

A three-part community dialogue took place in the Canal Community of San Rafael, Marin County in May 2008. Twenty-five participants, including long time Canal residents, immigrants and community leaders discussed their vision for a healthy Canal, talked about the issues currently preventing their vision from being a reality and the action steps that would help their community move toward positive change.

Following is a summary of the discussions.

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## PART 1 – SHARING OUR STORIES, SETTING OUR VISION

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Participants introduced themselves, *how long they've lived in the community and what motivated them to attend the community dialogues*. Summary participant profile:

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### PARTICIPANTS AFFILIATED WITH AN ORGANIZATION:

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- Representative of Marin nonprofit - representing her organization and wanting to get to know the community
- Representative of Marin grassroots group - father came to country because there were opportunities and she doesn't see much opportunity now.
- Representative of local nonprofit – 14-year Canal resident – interested in greenlining issues and why low-income communities are the most affected by it.

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### COMMUNITY MEMBERS:

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- Concerned about the recent ICE raids in the Canal
- Life is difficult, thanks for this invitation
- Have worked in the Canal for 15 years (with parents in education and mentor programs). Left the Canal 3 years ago but have strong ties there. My children are active in the community - daughter working in pre-school and son as a community leader/radio show host.
- 5 year Canal resident with kids
- Community member and former organizer: motivated to educate people about the need for political empowerment.

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### HOW ARE OUR LIVES BETTER/WORSE THAN OUR PARENTS/GRANDPARENTS?

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- “When my father bought his first house it cost 2 years of his salary. For someone in the Bay Area it costs 20 years of their salary to buy a home. I don't know how I'm going to get a house.”

- “My father and grandfathers both worked with one company their entire lives and had good retirement and insurance while they were working. In 25 years, I’ve changed jobs every 5 years, every 12 years, sometimes I have health insurance and sometimes I don’t.”
- “I have more freedom to change, more flexibility but less safety.”
- “What brought me to the Bay Area is the rich, cultural diversity. My grandparents’ world was very homogenous. There are opportunities to discover things from all over the world here.”
- “Both my grandmothers were 30 years old before they were granted the right to vote, one battled to go to nursing school, another went to business school – it was breakthrough for women not to be secretaries. Mother had to quit half-way through attending Berkley because there was only money for one of the kids to attend college. There is more opportunity for women to study what they want. In addition, my grandmothers both lived over 90 and ate all organic foods until they were 50 years old when pesticides became allowed.”
- “My grandparents died in their late 90’s. Life before was healthier, the environment was less contaminated. I try to find healthy products but it is really expensive. It’s not impossible though. I have a friend who has his own garden and he’s been able to grow his own food.”

### WHAT MAKES YOU PROUD OF THE CANAL?

- “What makes me proud is that we (immigrants) built Marin County, we build houses, gardens, anything else people need, we feel good about working and making life better for everyone here. Our labor force should be valued and recognized.”
- “I lead a group of folkloric dancers and it is a good option in the community to help children have something healthy to do other than watch TV. In addition, it helps them learn about our culture and teach the Yucatan dance.”
- “The country I am from is very poor and I came here 14 years ago when I was 12 and my life is phenomenally better, even though we were not poor. I’m the only person in my family who went to college from a great school in America and that is because we have scholarships opportunities here. As a woman, I don’t have to marry someone unless I want to. Now that I’m here I’ve become more American and I sometimes forget what it is like to live around poverty. We get comfortable.”
- “Our ancestors lived better than we did because they lived longer, cell phones make us all sick and we keep using them, technology makes us sick and we keep using it. Things are more modern but we have lost our ability to live over 70. I have a question, why do people not participate and vote? I have a sense that many people are more interested in personal economy and less interested in their community.”
- “Most people are very busy, working two-three jobs. It’s hard to find time and then have to wonder if my vote really counts. It’s all about money, not about me.”
- “It is very difficult to live in this society. We are paying \$4.15 for gasoline. We have more technology and don’t live better. It’s getting more complicated to live together. How many millions and millions have been spent on the presidential election campaign? Special interests buy the legislators, the president, the system is not working and the only way it can work is by organizing together, Latinos, whites and blacks.

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 SHARE YOUR VISION OF A HEALTHY COMMUNITY:
 

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- **Part of having a healthy community is living in a country with an effective immigration system.** “I would like to see our federal government take a stand on immigration. That is a positive thing they could do to legalize people who are here looking for a better life.”  
 “They should legalize people locally in Marin County the way they did with Marihuana, which is illegal in the rest of the country.”  
 “Immigration is a federal issue that needs to be dealt with at the federal level. People need to travel home. A local ID will not solve the problem.”  
 “Health comes with peace of mind. In the Canal, people come home from work and then go to bed wondering what will happen in the morning (if there will be another ICE raid). I spent a month in jail for nothing. My rights were violated and by the grace of god I was able to get out. **In a healthy community, people’s rights are respected and people are free. In a healthy community, I can trust law enforcement to respect my rights as a human being.**”
- **In a healthy community, workers have rights regardless of their legal status and they understand and exercise those rights.** “The undocumented represent a big workforce in Marin County: they bury the dead, they do construction work, landscaping, work that no one else does. Undocumented workers have no workers compensation, no rights; they get paid cash because they work cheaper. It is a mutual agreement. I was sitting in a bowling alley and this kid who was 18 years old cut his fingers and he said he didn’t know the saw had batteries in it and that he couldn’t sue his employer because he had to go to work. We need to tell them what their rights are.
- “That’s true for a lot of different issues – people don’t know!”
- **A healthy community implements policies that protect the health of its residents instead of special interests.** “I have no idea what it feels like wondering if immigration is going to take me away, but wondering how many more days we have left before they spray our community and we become sick. The moth spray will be in the air at levels that will do its job for 7 months and if you are allergic you have to leave, nobody can do anything!”
- **A healthy community has more accessible media representing all of the residents –** “Media should be available to everyone (in your own language). If you don’t vote, you don’t count. We have maybe 4 Spanish speaking radio stations that have moved into the Canal, Azteca and Univision and have closed. We should utilize the media to communicate with Spanish-speaking people so they understand the importance of being civically engaged.”
- **“A healthy community is safe,** children are safe, older people are safe, people who are vulnerable are safe.”
- **A healthy community is one that has an integrated communication system that serves the community -** where you can find important information from your neighbors, churches, shops, front of the phone book.

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## WHAT'S WORKING? WHAT SPECIFIC EXAMPLES ARE THERE IN THE COMMUNITY OF PEOPLE WHO CONTRIBUTE TO THE COMMUNITY?

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- Pickleweed Center – a great way to gather community and share information by the City of San Rafael
- Local radio stations – need to protest the shut down
- Soccer teams and developers who create public areas that benefit the community
- Health care clinic, adult education
- I have seen Douglas Mundo bring people together to work on projects – he coordinated the main immigration challenge. He worked day and night to organize people and they marched. I see him and Canal Alliance do very effective work.
- Marin Institute
- A lot of people knows Tom Wilson – was one of the people who brought Ecology house to the canal to make the community accept the disability community
- New free clinic that a lot of people in the community put together
- Pickleweed action community – stopped fumes close to ecology house.
- Manh Phan – the Vietnamese are very quiet but they are there contributing and they vote.
- Chanchajal Group entertains the community with their dance
- Bay Vista school is an incredible resource
- The Canal library – computer classes filled up with little kids all day and night long. The lab is working full time.
- Authors and writers who are Latinos are really starting to come up. If they could write it in English
- Marin County fair does not allow alcohol or smoking– most Latinos are under 25 and that's a big win. That's one of the things the Marin Institute and Healthy Marin Partnership have been able to accomplish

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## PART II - WHAT ISSUES PREVENT OUR COMMUNITY FROM BEING HEALTHY?

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- Immigration is one of the biggest issues in the Canal, because we don't know when it will be solved:
  - This is a federal issue because the police here don't cooperate with ICE
  - Groups at the local and federal level are working on this. Solutions will not come unless the same people who are affected work on it
  - I paid \$7500 to get out of jail after I was apprehended last year under suspicion of being undocumented. I am not.
- Violence and crime: police, gangs, alcohol, illegal drugs, petty crime.
- Drugs – dealing, use
- Alcohol. The canal has the most alcohol/liquor licenses in the county

- Driving without licenses. “I know several people who got hit by people driving without a license and they got injured for life.” “I was hit several years ago by people driving without a license.”
- Lack of educational opportunities for young people
- Lack of affordable housing
- Parking
- How are we going to solve all these problems if we don’t have power? We need political power to make change.
- Lack of empowerment: we can’t do it alone, we have to have allies who can do this, for example businessmen, need to develop partnerships with them. Churches are powerful and people that vote have power
- Empowering and working with the police would work in mitigating violence
- Greenlining is a very important issue, we keep finding out issue after issue of cell towers, and things affecting our quality of life because they figure there won’t be opposition from the people in the Canal
- I’m very worried about pesticides but I listen to the news of it in English. I would love it if people here could educate teachers and children and give them information and fliers. What good does it do to be documented if the environment we live in is contaminated?
- We need translators into Spanish. I’m here to find someone who can help talk to their neighbors and spread the word
- Schools need to be a hub for information sharing, because everyone is going to school
- How many people know that you can broadcast things in public access?
- 1500 voters in Canal of which less than 600 are Spanish-speaking. Political process, deals with voting – voting decides where money goes – there is no Spanish voice in Marin.
- There is a need for more representation of Spanish leaders from the Canal in Marin County and San Rafael.
- We want to change, no matter what it is, in order to change we need power and the only way we will do this is by changing the way decisions are made that deal with those issues: more participation in the city council of San Rafael, the places where decisions are made
- Lack of childcare

### WHY ARE THESE PROBLEMS STILL HERE?

- We aren’t empowered as a community
- The economy, jobs aren’t available. When people are out of work they get depressed, drink and use drugs
- We need more power, but we are not participating in politics and it is our duty to care and to organize
- A lot of community’s residents are undocumented, even though they produce a lot of money for the city
- Racism
- Lack of education by the general populous

- Lack of opposition from community members when something goes wrong and lack of economic plow. In other areas someone has to worry that big donors will get upset, but because there is little money in this community, politicians don't have an issue with things that negatively affect the Canal.
- 5000 people marched to the civic center and that was power. Nobody put it to good use, but it was power. Most of us don't vote. There are only ~ 200 Latinos registered to vote in the Canal. We don't have political power but we have power in terms of people. We need somebody to represent *us* in the Canal, someone who will represent our interests in the City Council on all these issues that we care about.
- Another problem is that we don't know we have power, so we don't use it because we don't know. The 5000 march was a showcase of power, but because there weren't immediate results, things fell apart. We need a support system that will help us understand that change takes time. After that march there has been no follow up. Fear is preventing us from acting. Who did we impress? The press, not the politicians, because politicians aren't thinking about the 12 million of us who are undocumented.
- They do focus on that, but only to benefit from our labor. This is why they haven't wanted to change the immigration laws.
- Our problem is underrepresentation. We have no one taking our issues before the city and county government.
- Marin Grassroots has a last name and that is network. They could appoint someone to advocate for this community and develop leaders within our community
- Has anyone heard of "Gerry Mandarin" (pls. check spelling)? Canal is not with the rest of San Rafael when it comes to voting issues. It is with Corte Madera and West Marin and we are outvoted by them.
- Voting is important, but it is only one part of the overall empowerment. We have to get together, become really uncomfortable for politicians and be "in their face" until they listen to us
- Cesar Chavez was boycotting *one thing* "grapes". That's why he was able to have success, because they were focused on one thing. So we have to make a decision about the things we are going to take on and develop a plan. We need a vision of the things we need to accomplish all together.
- Some things can be resolved short term where others can be resolved long term
- Suppose that all of us here were to put a boycott on the biggest store in the city. What do you think would happen? That's using economic power to get business to help communities
- It would be good to be able to inventory the community organizations that are already working with the community
- We need to get educated about the groups in the community that are working to make change. Lack of knowledge of organizations. There a lots of them working in the community. We need to research this with more time.
- Part of the action plan should be to do the community inventory

- Can we make a list of 10 organizations and what they do? So we can start compiling them (this was done by Charisse MaLebron from Marin Institute, and brought to the next meeting).
- There are quite a few organizations that focus more on the East Bay and would focus more on Marin if someone would wave at them and ask for help: EH for Children, Ella Baker Center
- Two organizations: Bay Point Laguna Home Owners, Spinnaker Point Home Owners, they may not think like us, but they like a safe area, they don't like drugs and violence. There have to be areas of commonalities that we could develop
- If we got a group together to picket the Marin Community Foundation to pay more attention to the Canal and let them know that they are not doing that
- You start with the community and then you ally with other organizations
- The city is giving communities the opportunity to meet with them and let them know what their concerns are important. Bay Point Laguna residents have already met with the city and gave them a list of concerns that they would like the city to work on. We could do the same.
- This is going to be a long term process and we need to be ready for it and for collaboration to be able to influence decision makers

## PART III - FROM DIALOGUE TO ACTION. WHAT CAN WE DO ABOUT THESE ISSUES?

ICE raids took place in the Canal the day this last meeting was held. The dialogue started with an acknowledgment of that.

Charisse MaLebron from Marin Institute brought a list of potential allies for community revitalization in San Rafael and distributed it to all participants.

About the issues:

- Should we have a community leader come out of this group to be part of the City Council? If the Canal makes up 25% of the San Rafael population, shouldn't we be represented in the city? It is important for our community.
- I became a citizen so I could vote and I find that it is very tricky because the language is very difficult and the system complicated. What we need is simple, accurate information.
- There are no good programs to educate people on how easy it is to become a citizen once you're a legal resident. This lack of information affects our political power.
- With four city council members, having one person represent the Canal would be very important
- One consideration is that the whole city votes on the city council race, so it becomes more difficult to be elected.
- We need a representative who is Latino who can represent our interests.

- We can start classes educating people about the system. Why do we have government? The only reason we have government is to serve and many of our elected abuse that power.
- The City of San Rafael offers a class on how local government works. We could get info about this and get them to have translators so more Spanish-speaking residents can attend.
- We should get back to what others talked about in this room: alcohol, violence, driving without a license and other issues.
- We are trying to prioritize these problems. We should keep meeting to be able to tackle other problems.
- The voting issue is a small part of the problem. Focusing just on it disenfranchises part of the community.
- Go to the City Council meetings. Almost all of them have *open* forums within limited time.
- There are many ways to get change, but we need to see what tools we want to use to achieve our goals. Voting is an action.
- What's important about voting is that people who are new to this country become part of the process and can educate others.
- In every democratic country, it is important that we educate people about the process. The right to vote is not the highest right we have. We have to involve educated and uneducated people in the process. Civic engagement!
- We had talked about local ID's for undocumented immigrants. What can we do about that?
- People don't know how to use community resources. They don't know where to go for help and what resources they can get from community groups to make their lives better.
- Marin Grassroots has something valuable in their hands with these community dialogues in Novato, Marin City and here in the Canal. We can work together on the Canal agenda and solve real issues.
- In regards to lack of representation, San Francisco fought it through district elections. Even if you don't get what you work for at first, it gets people talking about the fact that there is lack of representation. We should do the same.
- Charles McGlashan pays attention to Marin City. I don't see Steve Kinsey doing the same for San Rafael. We should change the way supervisorial districts are drawn so the Canal is in the same supervisorial district as San Rafael.
- There's another tool we can use as a group: the Pickleweed Advisory Board. Meets every first Wednesday of the month at 6:00 p.m. Citizens can talk about any issues they have and ask the board to invite city council members or supervisors to the meeting, so they can hear their concerns. The board can also write letters to the city about any issue.
- We need demographic data about San Rafael and statistics about how many people from each community vote, as well as how many accidents have been caused by people driving without licenses.
- We need to make sure that the level of government we are advocating to has the ability to implement the ideas they commit to. We need to find out how to influence decision-making.
- Find out who represents what district. Sign a petition and give it to them.
- This system works on money. The more you have, the more likely you are to win an election. It would be hard to elect a Canal representative who is not well funded.
- It is also important to assign community members to county commissions. More people representing the interests of this community are necessary in all levels.
- This dialogue process is great. We should continue to meet regularly.

- There are organizations that can help us find the money that was given to the Canal community meant for immigrants who were apprehended last year and had to pay bail. We never saw a dime of that \$130,000.
- Marin Peace & Justice Coalition is working on “local democracy” creating a local government power base. They meet Monday evenings at the First Baptist Church. We could connect this group through them to groups in Washington working with immigration issues.

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### WHERE DO WE GO FROM HERE?

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- I’d be very happy to be involved in the process of creating change for the Canal. We’re all trying to meet our own agenda. We need to decide what we want to do together and move in that direction.
- We can communicate with our friends and neighbors about these meetings, compile the information and support GLN in the Action Forum in October.
- We could send some leaders to the Wellston Action Program. A two-three day program on how to do local politics. Not sure if they offer the training in Spanish. Someone should make them do it.
- We could get funds to send some Canal leaders from this group to a training on how to become a candidate or how to work for a candidate.