



OUR DENVER

The Denver Public Library is listening and holding community conversations to better understand people's values and aspirations for Denver. Libraries all over the country are utilizing the library's role and position in the community to support and connect community members to activate brave spaces for open dialogue and action. The library will make decisions based on what we have heard that will ultimately empower our city, its neighborhoods and communities to thrive by achieving their aspirations.

From Fall 2016 through 2017, the Denver Public Library reached out to the greater Denver community to listen to its aspirations, concerns and needs. The information we received in those conversations will help guide our work, increasing our responsiveness to the customers and communities we serve. We will share what we learned widely, with partners and with the community and we will seek out voices in the community not fully explored in our original conversations. We will look to trusted community partners for their expertise and assistance as we move forward in our community engagement pursuits, and we will continue to ask questions, seek feedback, and listen to our community.

The Kind of Place People Want Denver to Be

People in Denver told us they want neighborhoods that are safe, where children can play and walk to schools and parks safely. They want neighborhoods that are safe from dangerous traffic and criminal activity, and have a benevolent police presence. And they want communities where neighbors know each other, are friendly, and help each other. A participant in the Green Valley Ranch neighborhood described a neighborhood where people “watched out for each other.”

People want a gathering place to make connections within and among their neighborhoods. They want a physical place that can serve as a connection point between neighbors, young and old, long-time residents and new residents. A participant from the Park Hill neighborhood desired a place where “I can grow old [in place] and feel comfortable.”

Many people identified wanting a community that is diverse and inclusive, a place that respects old and new, and is welcoming for all. In the Hampden neighborhood, one participant referred to a “welcome wagon” approach, with existing neighbors welcoming new neighbors. They want a community where gentrification does not displace people, where people can afford to stay in their homes and their neighborhood.

People also want to choose where they live; they desire the security of knowing good-paying jobs and good schools exist in the community. They want neighborhoods where youth activities and resources exist.

They also want to live in clean neighborhoods that promote beauty and community pride. They want people to take pride in their homes and their yards, keeping neighborhoods clean and promoting healthy spaces.

“ I CAN GROW OLD [IN PLACE] ”
AND FEEL COMFORTABLE.



Issues Affecting the Community

Our conversations yielded several key themes in response to questions about the issues faced in Denver communities. These concerns often were big picture, with many sub-issues underlying the larger issue. A couple of the issues were cited less often, but because of the nature of the issue, warranted inclusion in this report.

Safety

Many people expressed concerns about safety in their communities. From personal safety to economic safety to public safety, the issue of safety was discussed often and in all conversations.

When people talked about safety, they cited personal safety concerns that ranged from cracked sidewalks and bad street lighting, to safety of crosswalks, and speeding cars causing accidents or near accidents in neighborhoods. They described how challenging it can be to walk in their own neighborhoods because of these issues, and cited a lack of investment in fixing these problems. They also discussed criminal activity, including property crime. One participant in the Hampden neighborhood stated that his/her car has been broken into twice recently.

People also talked about safety in other terms. For example, many expressed that they do not feel safe letting children play outside and that there are not enough youth activities available in their community, which they feel would help children stay out of trouble. In several conversations, participants described their communities as lacking in parks, recreation centers and opportunities for youth jobs and educational activities.

While many of the same issues within the context of safety arose, we also heard varying opinions on safety with regard to police. People from several neighborhoods, including Lincoln Park in Central Denver, Hampden in Southeast Denver and Green Valley Ranch in Northeast Denver, revealed that they felt a lack of appropriate attention and presence by the police. In the Southwest neighborhoods of Athmar Park and Mar Lee, people said that there is a disconnect between residents and police, perhaps due to language barriers, and that creates frustration and distrust of the police among residents. Meanwhile, in the East Central neighborhood of Whittier, some people said they were intimidated by police, or felt less safe because of a heavy police presence in their neighborhood. They felt over-policed and that the police did not respect them. One person from Athmar Park echoed those unsafe feelings saying "I don't want what is happening here like what is happening in other states with police." In other communities, people expressed a need for greater police presence, and that police were under-policing their area.



Community Connection

The people we spoke with are overwhelmingly concerned about communities lacking connection. Many people described neighborhoods where neighbors do not know one another, and where there is a disconnect between longtime residents and new residents. One person from the Berkeley neighborhood noted that neighbors often do not say hello or even make eye contact walking down sidewalks, noting people have “less energy to be nice”. A participant from Bear Valley discussed the disconnect saying “It has been 12 years since I’ve been in a neighbor’s house.”

They also spoke of a lack of community spaces for neighbors to engage with one another, to get to know one another and to share community information. In one conversation, the issue focused more specifically on how often people move into and out of neighborhoods, with a participant in the Hampden neighborhood lamenting that moving multiple times in a short time period does not allow for getting to know one’s neighbors. Others spoke of people being too busy to get to know neighbors and to engage with their community, and how that challenged the ability to forge community connections.

Affordability

People said that affordability was an important issue in their community, with affordability of housing being the main issue of concern. People cited a rapid rise in both rental and home purchase prices throughout the city and how that made them feel insecure about their own housing situation. They also cited a lack of affordable housing available or being built in their communities, exacerbating their concerns over how to keep up with housing costs. A participant in the West Colfax neighborhood explained

rapidly rising costs stating “30% of your income is considered affordable.” Alongside this issue was the concern that moneyed interests were driving up the cost of housing and keeping affordable units at bay, even in neighborhoods where home prices and rental rates were outpacing earnings. Many people spoke of being “priced out” of Denver, with one person in the Platt Park neighborhood saying there is “nowhere for people to live or places for regular people to go that aren’t expensive.”

Neighborhoods In Transition

People we conversed with spoke broadly of issues often referred to generally as “gentrification.” They spoke about concerns of displacement, or losing community character, and about collisions of new and old residents in neighborhoods. Many connected affordability to the larger gentrification issue, with one person in the Berkeley neighborhood discussing gentrification’s significance to overall neighborhood diversity “as it becomes whiter, it becomes safer for whites and less safe for other groups.” People feel like Denver is growing too quickly and that longtime residents

are being “replaced” by new residents. They feel vulnerable to a City that they feel is sacrificing their needs for those of the development community. In the Lowry neighborhood, we heard that “Denver [government] has lost focus [ignoring] the people who live in Denver. They are focused on promotion and attracting people to come to Denver and it’s causing massive growth.” A participant in the Barnum neighborhood indicated a similar frustration, stating simply, “I’m over Denver.”

“ IT HAS BEEN 12 YEARS SINCE ”
I’VE BEEN IN A NEIGHBOR’S HOUSE.

Jobs and Education

Important Issues but Not Top of Mind

While we had anticipated jobs and education coming up as important issues facing our community, we heard those specific issues brought up infrequently overall. On several occasions, jobs and education were referenced as part of another larger issue. For instance, people spoke about needing good jobs to afford housing and stay in their neighborhoods, but focused more on how jobs related to broad issues of affordability and gentrification. In the Montbello neighborhood, one woman said “my husband does not work as much, but prices are still going up. Salaries are flat.” People also spoke of the lack of job opportunities for youth relating to safety- relaying that without jobs and youth-specific activities, youth in their neighborhoods resorted to criminal activity.

People in several conversations expressed a desire for better schools in their neighborhoods. In the Whittier neighborhood, a participant was bothered that families were moving into the neighborhood, but were choosing not to have their children attend the neighborhood school. Similarly, in Berkeley, one woman noted there were “9 kids on her block, and all 9 go to different schools.” People felt like new neighbors were choosing not to invest in their new community, keeping neighborhood schools at a disadvantage.

“ MY HUSBAND DOES NOT WORK AS MUCH, BUT PRICES ARE STILL GOING UP. SALARIES ARE FLAT. ”



What Can Be Done



We listened to people from many different neighborhoods with many different takes on how to improve their community life. Some people discussed issues and aspirations, but seemed to not know where to begin to take action. Many described feeling stuck, and a participant from Bear Valley simply said “we accept things.”

On the other end of the spectrum, people had specific actions they wanted addressed by named organizations or individuals. Many people trusted partners in their communities like Registered Neighborhood Groups (RNOs), community organizers, faith organizations and public libraries to partner with them on action items. More often than not, the people we spoke with suggested a baby step approach to improving community life, suggesting starting points and initial actions rather than defining partners or specific actions to take. They spoke of actions they can take to confront issues directly, as well as actions that require partnership to achieve success. In more than 10 different conversations, people mentioned meeting their City Council representative or a Denver Police Department representative as a good starting point for action.

People we spoke with overwhelmingly cited a need for more community outreach and engagement throughout neighborhoods to help people connect with their neighbors and educate themselves on community issues. They would like to build better relationships with City officials, including their City Council Representatives. In many instances, people stated that having access to “decision-makers” in City government would help them understand local issues better and would give them a voice in their community. They want to be able to contact someone with their issues and feel that their opinions and concerns matter to City officials. In Whittier, one person said it is important to “have a seat at the table.” They want to hold elected officials accountable for actions in their communities. People suggested community information walks, workshops on how to engage with local representatives, and holding community town halls as opportunities to be heard. Additionally, people felt strongly about building better relationships with police, including in several neighborhoods where people felt that police presence and trust was lacking. They wanted to bring police to their neighborhood to share their concerns, and develop neighborhood watch groups to increase the feeling of safety.

Many people we spoke with discussed the desire to create community spaces where people could actively congregate, connect with one another and share information. In several conversations, people spoke of utilizing resources currently available to help connect neighbors, including social media sites like Nextdoor and Facebook, as well as local publications and communication with neighborhood organizations to encourage community activation. Several people spoke about using libraries as gathering spaces, encouraging people to use community spaces already available for the greater community. In addition, people in some neighborhoods wanted to see more culturally relevant resources in libraries that would help them feel more informed about the history and culture of their communities.

People we spoke with also indicated that they were responsible for change in their communities. They felt that in order to move in the right direction, they needed to take actions themselves and encourage others in their neighborhoods to do the same. A participant from Platt Park declared "it's on us as well, we can't let others act for us". People mentioned small actions that could make a big difference in creating a more welcoming community. "Talk to your neighbors" was heard in Cherry Creek, and "say 'Hey'" to your neighbor from a West Colfax participant. Other ideas included supporting aging neighbors, helping in neighborhood cleanup, hosting a neighborhood BBQ, leading a community building event like Denver Days, or joining local registered neighborhood organizations (RNO) as opportunities to take action for a better community. Among Stapleton neighbors, we witnessed this idea of creating change, as people began discussing how they could partner with others in the room on activities immediately following the conversation.

“ IT'S ON US AS WELL, ”
WE CAN'T LET OTHERS ACT FOR US.



What Will Denver Public Library Do

As we move into 2018 and beyond, we will continue our efforts to build public knowledge through community engagement efforts. With 26 physical locations in our community, we are uniquely able to reach out to neighborhoods in every pocket of Denver. We are committed to holding community conversations with diverse residents, host programs and events that reflect issues and aspirations we heard from our community, and forge relationships with community organizations and governmental agencies that can create positive change. We will speak with city agencies addressed in conversations, including the Denver Police Department, City Council, and the Mayor's Office, to share what we learned and partner on action items. We will take a leadership role in our community, taking action when and where we can, and working with partners to address community aspirations and concerns in their work.

We are already starting to take action based on what we heard in our community. The Schlessman Branch Library addressed the Lowry neighborhood's aspiration to get to know neighbors by creating the Lowry Community Singers, a music group whose participants vary in age, ethnicity, neighborhood of residence, and ability. Several of our branches have

added "meet your neighbor" events and activities to encourage community building. The Park Hill and Pauline Robinson Branch Libraries have held joint community conversations, diving deeper into topics like affordable housing and equity in education, and offering events based on what they heard: a neighborhood potluck at the Pauline Robinson Branch and a community discussion about gentrification at the Park Hill Branch. In addition, we are reaching out to our partners in city government to address civic aspirations and concerns, and to community organizations that can take action on specific items or in specific neighborhoods.

We heard from a community conversation participant in Virginia Village, who said "I enjoyed being able to talk about this" and we invite other community members to engage with us in our efforts, and take individual action to improve their neighborhoods. We want to hear from you, and we want to share with you. We encourage you to contact us, whether stopping by a branch, reaching out online, or connecting directly with our community engagement team. We can all play a part in improving our neighborhoods and building a better Denver.

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