinnati

Market/advertise what's happening here

- » Tap into universities for student input
- » A slogan for today – what do we have. No longer Rubber Capital
- » Market the stuff to do. The quality of life.
- » How do we let people know what we have?

Regional planning by diverse public group

- » Secure funding (grants, taxes, private dollars)
- » Define region -- cohesion of local cities and towns good, provincialism bad
- » Include delegates from all neighborhoods, from institutional leaders and vocationally linked institutions (higher ed, industry, medicine, financial)
- » Grassroots/bottom-up development
- » Conduct study, research first
- » Levels of citizen participation (core group, branch off to committees)

Support local business

- » Business scavenger hunt
- » Encourage students to get out and explore
- » Series of business seminars to help business thrive -- retail and wholesale
- » Promote community events in the media (cash mob)
- » Kiosk in downtown to advertise what there is to do in downtown
- » Incentives for people to open businesses in downtown instead of a mall
- » Market more of the First Friday events
- » Good quality local director
- » Local media set aside competition, create one site for everyone to find events



STATEMENT TO NEIGHBORS

At the end of the conversation, we asked participants to write down a statement they would want their neighbors to know about community vibrancy, to share with those that couldn't attend the event:

- Everything I hear is jobs - employment → income → housing security → spending → supporting others' jobs. How do we retain and create jobs? How do we ensure people have access to those traditional benefits (pensions, healthcare) in the 21st century?
- Akron is affordable and fun. It's a great place to live and make connections.
- Enjoy the Akron music scene. Become a leader in your neighborhood.
- How do we improve the jobs in the area so people want to relocate here to support the infrastructure and all the businesses
- There is more news to be heard in communities across the U.S that isn't BAD NEWS. Lets promote the good news for once.
- Ways to promote local business: cash mob, website, wayfinding signs
- The idea of creating a platform of events so that people know what is going on in the community.
- This was fun!
- Let's get together NE Ohio and make the most of our awesome region!
- Power of the people is stronger than we think. Together we can achieve great things.
- I want to help Akron and Summit County be a better place for my children and grandchildren.
- We need to think and act regionally, not locally.
- Keep thinking about ways to improve quality of life in region. Keep attending meetings and gatherings on this topic.
- Thank you for your focus on keeping ideas a doable size.
- I <3 Akron
- I was happy to hear everyone's insights and share how we can improve the community.
- It was enjoyable hearing all of your ideas to improve Akron. We need to pass these ideas to Jason Segedy.
- Help build a better community.
- People in Akron really care about Akron.

- Vibrancy starts with people. I think building a vibrant community starts with local neighborhoods and builds out. Local community gatherings, potlucks, meet-ups, gardens, clean-ups are the best ways to bring neighborhoods together so people can get to know one another, help each other, and love each other.
- A vibrant community is built upon its people. Let's support the diversity and energy of our neighborhood by engaging the people in activities that promote civic pride.
- I enjoy face to face interaction and conversation with others in and from my community.



PERSONAL ACTIONS

Using the discussion as a guide, here are the personal actions attendees will take to make Akron a more vibrant place for everyone in the community.

- There is a lot going on here, and a lot of it is good. Risk discomfort and go somewhere new, meet someone new, or have a conversation with a neighbor.
- Promote Akron, it's great
- I'll interview someone from Akron on my podcast.
- I will talk to young people to see what it will take for them to stay here
- Promote the local businesses
- I won't be taking any new action though I have more information to inform what I already do
- I will share what we have discussed with people I come in contact with to help move this along.
- Advocate for better funding for public transit.
- Text local friends and put on Facebook, re: Your Voice Ohio meetings this week
- Research more about the best assets of Akron. I learned today there's a lot of things that I didn't know about the area.
- I want to grow a large metro area. I want to grow large national university (NEOSU - 5 campuses)
- I will post on Facebook and Twitter positive news in my community.
- I will try to get two nonprofits I deal with to plan regional activity.
- Keep thinking about and pay attention to this process of improve life in Akron. Attend more civic meetings.
- Outline the boomer-millennial business transition idea.
- Support local businesses -- shop small for the holidays.
- I am going to speak to people I know about their thoughts on Akron's transportation system.
- Talk to Councilman about more positive meetings re: the neighborhood and if it is possible to have meetings to begin to build a more vibrant North Hill community.
- Maybe take a bus.
- I am going to think on the challenge of finding enough good facilitation.
- Research successful neighborhood initiatives in communities of this size.
- Encourage local leaders to make neighborhood meetings and group conversations a reality in 2019.

LOCAL MEDIA PARTNERS

Akron Beacon Journal/Ohio.com

AKRON BEACON JOURNAL
@OHIODOTCOM
BJNEWS@THEBEACONJOURNAL.COM

The Akron Beacon Journal is a morning newspaper in Akron, Ohio, and is distributed throughout Northeast Ohio.



WKSU
@WKSU
NEWS@WKSU.ORG

WKSU is a non-commercial educational radio station licensed to Kent, Ohio, primarily serving the Akron metro area, and is a service of Kent State University.

NEXT STEPS

Reporters across these organizations are dividing up the questions now and reporting answers back to the community.

For up-to-date information and reporting, visit:

YOURVOICEOHIO.ORG

@YOURVOICEOHIO

