

Chambersburg Focus Groups

What We Heard

In March and April 2021, the Borough conducted 19 focus groups with a wide variety of local community members, including families, businesses, youth, and members of our Hispanic and Haitian communities. The focus groups served as a starting point to learn about the priority issues that should be addressed over the next 10 years as part of the Comprehensive Plan.

Stay tuned for more information about how you can continue to be involved in the Comprehensive Plan and invite more members of the community to provide their input.



Summary of Key Findings

Discrimination

- **Racism/dispary in accessing employment.** Racial disparity in hiring and firing practices, racial profiling in employment decisions. Very few minorities (African Americans, in particular) work in service organizations (law enforcement, fire department, Chambersburg court system); make diversity more welcoming by hiring more minorities in higher paying jobs (non-fast food; e.g., public school teachers, healthcare, law enforcement).
- **Racism/dispary in the justice system.** Negative encounters/experiences with law enforcement, court system.
- **Education system.** Lack of diverse teaching faculty in K-12; disparity in educational outcomes for Black/Brown students.
- **Desire for increased & easier access to home loans.** Concerns about discrimination in lending & sharing of anecdotal stories of persons getting approved/denied for loans based on race.

Diversity and Inclusion

- **Strive for equal representation in Borough government and the Police Department.** Discussed need to continue electing and hiring more officials, staff, and officers of color. Acknowledged recent progress in hiring more diverse officers but no real change will occur until more people of color are in leadership positions.
- **Promote diversity and equal opportunity in all five wards, including housing options, multicultural businesses, and services.** Diversity within the Borough is concentrated within one ward; there is a desire to see affordable housing, multicultural businesses, and services located in and/or accessible to all areas of the Borough.

- **Ensure Borough-sponsored programs are equal opportunity.** Persons of color are often left out of the process or overlooked in favor of white families in regard to certain Borough programs, such as home improvement incentives.

Community Development

- **Diversify downtown events to appeal to and attract the diversity of the Chambersburg community.** Desire to see more multicultural events and family-oriented events for all ages hosted in the Borough. In addition, identify activities that youth of all backgrounds can participate in. Downtown events are often geared to a majority White culture. Ideas for events included an art festival, film festival, concerts, etc.
- **Provide more activities and gathering places for youth.**
- **Improve Borough communications and event advertising,** to include content in different languages, more platforms, and more communications overall. There should be an area where members of the community can sign up for an electronic newsletter and/or email/text notification; not only does this save paper, but more individuals could see it sooner. A Borough Facebook page was also recommended. Additionally, make it easier to find key phone numbers for snow removal assistance, etc.

Economic Development

- **Redevelop blighted buildings throughout town and invest in aesthetic improvements.** The focused reinvestment and redevelopment of blighted areas in the Borough was cited as a significant need. Aesthetically, buildings and infrastructure “sets the tone” for a community.
- **Redevelopment opportunities** identified in addition to South Gate include: Grant Street and South Main Street and the former Kmart Plaza.
- **Minority-owned businesses are an untapped resource for empty storefronts downtown.** There is a desire to fill the empty store fronts in downtown. Likewise, there is a need for more diversity in terms of the types of businesses located in the downtown community and belief that minority-owned businesses are an “untapped” resource.
- **Create a multicultural commerce center** or “mercado” where smaller shops can sell food and other goods like Lancaster’s Central Market.
- **Expand employment opportunities.** General discussion about the desire for more employment opportunity and equal opportunity for all.
- **Workforce and vocational opportunities** should be expanded for high school students and adults with a goal of meeting the job needs of local businesses.
- **Attract large tax generating anchor businesses** to downtown Chambersburg to attract workers and more support businesses.

Housing

- **Increase the rate of homeownership.** Expanding home ownership was a strong theme in all focus group sessions.

- **Discrimination in housing:** Discussed the desire to increase homeownership opportunities (for persons of color) beyond the 3rd Ward, in part due to the space limitations and desegregation.
- **Housing education** is needed and should include contractors, developers, landlords, homeowners, and tenants.
- **Cost of housing is high;** it was noted rents exceed the value of rental properties and require dual incomes to live comfortably.
- **Improve code enforcement and incentivized property management.** Landlords should be incentivized to improve and maintain properties, ensuring compliance with Borough code enforcement. A past Borough program provided tax incentives for landlords who made property improvements. This program should be considered again and expanded upon.
- **Address the racism/ disparity in housing development that interplays with education disparity.** Articulation of unconscious ways in which racism operates through housing development and school assignments. Dense housing has been built in the 3rd Ward without meaningful consideration of the pressure it places on Stevens School in terms of student numbers and the age and size limitations of the building. Comparisons were made to other areas of the Borough that are less diverse and have larger school buildings. CASD noted it is working on a plan to decrease teacher to student ratios and increase diversity.

Social Services

- **Stakeholders expressed a desire for a place where people can go for assistance that has diverse languages available.** Similar to the current 221 information and referral service but a physical location within the Borough with multilingual staff. There have been times where members of the Spanish speaking community need to make a complaint in terms of living conditions or helping to find housing, but due to the language barrier they are unable to find the help that they need. These hotlines or information lines need to be more accessible to all members of the community and in several languages. Many low-income and ESL people have difficulty finding information on employment or healthcare, and resources are limited.
- **Lack of career planning with Black/Brown youth.** Desire for more focus on assisting Black/Brown youth in creating a plan for higher education, trade school or career path beyond high school. Broad frustration was expressed that conversations in this area are often lacking and perhaps reserved for “certain” youth but not youth of color.

Transportation

- **Pedestrian and bicyclist improvements are desired throughout the Borough.** Walking and biking accessibility increases the equitability of transportation and supports healthier lifestyles. Expand the rail trail and establish a bikeshare system.
- **Improve parking in the downtown area.** Identified as a barrier for downtown property owners and residents and to Wilson College constructing a downtown satellite facility.
- **Re-establish a trolleybus and a bikeshare system** to improve transportation mobility and economic opportunities for low income households, as well as more generally active transportation for all. There is no public transportation in the Borough aside from rabbittransit’s shared-ride services. Public transportation is desired.