

On November 30, 2023 a daylong community assessment was conducted where a cross-section of community leaders and residents shared their thoughts, feelings and aspirations about the Walkerville community. Julie Hales-Smith of North Coast Community Consultants conducted the assessment and produced a comprehensive report after collecting, summarizing and analyzing the community feedback. This document is a very brief summary of that report. The full report can be found on the Oceana Community Foundation website (oceanafoundation.org) under the IMPACT tab.

COMMUNITY FEEDBACK – Five focus groups and a town hall meeting were held throughout the day

Focus Group #1: High School Youth - Fifteen giggling, excitable yet engaged youth clustered around the table for this focus group. When asked about problems they had with the community first there were multiple eye rolls and then a range of answers – general community appearance; lack of things to do; no opportunity (no jobs); need for a grocery store and other retail; lack of decent, affordable housing; and how they felt their education was compromised by so many substitute teachers who were not credentialed. When asked about the strengths of the community, the discussion was not as robust. A few mentioned the school and other amenities – gas station, churches, post office – but it seemed a half-hearted attempt. However, when asked what they wanted to accomplish the tempo picked up. They truly want a better library that is bigger and staffed more regularly. Also, a restaurant, grocery store, and common area for community events.

Focus Group #2: Business Owners - Not surprisingly, a top concern for business owners was jobs and the workforce. Businesses looking for employees can't find them. This group emphasized the lack of decent, affordable rental housing in the area and/or housing in general. They explained that one reason the housing situation is abysmal is due to the limited public services and oversight. They suggested the Village "Explore zoning and rental unit regulations; not to stop development but to support development." As for strengths/assets of the community, they mentioned new capacity, including existing business owners who are realizing they want to be involved in building up the community, and also new capacity found in folks from the lakes – who might have been seasonal but now are putting down roots and working to become part of the community. They often bring a wealth of knowledge and experience. When asked what they want to accomplish, affordable housing topped the list along with improving the infrastructure situation and developing a community center – someplace to bring the community together.

Focus Group #3: Elected/Appointed Officials - This group of officials zeroed in on the challenges in the community that we hope and expect our elected/appointed officials to tackle – infrastructure, high-speed internet, and blight. But they also touched on something less concrete that surfaced in a myriad of ways in all of the focus groups – the need to rebuild community. The top strengths/assets were the school, the amazing agriculture, and the natural resources including the beautiful lakes and national forests. These officials were both pragmatic and hopeful when discussing what they wanted to accomplish. There was overall agreement about the importance of intentionally re-building community pride and supporting their three top assets – the school, the amazing agricultural opportunities, and the natural resources.

Focus Group #4 – Seasonal Residents - A very robust group, these folks wanted to make it clear at the beginning that they didn't consider themselves "seasonal residents". Although situations varied, most had been a part of the community for generations and several have now made Walkerville their permanent residence. When asked about the challenges these folks decried the lack of basic retail and public services. They worried that the school missed out on quality educators because the wages were so low. Also, they complained of the blight – trash, dilapidated mobile homes, and the like. When asked about the strengths of Walkerville, they agreed that the beauty and soul of a small community like Walkerville are that people "step up". And, of course, they loved the lakes and felt lucky to live there. They want to improve the schools, build affordable housing, and establish a thriving business district, with a restaurant! They dream about a community center with a library and more human services for families in need. They want to revive community events and clean up the entire community. Plus, they want to capitalize on natural resources.

Focus Group #5 – Service Providers - The group zeroed directly in on housing as a top problem. There is not enough, what is here is dilapidated and unaffordable. They also acknowledged that very few human services are provided directly in the community and that includes day care. There are few day care providers and typically the ones who operate in the area are not regulated. Just as with the previous group, when asked about "what is working in Walkerville", this group immediately said, "The community! People love Walkerville and we take care of each other." They also appreciate the school and the role it plays in instilling community pride, and the wonderful outdoor recreation opportunities. They want to accomplish a beautiful downtown in Walkerville, with stores, a restaurant, and places for the community to gather. They want affordable housing and the utilities to support new housing. They want good quality, affordable childcare.

TOWN HALL:

Participants envisioned new businesses in their downtown, community events and improvements to the school. They committed to rebuilding the community in a town that they all love, as their families have for generations.

PRIORITY AREAS OF FOCUS:

Through the assessment process, five themes or priority areas emerged

BUSINESS AND RETAIL: The community members have dreams of (at the very least) a restaurant and access to fresh foods. There are vacant buildings with potential. There was interest from community business/building owners but they ran into roadblocks. Maybe a group of dedicated community leaders with a thoughtful, realistic plan can help bust through those roadblocks.

COMMUNITY CENTER: An underlying theme was, "How do we rebuild community when we have nowhere to gather as a community?" Flowing from this theme were various suggestions like a community/recreation center. This type of facility might be a heavy lift, especially in the short term. However, with community partners such as churches, the school and other community stakeholders perhaps this goal of having a place for folks to gather might be achieved through other means, and could be incrementally visioned out once a location is secured.

BASIC HUMAN SERVICES AND CHILDCARE: There are no human services providers with offices in Walkerville. One out of every three families live below the poverty level yet they are expected to travel to other communities to seek services. This issue might be addressed through outreach services, one day a week for example, possibly located in the community center envisioned by the community. The primary form of childcare is in private homes and is unregulated. All potential avenues to provide quality, affordable childcare need to be explored with human service partners, including the possible re-opening of the daycare center at Arbre Farms or a collaboration with an existing organization (such as a church). Businesses need employees and families need income – but this can't happen without daycare.

RE-BUILD COMMUNITY: Even the giggly, high school kids get serious when they talk about how they feel they don't have a "community". They don't feel a sense of pride, nor do they feel it in the broader community. And they don't think they, or the school, get enough support. The school is a tangible, obvious place to focus energy and resources to build the confidence, morale and spirit of the community. School and community leadership can work together to garner support and develop an action plan. Festivals and events are another way to re-build community, build pride, and bring people together. Longtime generational residents woefully remember a bustling village center, and family fun activities/events. They seem somewhat disheartened by memories of the past but hopefully, once marshalled, those feelings will motivate instead of demoralize.

HOUSING AND INFRASTRUCTURE: The community wants many things that could be made possible by improving housing. They want to clean up and beautify Walkerville. They want to attract new young families to populate their school, and to add an infusion of fresh enthusiasm and energy to community events and activities. They want to attract good teachers and other employees with decent, affordable rental and homeowner housing options. One problem that hinders progress in housing is the need for upgraded infrastructure. Infrastructure and housing improvement/development are certainly stretch goals, however the community wants and needs them badly. These issues must be priority and on the radar of community leaders; even incremental steps could make a big difference.