

A three-part community dialogue took place in the Hamilton Community of Novato, Marin County in May 2008. Participants, including long time Novato residents, immigrants, community leaders and residents in transitional/group housing discussed their vision for a healthy Novato, 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.

PART 1 – SHARING OUR STORIES, SETTING OUR VISION

First group discussion:

HOW ARE OUR LIVES BETTER/WORSE THAN OUR PARENTS/GRANDPARENTS? HOW ARE YOUR CHILDREN'S LIVES BETTER THAN YOURS?

- Our kids have things that we didn't have – because of immigration, they have food, clothing, better health and education
- Life for our parents is worse in Guatemala than for us here.
- I just want to say that immigrants come here to work, we are not terrorists. We are looking for a better life.
- We hope our kids have everything we migrated here to provide them: a better life.
- My life is better than my parents' and I hope my kids' lives will be better than mine.
- I think our lives are better in some aspects only, worse in others.
- It is difficult for people to understand the reality of other countries. As immigrants, we hear many things that hurt.
- I am always proud of who I am and where I'm from.
- My daughter is not as free as I was back in my country in my childhood.
- My parents walked more and lived close to where they worked, studied and shopped. There was a stronger sense of community.
- If I had a chance, I would bring my daughter back to where I came from to experience our culture.
- There is no sense of community here. Many people die in solitude.
- I see an obscure future for my kids. The economy is on its way down. Life for us immigrants is getting harder.
- I am thinking about going back to my country to give my kids a cheaper, better life. Everything is getting expensive, there are no jobs, the rich are getting richer and the poor poorer. Being here is risky for our kids.
- As a young woman, I am aware of the difficulties of having a child and I worry about the future of my kids.

WHAT IS GOOD IN OUR COMMUNITY?

- It is nice and quiet
- Less cars and congestion
- Lots of open space
- Less people
- We feel safe, at ease. Neighbors are quiet
- Novato has developed a great deal in the last few years and it is better now. There are more people, but everyone is private.
- The diversity of people living in the community. People want a better life and that gives me hope.
- There are many Hispanics in Novato. This is good for me because I can speak my native language and feel more included.
- People are nice and say “good morning”

SHARE YOUR VISION OF A HEALTHY COMMUNITY:

- In a healthy community, all residents work collaboratively by compromising some needs. It takes a village to meet everyone’s needs.
- A healthy community has equality of rights, treatment, respect and justice.
- A healthy community has a government that effectively supervises the provision of basic needs, for example clean water and safe vegetables.
- In a healthy community, everyone has the opportunity to recycle.
- A healthy community has good moral values
- A healthy community has civic pride and people who care for and understand each other.
- A healthy community is discrimination-free.
- A healthy community is safe and crime-free.
- A healthy community has access to resources and education
- A healthy community is tolerant and open-minded

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

- Landfill next to apartments
- Lack of opportunities to recycle at place of residence
- Fear of rejection: my problem is only mine, your problem is only yours, not understanding each other
- Prejudices (in general) – open-minded
- Inequality of rights:

- Health: because of your legal status you don't get equal treatment in a hospital, no free/affordable medicine, public health. Getting sick is a luxury the poor cannot afford.
- employment: you don't get the job because you don't speak the language,
- racism,
- lack of access to social services
- Lack of organizing, support and leadership (when problems arrive we don't know who to go to). We need more support from our neighbors.
- Need community buildings where residents can meet (recreation center, community center, teen or youth center)
- If I go to the community clinic, the first thing I get asked is if I have insurance. If I have a problem I can't go to my neighbor
- Crime that reverts back to a lack of education or resources

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

- To solve problems, you have to create leaders, support them with training and technical assistance to be more effective, and may bring the community together. The community centers would be a great venue to get people together and get them to dialogue and start building a sense of community where new neighbors can introduce each other and begin to build a sense of belonging and knowledge about the issues the community is working to change.
- People need to organize
- There needs to be an entity within the community spearheading change: raising awareness, organizing
- Raise awareness of perceived problems and find out if others in the community feel the same way
- Distribute fliers to the community, inviting people to meetings, meeting with landlords to find creative ways to deal with tenants problems
- Identify the problem with the most realistic solution to work on it first
- The county doesn't easily approve community space – you have to go all the way up somewhere to get things approved, affordable housing (i.e. Hamilton).
- Reaching out to the neighbors, to the community
- Build a sense of community: meet neighbors, be proactive, attend community meetings
- Establish community buildings/meeting space. How? Be vocal. Show the need to all, including policy makers, foundations, and police. Find land, speak to city council, get petitions signed, and make a strong case.
- Reach out to your neighbors: say hello, help carry groceries, find opportunities to connect