

What's your future,

Athens?

November 21, 2019



Background

Across Ohio, Your Voice Ohio has been holding community conversations in partnership with local journalists to ask: *what will it take to make life better here?*

The conversation came to the Athens area on November 21, 2019, at Nelson Hall at Ohio University. Participating local newsrooms included the Athens News, Athens Messenger, Vinton-Jackson Courier, Meigs Independent Press, and WOUB. We partnered with the Ohio Debate Commission and Ohio University to host the event.

About 50 people came to discuss their hopes for the community, and think about how those hopes could be achieved. Over the course of the evening they considered three major questions:

- What does a community look like where people are happy and live fulfilled lives?
- What would you change about your community to move in the direction of happy and fulfilled lives?
- What are the assets of the community that can be applied to making change?

Attendees shared powerful stories of small-town poverty, where access to internet and cable can be hard to find. This can prevent many people from accessing news and personal services. One journalist described a nearby town that lost its laundromat, and residents who couldn't afford to buy their own washing machine often had to drive more than 20 minutes to wash their clothes. Other concerns included a lack of adequate resources, economic opportunities, affordable housing, access to education, and healthy food.

But people also celebrated individuals and organizations working hard to improve the community, including higher education, and discussed the natural beauty of the area.

When the conversation moved to actions that could be taken by leaders, people, and journalists to address those challenges and more fully recognize community assets, participants wanted to see:

- Personal mentoring
- Help for people to stay in and maintain their homes
- Increased broadband access
- Assistance for struggling villages
- A positive solutions-focused attitude
- Leadership giving voice to people

The meetings are designed and run by the state-wide news media collaborative Your Voice Ohio, which is listening to residents all over the state in order to better represent their concerns and solutions in the news and in democratic processes. Over 30 meetings with more than 1,000 people have been held in communities from Cincinnati to Youngstown and Lima to Marietta.

Ideas from these meetings will be used to shape local issue coverage ahead of the 2019 local and 2020 national elections, giving the community a voice in the democratic process.

Doug Oplinger, Your Voice Ohio

ASK YOUTH WHAT THEY WANT
 MAKE EXTRACURRICULAR ACTIVITIES MORE AVAILABLE (ACTIVITY BUS FEES)
 LOCATE COMMUNITY SCHOOLS
 TEACHERS / STUDENT CONNECTION
 COMMUNITY FRIENDS + NEIGHBORS -?
 MARKET
 COMMUNITY EVENTS
 WAYS TO PROMOTE COMMUNITY

Participants were asked to initially write their answer to a question, then discuss with their neighbors at a table conversation, and finally report back to the large group.

What would a community look like if everyone were able to be happy and live fulfilled lives?

- Green city, parks and benches; no-emission public transportation running frequently and widely; protected bike and pedestrian lanes/paths; playgrounds; local health care centers; local businesses thriving; strong social services and everyone guaranteed descent housing, health care, education, clean and green jobs are prevalent; financial support for everyone.
- Preventative medicine; less crime, safer cities; mental health care; we don't have to worry so hopelessly; sustainable, efficient living; equality – gender, race, class; affordable quality food, water, healthcare, education, living, utilities, sanitation; fair work.
- Tended streets, buildings, landscapes, homes, infrastructure; health, housing, education; not necessarily new, that's not necessary, but cared for, tended.
- Access to basic needs as well as wants; includes health care, education, money, housing, transportation, food security, etc.
- Employment: Full, diverse, remote, flexible; Social events: Arts, culture, recreational; Housing: Affordable, quality; Transportation options; community interactions; safe space.
- Equal access to resources – transportation, government services, amenities; accountability for interpersonal violence; Living wages for everyone; Rehabilitation for property crime, most crimes; no overcrowded jails, drug treatment; access to health care, affordable.
- People all have enough dollars to meet their needs; healthy, mental and physical; inclusion, respect, racial equity; sense of connection with others, interdependence, community
- It would look completely different; kids would have healthy meals; we would have jobs in our area; the community as a whole would look so much better, cleaner and healthier; local buy-in
- Opportunity for all; economic vitality; engagement-voice; healthcare access
- Everyone has enough; people participate in community
- Housing crisis ended; access to good quality clean food and water; fulfilling careers, not just “jobs,” healthcare affordability; equality between all people, fair treatment, unbiased justice system; human connection; good quality education; strong infrastructure
- Calm; unity among various communities (OU, Athens City, Athens County): vibrant small business in downtown Athens, Pomeroy and Nelsonville
- Included; employment opportunities for all; attentive to health including mental; good strong services – retail, so no one has to leave
- More inviting; more successful; more engaged; more community-oriented; more vibrant

What would a community look like if everyone were able to be happy and live fulfilled lives?

- Educational opportunities for local children that are balanced; job opportunities at many levels; small business support and promotion; maintenance of infrastructure and place to be proud to live in
- There would be cooperation, communication, creativity in the community
- Equal access; prevention services; opportunity (jobs, health, activities etc)
- There would be kindness, compassion, generosity and peace
- Safe and secure foundation of: Housing, food choices, medical care (mental and physical); solid infrastructure; opportunities to grow as individuals; share some general common bonds; integrated into a broader statewide/national community (urban rural divide); a vital downtown with stores.
- Fulfilling jobs that cover cost of living expenses; affordable education; affordable health care; no education loans; strong family units; safe environment for children; high speed internet; mental health care
- Human connection; basic needs met; shared goals; optimal health; shared purpose
- No food scarcity; jobs for all, even those on assistance; more vibrant business district from local; a sense of purpose and success for citizens
- Financial freedom; no food insecurity; steady living arrangements; secure/diverse jobs; financially equipped for emergencies
- Healthy, fit, strong, active, smiley, artsy, unique, diverse, “wealthy” or “not poor,” interested and interesting, in harmony with nature, at peace with others, “Ikigari”
- Good job making a living – fair wages; health care covered regardless of employment; save community w/no crime; no worrying about debt, retirement of future; problem of the media....
- Our community would see less acts relating to inequality and discrimination. I think that community members would be united. Economy would flourish, and rates of poverty would decrease. Everyone in good health. Relationships and marriage would be strengthened. Drug treatment; community driven by itself; housing, road security; health care; living wages; meaningful jobs; jobs in local businesses; green jobs; strong family units; save environment.
- The community would be accepting of all people. There would be enough good paying jobs so we would not have unemployment. No crimes or drugs in the community. Everyone would be willing to help another out if in need. The willingness to devote a small portion of time to help others.
- No poverty; better housing options; more jobs
- Better rental practices; end opioid addiction crisis; end poverty gap; equal opportunity education; jobs/training opportunities; college affordability; infrastructure; representative government in county and state.
- Wealth equality; better water infrastructure; upkept and affordable housing; full-time permanent jobs; transportation for jobs, health care, child care and pleasure; more drug intervention measures; engaged.
- Every voice has equal value/worth; has sufficient infrastructure; enough food, gas, vehicles, transportation; easy access to economic fulfillment; government treats all equal; feel included.
- Productive, creative, peaceful; projects would be completed/needs met; food insecurity alleviated.
- Affordable, equal housing!; less brain-drain; improved transportation; access to places like Columbus (light rail).
- Industry for skilled and unskilled; grocery/food access; clean water; quality health care; public schooling.
- People would have meaningful work; food security; community connections; resilience; leisure time; better health; more things that people need in communities; equal treatment by government; ikigari.
- A happy, fulfilled community would have the capacity to address the systemic, underlying policies and infrastructure to be able to resolve chronic challenges such as food insecurity, meaningful living wage jobs, mental health, social determinants of health.

What would a community look like if everyone were able to be happy and live fulfilled lives?

- Connectedness: Broadband, statewide transportation, diversity celebrated, intergenerational, inclusive; Thriving: positive social determinants of health, socio-economic equity closes gap between rich and poor; resilient: sustainability prioritized in economy, community and environment; Community-driven: home rule by and for the community, pride-based, engaged citizens on community assets.
- Needs would be met; stable, non-precarious housing; schools adequately funded to provide and meet the needs of all students; safe from family violence; pursuit of economic stability; need not take away from personal fulfillment; precarity removed.
- Safe spaces; walkable; vibrant uptown; community resources and venues; small business presence.
- More diverse; income equality; more local businesses; larger local population; more tourism; better infrastructure.
- Happy, peace of mind; strong sense of community; basic human needs are met: food, shelter, healthcare, transportation; there are no disposable people, everyone valued and respected; personal safety.



What would you change about your community so that all people could be happy and live fulfilled lives?

- People need \$\$\$\$; safe affordable housing stock; compassion from systems/agencies/govt for vulnerable
- We must be far less judgmental; we must be more engaged in the community; raise expectations for our elected officials; we must be responsible citizens; more compassionate; taxes are upside down, do it on purpose
- Higher tax base (university contributes more to tax base); enforce code violations; increase funding for...; greater town-gown relations
- Real challenge can come when people start seeing others as individuals, not strangers; higher tax base
- Jobs that pay living wages; health care that is regardless of employment
- More state funding to communities; better understanding; media improvement; literacy; better democratic involvement, voting, running; better representative government; school funding; code enforcement; OU-Athens relationship
- Cell phone ban, at least while driving; cleaner streets; opportunity for involvement/greater relationships; sense of community; transient population, not only students, creates less care
- Universal access to clean water, electricity, food, work and respect, also transportation and health care and housing; in Chauncey: Sidewalks, community garden, laundromat, diner
- Federal healthcare changes for all; state/local wage reform – minimum wage \$15?; transparency/accountability in local, state and fed govt; drug treatment funding – huge increase; transportation – public in all villages and cities; improve pedestrian/bike routes in city; school funding – state reform; education – sex ed, ?
- Everyone could have a coach that would help them get to the happy place; Design the community to be in harmony with nature and efficiently meeting the needs of the people; Everyone would have a purpose, value, worth and they are contributing to the whole. “Ikigai”
- Medical and health services available; better information infrastructure; jobs (sustainable and good wages); broader educational opportunities; affordable housing across the region; Hope for the community
- Work to create residential neighborhoods close to campus; small business financing in low rent buildings
- General agreement on goals or if lack of dissention; improve infrastructure; access for all; wage parity, educational parity, health parity
- Job creation in Athens County, poorest in state; Athens also suffers from college grads leaving due to lack of jobs; affordable housing; increased transportation for county residents
- Accept that what life means has changed from 1960; expand our ideas of what our community would look like and what we are capable of (Green new deal, transit); Invest in what counts – what will last us in the long run; change our moral compass and focus on what we can give our kids not take for ourselves
- Reduce poverty; share resources; create ways for folks to interact face-to-face; increase/tolerance support; put a new face on the word “Hillbilly:” create neighborhoods helping neighbor groups.
- Offer more jobs; support local business; divide between OU students-locals; more events/recreational activities
- Jobs, job access, well-paying jobs, fulfilling jobs, a new set of industry; Education: Job training, life skills, funding?: additional, accessible healthy grocery options as well as better, earlier health care for kids; sense of being heard and able to make change; Affordable, widespread transportation; less “all of our eggs are in one basket.”
- More access to food; more employment opportunities; TRANSPORTATION!; access to affordable healthcare; mental health services; mental health education; youth programming; rehabilitation services (access)
- Crime rates down/justice system; jobs; small business promotion; schooling system; ourselves; voting (kinda); access to healthcare; access to resources needed for health; walkways, passageways
- Transportation; address poverty; jobs; appearance
- More jobs with living wages; quality healthcare for all; food security; more affordable childcare; more community activities; improve schools
- Return to a culture based on community, something bigger than self; everyone has enough.
- Employment beyond OU; broadband in the county; stop brain-drain – higher ed and seniors.

- Healthcare reform; drug addiction stigma within direct healthcare settings; rehab reform; legal reform; increase job/education opportunities; lower cost of college; increase availability and affordability of food, housing, and transportation, food and homeless shelters; society needs to focus on support of mental and physical health as well as relationships and marriage
- Various systems of power – government, education etc; consensus from the people on what issues are the most pressing; people with the most things need to be willing to have less; more diversity, such as racial, gender, sexual orientation, SES, age, making decisions
- Connect people to available services; encourage local food business – accessible food; plan for housing population in mind; affordable transit
- Housing – need affordable; grocery; lower sewer bills; community events; less Facebook, more face to face; infrastructure (roads, sidewalks), feeling recognized by government – feel isolated from county authorities
- Make healthcare more accessible and affordable; change education and policing to be better at building safe, inclusive, respectful spaces and relationships for people of color and other groups; fewer slumlords –changes to housing; BROADBAND!; ecofriendly jobs
- Equal access to opportunity (jobs, transportation, activities, healthcare, etc); work together to solve cyclical and societal issues; more unified; willingness to understand other perspectives and respect (and stigma); meet people where they are/ empathy
- The hob-nobbing presence; employment for all; nepotism; stronger CTE opportunities and adult learners
- Wealth distribution – could be through tax code changes, could be through grants, loans, philanthropy, volunteering; change who practices these policies and leads changes
- More diverse economic environment; access to 21st century technology and connectivity; increased tolerances for differences; increased connectedness
- More recycling and community compost and gardening; increased community involvement and volunteer work; foreign languages taught at a young age; small businesses
- Open the mind and the heart, mindsets; education; empathy (without that trifecta it's useless)
- Education equality – less social segregation; business district for small business with parking; attention to housing in the community
- More dollars toward wrap-around social services; Locally-owned broadband internet; more village input and power; better infrastructure; more open data tracking; dollars toward education.
- Better public transportation and zero emission; accessible free health care; more pocket parks and public accessible gathering places; better food security; small community based schools; better social services; subsidies and incentives for affordable locally owned green jobs; energy efficient housing; support for biodiversity; safe pest control; single-use-plastic restrictions.
- Infrastructure: Sidewalks, water and sewer, broadband, other basic utilities; basic community services: grocers with healthy food, laundromats; personal and communal agency: to develop state of hope, to develop inspired motivated citizens; Tax incentives to support for home repairs; wraparound social services; Strengthen locally owned and operated businesses; Affordable child care; stop brain drain from young and old; living wages and more employment opportunities; affordable and safe housing; positive social determinant of health policies and practices; improved pre-k-12 public education – equitable funding and access to higher education; resilient and sustainable environmental policies and practices (transition toward renewables); increased public funding for public resources such as transportation that is statewide.
- Improve infrastructure; good government; enable living wages; affordable housing; available services; provide services; empathy
- Access to basic human needs: Food, shelter, community, services, incentives.
- What if Hocking/TriCounty students were transported by bus funded by Athens County Foundation to build or renovate commercial building in Glouster (but we've already tried that)
- Temporary tax incentives for business; equitable public education funding; infrastructure; re-institute home rule; automatic voter registration; increased public funding for public resources; bring back support for renewable energy

Problem Solving Sessions

After voting on the changes they thought most likely to move the community in the direction of a place where all can be fulfilled and happy, the top six changes were placed on separate tables. Participants migrated to the change of most interest, where they were asked to develop a list of possible actions, and to assign actions to leaders, people and journalists.

Improve economy, living wages, good employment, diversified industry – 15 votes

- Diversity economy; tourism; small manufacturing; improved broadband; solar companies; local government funding/state government change; local business incubators; low cost of living; living wages; improved public transportation
- Leaders: funding – public for businesses; community improvement; local bank; educate local leaders
- People: support leaders, buy local
- Journalists: Highlight businesses, highlight positive changes

More funding resources to implement ideas – 14 votes

- Leaders: More communication among leaders at all levels; priorities need shifted
- People: Elect leaders who represent interests, fight brain-drain; create incentives to include voices often unheard
- Journalists: Remind public of incubation success stories; *Distribute concrete action items

Affordable and safe housing – 10 votes

- Cost of Athens city utilities; rent control; income limited; transparency; senior housing – universal design; co-housing, building conversions, dignity of owner.
- Structural safety: Code enforcement in Athens; code changes; connect homeowners with resources to help them fix problems rather than impose fines or seize property.
- Affordable: rent control; income limits/low-income housing; transparency in costs and income limits/co-housing; maintain dignity of owner

Attitudes: change moral compass; too judgmental; build capacity; positive self identity (positive spin on hillbilly) less stigma – 9 votes

- Leaders: Claim power; set example (compassion, understanding, listen, be in community): women run for office; acknowledge problems and challenges
- People: Fear of change; connect community; talk to one another; teach languages at elementary level to foster learning; collaboration – acceptance – fostering cross-cultural dialogue; mentors/partners; builds into schools; food brings people together; opportunities to interact in county
- Media: Promote events; opportunity not negativity

Infrastructure – 9 votes

- Looks like a place where people take care; Tax incentives and abatements
- Leaders: Tax incentives/abatements; assist small villages; prioritize outside the city
- People: Get involved; voice needs to government at county level
- Media: (No suggestions)

Build community: Among youth, social connection opportunities, coaching/mentoring – 6 votes

- Ask youth what they want, make extra-curricular activities more available, activity bus fees; teachers-student connection advocate for community schools; Athens friends and neighbors, farmers market, community events; resources to promote community events; regular community meetings.
- Leaders: Promote community dialogue
- People: Clubs and organizations create events supporting/guiding youth
- Journalists: Community calendar, positive reporting, solutions-based reporting

Justice reform and rehabilitation – 4 votes

Equity access to services – 4 votes

Broadband internet access – 4 votes

Broader educational opportunities for all, throughout life – 0 votes

Affordable childcare – 0 votes

What one action do you want to take after participating in this conversation?

- Inspire others to engage in the community to make a difference by starting a conversation
- I am going to try to attend more events such as this. (Also next time try to host off campus. OU is very hard to get to/get around).
- Remember all the good things in our community.
- Talk with people.
- Look into tax incentives for developers to build structures for businesses in villages.
- Make more effort to go to a community event outside of Athens (outside my comfort zone).
- Local support for solutions journalism
- Commit to talking with those I don't know.
- I will broaden my reporting on infrastructure issues, connecting local issues to state-wide solutions.
- Work to revitalize structures to support housing small business and facilitate economic progress.
- Get involved and make my elected official participate!
- I will continue to host conversations as we have been doing for 8 years!
- I will actively participate in/help assess "Community Table" discussions.
- Spend more time listening to people for the sake of listening.
- Try to start a community garden.
- Renewed support of local groups/businesses/ organizations.
- I will continue to look for opportunities and act on buying properties to make universal design.
- Strong organizations MAP
- Create a resource sharing group.
- As a journalist, I'd like to possibly host more meetings like this! I'm thinking of other ways to gather community input, too.
- Participate in a local organization, e.g. Rural Action.
- More of a conscious effort to support local businesses and create a closed financial loop within the community.
- Pre-existing plans (but possibly benefited by this event): Spring volunteer work at Timothy House Shelter. Attempt to bring community garden to Mill St.
- I will continue to fight poverty.
- Research more into tax incentives and why they do more harm than good.
- I will get to know my elected officials and express my pride, concerns, and wishes.
- Explore a community dinner that encourages conversations about ideas and changing ideas.
- Be less judgmental.
- Judge less and be more understanding.
- Be a mentor to another person.
- Will document stories of poverty.
- Attend more community events, and listen to people's concerns.



Questions for Elected Officials (Local, State, or National)

- How can citizens better support our leaders?
- How do you best try to represent all in your district/area?
- What steps are you taking to provide affordable housing? Affordable for the entire county, not just students and city residents!
- How do you plan to increase the economic security of your constituents?
- Safer communities means less distractions – When will there be an Ohio driving cell phone ban?
- Can you find Athens Co. on a map of Ohio?
- What are you doing to promote healthy, actionable ideas?
- Can you help put a reasonable cap on rent prices in Athens, Ohio?
- Why does Steve Stivers hate Athens?
- Every elected official has support from a majority of voters – How will you help those who didn't vote for you?
- How poor do people have to get before you will care?
- (National) What actions/plans do you have to support rural communities?
- (State) How will you work to empower smaller municipalities?
- What do you plan to do moving forward to address tensions between the police and people of color?
- (For state legislators) Why do you continue to support unconstitutional abortion bans, knowing you'll waste taxpayer money defending it in court (and lose)?
- How do you plan specifically to fix poverty rates in Southeastern Ohio?
- How do you plan to help the children in this community get a better education?
- How will you support local businesses?
- We don't bite – come listen to us.
- Why can't resources be more proportional?
- Why aren't the commissioners supporting economic development in Glouster? (other than the land bank)
- Why is broadband so difficult?
- Funding???
- What ways are you working to build/amplify access to pre-existing resources?
- How can small villages get you to treat them with respect with priority to use county funds outside of Athens city? Less bike paths & lanes – better streets/sidewalks, etc. in Glouster, Coolville, Chauncey?
- What are you doing to combat generational poverty?
- What are you going to do to help these poor communities?
- How can the state better support local jurisdictions' ability to fix and maintain its infrastructure?
- How do you listen better?
- Why do we keep supporting horrific abortion legislation in Ohio? (Please stop.)
- More benches!
- How will you address the disparities created by the property tax based school funding system?
- Could you please help us retain the beauty and health of our county?

FOR MORE INFORMATION

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Participating Newsrooms



MEIGS
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Participating Organizations

