



Creatively Gathering Community Input

Developing a comprehensive understanding of the interests, needs, and strengths that exist within your community is the first step in developing a connected, active, and vibrant community.

Traditional approaches start with a needs analysis, usually in the form of a survey (see example below). Surveys are a great first step in exploring who lives in your community, what their interests are, what they might need and want, or what they value most.

Some possible approaches might be to ask neighbours to identify their desire to be involved, such as asking them if they would like to serve on the Members Committee or attend activities offered by the Social Committee or whether they would attend an exercise program if offered.

You may also ask neighbours to specifically identify their interests by asking:

Please mark with an X which activities/programs you are interested in participating in:

- Social programs
- Exercise program
- Information/educational meetings
- Dining Service
- Health and Wellness support, like
 - Health system navigation
 - Security or med checks
 - Fall prevention pendant
 - Transportation assistance
 - Other – please list on reverse

Further questions you might ask that will inspire creative thinking and ideas could be:

- What about this community makes you feel most at home? Tell us what you like most about the building.
- If you could stay in this community for the rest of your life, what would make it possible? What would make it exceptional?

You can also ask your community to think wildly – ask them to wave a magic wand and create anything and then describe it for you.

A survey might be followed with information sessions and focus groups to gain buy-in and inspiration for community activities and events.

Other strengths-based approaches aim to build on the local talents and strengths that exist in the community. This approach is rooted in community-led development and recognizes that everyone in a community (including individuals, resident groups, businesses and organizations) has skills, interests and experiences that can help strengthen their community (or perhaps a new one they want to learn!)

You can read more about the **Asset-Based Community Development** (ABCD) vs traditional approach here -- very highly recommended:

<https://sustainingcommunity.wordpress.com/2013/08/15/what-is-abcd/>

Regardless of whether you take a needs-based or asset-based approach, or hybrid of the two, there are many creative, activity-based engagements that can complement surveys if they do not garner as many responses as desired. These also provide community members with other ways to contribute ideas, stimulate conversation and enlist the imagination.

Some examples include:

If you live in a building, you might consider:

- Posting an envelope on the public bulletin board where members could leave ideas anonymously
- Posting large pieces of paper on the walls of the common rooms with post-it notes and markers so members could identify needs and desires
- For larger groups, holding round table discussions with paper-covered tables so members could discuss among small groups and leave feedback behind as they moved from table to table in a world café format.

If you live in a neighbourhood made up of single family homes or a rural community, you might consider:

- Delegating a member of the group to collect anonymous responses in their mail box
- Connecting with local community centre, grocery store, library or coffee shop and ask them for space on their bulletin board help with:
 - Posting an envelope on the public bulletin board where community members interested in aging in place could leave ideas anonymously (this will also help engage those who have not yet been involved); make sure to include an email address

The following are some other complementary creative methods for understanding community needs, assets, and desires:

Community Interviews

Recruit community members to play the role of community reporters. Compile a list of topics and sample questions and then 'assign' community 'interviews' to the reporters. Have each reporter develop a community story and summarize their notes based on the key topic areas.

Community profiles could then be shared (with consent) as a means of 'getting to know' each other.



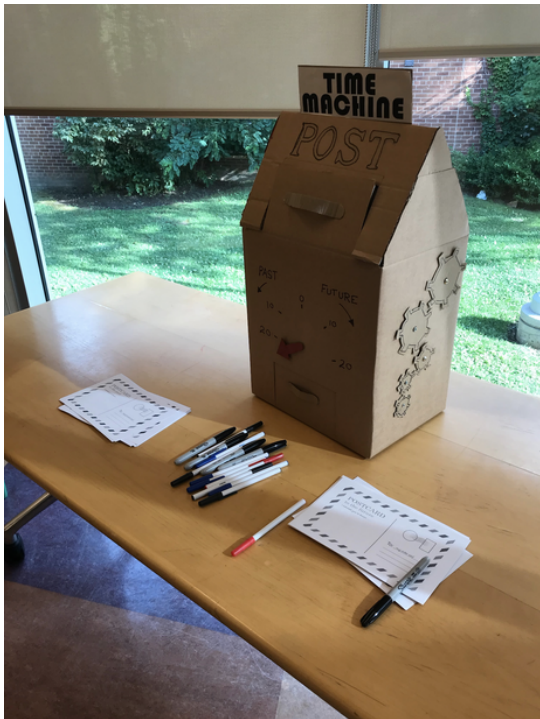
Example: ["Stories of Summer" exhibit](#)

Conversation Boards

Create a conversation board. If you live in a high-rise building, consider putting it in the lobby or on individual floors. You may also want to connect with a local community centre, grocery store, library or coffee shop and ask them for space on their bulletin. This could be a whiteboard with markers or a corkboard with pins and note cards. Put a 'starter' question on the board and invite community members to contribute either ideas, needs or questions of their own.

'Start question' samples:

- What does aging in place mean to your neighbourhood?
- If you could wave a magic wand, what would the most ideal community look like?
- When was the last time you asked a neighbour to help you with something or ask for sugar?
- Is it hard to ask a neighbour a question?



Community Mail

Place a community 'mail' box either in the lobby or delegate someone in your neighbourhood to host the mailbox on each floor by the elevator with a direction to 'send a postcard' to your community, requesting something you need or wish for your community – or it could be a love letter "What I love about my community . . ."

Share the results with everyone at your next community gathering!

Creative Portraits

Invite community members of all ages to submit a song, poem or art piece which describes their community, either in writing or in pictures. Or ask neighbours to submit a portrait of what they love most about the community or what makes this their ideal home or even changes they might like to see take place in the next year. If appropriate you can offer a prize or award for submissions.



Example: ["Faces of the Community" Portrait Stencil Exhibit](#) at Morningside Library

Photo Voice

Distribute disposable cameras to people of all ages in the community or ask people to take their own digital images capturing their likes and dislikes in your area.

The results can be exhibited to generate further discussion or to promote additional events. The 'exhibit' might be shared in the lobby or communal room if you live in a multi-unit building, or a community space (community centre, library or cafe) in your neighbourhood if you live in a house.

Or the exhibit might be developed as a "virtual" exhibit via a community website open to community comments or coupled with an online forum.



Example: "[Inspire the Women](#)" portrait project

“Map and Wheel”

Building Caring Communities (BCC) has created a mapping exercise that they unofficially dubbed “Map and Wheel” exercise. This activity injects an element of fun and whimsy into the mapping exercise and provides an incentive for participants of all ages to give some thought to the places they love in their community.

Two items are used – one being a large map of the local community and the other being a spinning wheel that has a variety of questions on the panels about the places in the community. Questions may include, “what’s the most romantic place?” or “where is your favourite tree?” or “where is the best place to sit and read a book?” or “where can you get great fries?”.

The possibilities are abundant and can be tailored to the goals of any event, community organization and neighbourhood! Each time someone spins the wheel, they read the question and then mark their answer on the map. This is done via coloured post-it notes to differentiate the various answer categories. After the exercise is complete, a wonderful artifact remains – namely a map of the local area filled with markers indicating the places that are considered important by those who live, work, and play there.

This can either live in the lobby of your building or a local coffee shop or community centre for those not in a high right building;building.



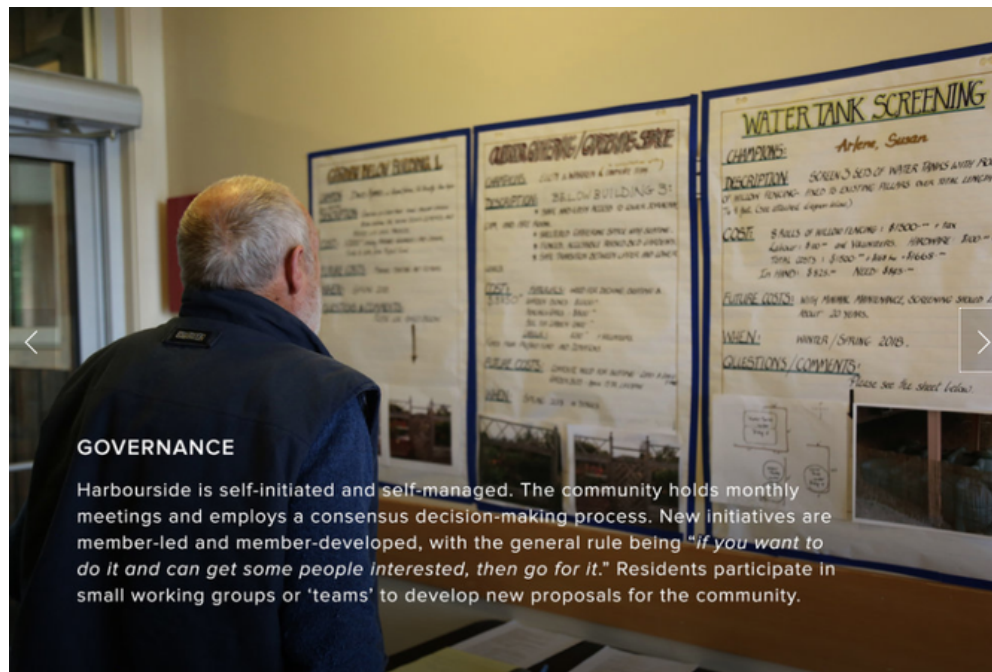
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Making Projects Public

Create a poster for new community ideas and invite your community to leave feedback.

Write important details on the poster and print a longer description for residents to learn more if interested. Most importantly, leave a notebook for residents to write down their thoughts. This method is perhaps most useful at the stage where some ideas are bubbling to the surface.

Publicly displaying the feedback and ideas provided by residents in the common spaces provides the opportunity for residents to build on each other's ideas and give feedback on the ideas that they also prefer.



These are just a few examples and there are likely many more – plus more we could imagine together!

Two of the key takeaways are:

- The importance of keeping it fun as a way to engage everyone involved
- The importance of building engagements that strengthen relationships between community members, not just between the organization and community members