Build Small Live Large Community Engagement Report

By Daimon Sweeney

On April 14, 2018, the Happy Valley Neighborhood Association (HVNA) hosted its second annual neighborhood event, this time called Build Small Live Large. Both this and the previous year's event were funded by the Whatcom Community Foundation's Neighborly program. Sustainable Connections was the sponsoring organization and provided publicity and volunteers, and many others provided support in many ways.

Approximately 100 people attended a morning of presentations. They watched a short video made for the event on the benefits of living in smaller homes in community, then heard presentations on topics related to housing policy, housing options, building design, the local housing market and the Bellingham Infill Toolkit.

After lunch approximately 50 people engaged in a community engagement process of collective intelligence (the subject of this report) around the question, **"What is something that would make your neighborhood more ideal?"**

Note: A short video of the event can be viewed at http://www.HappyValleyNA.org

Participants came from many Bellingham neighborhoods, and from as far as Ferndale. Because we particularly wanted to know what Happy Valley residents thought, while having everyone participate, we asked everyone to write their neighborhood on their nametag and to note that on the sticky notes with their answers, allowing us to sort the responses by "Happy Valley" and "Other Neighbors."

Participants formed groups of five. They were instructed in a specific process of asking each other a set of three questions, three times around the group. The questions were on paper so they would not morph in the process. The answers to the first question were written on sticky notes, then organized with Happy Valley responses on one window and "Other Neighbors" responses on another window.

The questions were:

- What is something that would make your neighborhood more ideal?
- How would that be meaningful for you?
- What would that do for others?

After the notes were posted, each person had five adhesive dots to apply to notes they liked, with no other rules. All five could be applied to one note if desired. The dots give a general indication of sentiment. In some cases identical notes garnered dots and those are grouped in the report below.

Happy Valley residents and "Other Neighbors" (everyone else) organized their responses, grouping the ones that seemed to belong together.

We then named the Happy Valley groupings or themes and final step was to identify the aspirational values behind each theme.

With only 90 minutes in total, we were able to complete this process only for the Happy Valley responses. The "Other Neighbors" responses are included below, grouped as if they fell into the same categories as the Happy Valley themes.

The themes and aspirational values we found for Happy Valley are as follows:

Aspirational Value	Theme (# of dots, # of responses in the category)
Homes for Everyone	Diverse Housing Options (30, 8 responses)
Neighborhood Self Sufficiency	Neighborhood Businesses (21, 8 responses)
Ecological Services & Responsibility	Trees Wildlife Agriculture (10, 6 responses)
Sense of Belonging	Gathering Places (10, 6 responses)
Social & Cultural Richness	Diversity (9, 5 responses)
Restructuring Right of Way Priorities	Pedestrian/Bike-friendly Streets (6, 5 resp)
Environmental Responsibility	Sustainable Buildings and Energy (5, 4 resp)
See Appendix for full detail on all input	

"Other Neighbor" Responses (# of dots, # of responses)
Diverse Housing Options (56, 17 responses)
Neighborhood Businesses (19, 21 responses)
Trees Wildlife Agriculture (9, 9 responses)
Gathering Places (15, 15 responses)
Pedestrian & Bike-friendly Streets (20, 18 responses)

How this report can be used

This report is a snapshot in time what was on the hearts and minds of a particular group of people. A more consequential use is also possible, one that can influence neighborhood policy. How so?

"What is something that would make your neighborhood more ideal?" is a question that opens the way to identifying the underlying values of each neighborhood.

As identified values are validated through time and with more participation, they can be translated ongoing questions about how to embody them, and then move into projects and policy.

Used in this way, questions lead to identifying shared values, then to community cohesion around those values. Questions about how to embody shared values lead to projects and policies. Supported by community cohesion, these shape reality.

Applying the Question-Based Approach

The event detailed in this report is one way to identify shared values, an early phase of the question-based approach.

In this section I will describe the larger approach and how it could be used by not only a neighborhood but any non profit, government or for-profit organization. They are all run by people and people operate by certain principles.

In the question-based approach there is a Vision at the top. What is the ultimate desired outcome? Under that is a Mission Question rather than a Mission Statement.

Why does this matter? It matters because Mission Questions are open ended and invite evolution. Mission Questions that embody core values are inspiring, invite engagement and are the starting point for ongoing examination of how things are working now and how they could work better.

On the other hand, Mission Statements are often experienced as closed, as a statement of fact. They may actually be in conflict with reality, and being framed as a statement, they do not directly invite engagement

Translating a Mission Statement into inspired action, which is the intent, involves the extra step of each person reframing it as a question, in the form of, "How do we do that?" It is often not obvious that people are supposed to do that, and when they do there is no built-in consistency or method.

A Mission Question builds in this often-missing step. Questions are alive in the moment, taking in the current reality. There is a sense of aliveness, connection, and personal and group responsibility.

In an organization built around a Mission Question it can be present, explicitly and implicitly, at all times. Everyone is asking themselves the same question consistently, which allows it to sink in.

When you ask questions you get answers, and asking at this deep level brings forth a stream of ideas, perhaps unexpected and surprisingly effective ones.

For example: How can we make this neighborhood more ideal?
As a Mission Question, this directs attention to the search for the best ways to move the neighborhood toward its vision of being ideal. What "ideal" means is identified in the sub-questions, each embodying an identified value.

For Happy Valley, based on the aspirational values identified, the sub-questions can be:
- How can everyone have a home?
- How can we promote neighborhood self-sufficiency, and what does that mean exactly?
- How can we maximize ecological services and responsibility, and how do we define those?
- How can we support a greater sense of belonging in the community, and how can we measure that?
- How can we maximize social and cultural richness, and how can we know if we are making progress?
- How can we prioritize right of way issues to encourage safe use by pedestrians and bikes?

With values-based sub-questions articulated, the next step is to define the terms used, then search for answers. That search includes finding out what others have done and generating ideas from the community, starting with the ones already gathered.

As promising ideas are identified, through analysis, test projects or both, they can become working answers. As they prove themselves they can potentially evolve into projects and policy, thus guiding decisions and investments.

No matter how established a particular working answer becomes, it remains a working answer, subject to change when something better is found, perhaps because it worked and things have moved on.

This ability of the system to evolve remains active only if the question remains predominant rather than the answer becoming a stuck status quo.

This evolving, responsive nature is what distinguishes a question-based approach from an answer-based approach, which essentially says, "This is how we do it."

Status quo, answer-based approaches tend to generate adversarial positions because proposals for change are seen by defenders of the status quo as attacks, rather than as potentially better answers to a Mission Question, to be evaluated and accepted or not.

Then in turn, proponents of change take positions and the battle is on.

The question-based approach turns this dynamic on its head. Shared questions produce collaborators. They may have different ideas about the best way to proceed, but those can be compared on their merits.

In the question-based approach, questions remain stable and the working answers evolve, rather than a set of answers becoming stable and resisting change, despite changes in the social, economic, political or physical environment.

As change happens, which is the only sure expectation, the Mission Question and subquestions can be assessed and can themselves evolve. In this way the aspirational values of the community, embodied in the Mission Question and the subquestions, continually shape the developmental path of the neighborhood.

> This model can be applied to businesses, nonprofits, governing bodies of all kinds, and to essentially every organization. Each exists in response to a vision, need or possibility. Each has a core or guiding question that may be conscious and articulated at the beginning, in the form of, "How can we do this thing?"

> Possibilities are examined, some are chosen, and a set of routines or accepted answers develops. The organization becomes established. Often the set of routines solidifies into a vested status quo, difficult to change even under great need.

> If not deliberately examined and updated, the vested status quo becomes increasingly less adapted to reality, perhaps to the point of being dysfunctional. This is how large organizations fail.

> The question-based approach builds in the necessary self-awareness, questioning, pro-active exploration, testing, and organizational evolution needed to adapt and thrive in changing environments.

Collaboration or Adversarialism?

As mentioned above, questions invite engagement while answers (including proposals) invite opposition. With an answer you must either agree or disagree, which sets up an adversarial situation.

When a topic is approached as a question, everyone interested can engage. More and better possible answers are likely to emerge, simply because all of us are smarter than any of us.

In this collaborative approach subtle issues and consequences are more likely to be identified,

considered, and addressed in advance. Creative possibilities to move toward desired outcomes may emerge. In the end, the solutions arrived at are likely to be more thoroughly considered from all sides, making them better solutions with more support.

When people are heard, when their input is considered and their values acknowledged, then if they respect the process, they are more likely to support the outcome or at least not oppose it.

As differences inevitably arise, if they are reframed as questions, the search for the best answers turns potential adversaries into collaborators.

Summary: A question-based approach can be the basis of ongoing constructive movement, engaging a community or an organization toward accomplishing a series of aims that increasingly satisfy its shared aspirations.

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APPENDIX - Summary of All Results

Happy Valley Detailed Results

The format is
# of dots for the category Aspirational Value
  Category Name
# of dots for the specific topic The words on the sticky note

(Some numbers are cumulative for essentially identical notes.
Not all notes had dots. Those have no number. Even so, one person had it as their answer.)

30 Homes for Everyone
  Diverse Housing Options
14 Smaller lots allows smaller houses
9   6 Communal housing
     3 Communal Housing
5 More affordable housing through partnerships
2 Home ownership
Third nonprofit development model
Higher value use of existing land
Continuity with historic diversity & eclectic character

21 Neighborhood Self Sufficiency
  Neighborhood Businesses
7 More businesses (mixed use)
8   6 More community commercial services and gathering places
     2 More small businesses (so you don't have [to] leave)
2 Community Farmer's Market
2 Repurpose the convenient [convenience] store at 21st & Harris
2 Affordable storage
Diner
Pub

10 Ecological Services & Responsibility
  Trees Wildlife Agriculture
4 Zone for perm. Agriculture
2 Small (pocket) parks/garden place
1 More fruit trees!
1 More tree canopy
1 More wildlife, birds & mammals
Connectivity for animals

10 Sense of Belonging
Gathering Places
4 More gathering places in the community

2 Community center
2 Structural intergenerational activities
1 Shared resources lending tools library
1 Larrabee school (presumably return to being a public school - "kids could walk to school")
Latte carts - gathering places

9 Social & Cultural Richness
       Diversity
9   4 More diversity
        2 Diversity in community
        2 Greater diversity
        1 More diversity
        More diversity

6 Restructuring Right of Way Priorities
       Pedestrian & Bike-friendly Streets
3 Increase in bike paths
       Bike paths (more)
1 More walking & biking
1 Streetlights! (safer for pedestrians)
1 Better rules for on-street parking - open travel lane

5 Environmental Responsibility
       Sustainable Buildings and Energy
4 Increased prod. of solar energy
Grants for energy efficiency & skylights
More steel framing, less wood
Community emergency planning

4 Environmental Education, Stewardship & Health
       Connection to Nature
4 Better trails from Mill Street to Nature Area
Greenways (I was told the "clean coal" on this note was a joke)

OTHER NEIGHBORS

Because we did not have time to go through the group organization process for the "Other Neighbors" I put them into the categories we found for the Happy Valley notes, and/or the aspirational values as they seemed relevant. They generally fit quite well, with fewer categories needed, actually. If we had had time for the whole process, of course, the results might look different.
I have included the neighborhood of the person responsible for the original note.

#1 Diverse Housing Options

12 Rent control (Fairhaven)

8 Greater variety of housing, affordability, diversity (Fairhaven)

5 Affordable housing for retired

5 More homes including people who are excluded, more diverse, vibrant community (Fairhaven)

6 More diversity in housing types/size (more home-sharing, fewer empty bedrooms) (Fairhaven)

4 Incentives for smaller footprints (Fairhaven)

2 Diversity, ethnicity, age (Fairhaven)

3 Allow neighborhood infill (Alabama)

3 More socio-economic diversity (Fairhaven)

2 Income diversity

2 All of my neighbors have homes (Lettered Streets)

1 Ensure elders can afford to live here (Fairhaven)

1 Density -> Urban villages (Ferndale)

1 Variety of home ownership opportunities (Ferndale)

1 Affordability of housing - space better utilized (Sudden Valley)

More affordable housing options (Silver Beach)

DADUs (Birchwood)

#2 **Neighborhood Businesses**

6 More & better services for homeless (Lettered Streets)

1 Coffee shop (Silver Beach)

2 A better convenience store in or near the community (Alabama)

2 Corner store/biz zoning (South Hill)

2 Community center (Lettered Streets)

1 Having a community center (Alabama)

2 Community gathering spaces in walkable distance (Puget)

1 + mixed use (Fairhaven)

1 Grocery store/food co-op (Sudden Valley)

1 Annex to city Yew St.

Affordable gym (Lettered Streets)

A new high school (Ferndale)

Coffee shop nearby (Other)

More services, community center (Sudden Valley)

Schools (Silver Beach)

Services provided in general (better development of plaza) (Sudden Valley)

Grocery store & small cafe (Puget)

More mixed use buildings (Fairhaven)

Adding care center to senior mobile home park (Lake Padden)

Shopping available in community (Lake Padden)

Having someone to mow my grass

#3 **Trees Wildlife Agriculture**

3 Preserve green spaces (Silver Beach)

2 Less pavement, more permeable

2 More community gardens (South Hill)

1 Paths through neighborhood for walkers to mix (South Hill)

1 More community gardens, social mixing (Fairhaven)
Source of locally grown food (Ferndale)
Gardens not grass (Puget)
Drier trails (more walkable year-round (Other)
Cleaning up pond so clear enough for boats (and Lake Padden) (Lake Padden)

#4 **Sense of Belonging**
Gathering Places
4 Less discrimination (Sudden Valley)
4 Regular neighborhood block parties (South Hill)
1 More opportunity to know neighbors (Sudden Valley)
1 More neighborhood events (South Hill)
1 More friendliness (South Hill)
1 Connections between different people in diverse housing types (Puget)
1 More respect for elders
1 Better treatment of co-owners of mobile park (Lake Padden)
1 Better communications about people's health (in 100 units) (Lake Padden)
More waves, less rage
More children (Lettered Streets)
Intertwining of a layered community (South Hill)
Community gathering area (Ferndale)
Public fiber (Internet)
Affirmation for volunteers who clean our park! (home) (Lake Padden)

#6 **Restructuring Right of Way Priorities**
Pedestrian & Bike-friendly Streets (+ Transit)
3 Protected bike access to shops (Puget)
2 Fewer cars and more bikes
2 Fewer cars (South Hill)
2 Sidewalks for connection and safety (Birchwood)
2 Frequent busses to Sudden Valley (Puget)
2 Better transit to downtown and to county
2 Neighborhood walking, school bus (Ferndale)
1 Sidewalks (Silver Beach)
1 Access to shopping by bicycle (Lake Padden)
1 More public transportation (South Hill)
1 Public transit (Fairhaven)
1 Extend sidewalks from school to Samish (Yew St)
Infill & near downtown to reduce traffic
More sidewalks (Other)
Sidewalks, wider streets (Sudden Valley)
More public transportation and access (Sudden Valley)
Punch buttons and have car come to my house for $3 (won't need car) (Lake Padden)
More public services, walk/bike, interaction (Sudden Valley)