

More than a Transit Corridor

Insights from the Hybla Valley/ Gum Springs Community Conversation

What is the best part about living in your community?

What are its greatest challenges? What are its greatest opportunities?

How might new investment and development benefit community? How might it hurt?

Residents know their community best. However, far too often no one asks them these questions. As a result, they feel their opinions are undervalued and unwelcomed.

Now more than ever, Fairfax County needs a new way of engaging residents to ensure their voices shape the future of the area. This is especially true for South County, which is expected to see significant growth and development in the coming years. The Embark Richmond Highway Plan will create more than 18,000 new housing units, 8.5 million square feet of nonresidential development, and interconnected parks along a 7.5 mile stretch from Huntington Avenue to Jeff Todd Way.¹ While large scale redevelopment efforts can generate significant benefits and amenities, they can also increase displacement and gentrification pressures as neighborhoods become more desirable. Richmond Highway is more than a transit corridor; it is a community. Residents who will be most affected by these changes must be involved in shaping the future of their community.

On April 30, 2019, several non-profits sponsored a community conversation at Bethlehem Baptist Church, an anchor faith community located in Gum Springs. Organizers wanted to hear directly from residents and provide a forum where people could feel valued and voice their concerns. More than 120 people from the Hybla Valley/Gum Springs area, including the many garden apartments, condos, mobile homes and small businesses along this stretch of Richmond Highway attended the conversation.

Unlike traditional community meetings, there were no formal presentations. Instead, participants were invited to visit four stations at their own pace. Each station had a conversation prompt designed to solicit feedback on community assets and challenges. At times participants were surprised by the format. Several people asked questions such as “what time is the presentation?” and “what do you mean by you want to hear what I have to say?”² The conversations illuminated new insights about community values and perceptions of the Embark Richmond Highway Plan. It is our hope that the ideas generated, and the stories shared will be incorporated into existing and future planning efforts to ensure investment and development decisions that are more community-driven and informed by community perspectives and voices.

¹ For more information on the Embark Richmond Highway Plan, visit: <https://www.fairfaxcounty.gov/planning-zoning/embark-richmond-highway>.

² *Planning for the Community Conversation* below details session activities.

Planning the Community Conversation

Pre-Stakeholder Meetings: The earlier residents are engaged, the more they will feel a sense of ownership over the process. Four months prior to the conversation, members of the organizing committee held 1:1 meeting with individual residents and stakeholders in which they asked:

- What is your connection to the Hybla Valley/Gum Springs area?
- What are the greatest challenges to living/working here? What feels most urgent to address?
- Several new developments, including a significant transit investment, are planned for the Route 1 corridor. What are ways the new development could benefit the community? What are ways the new plan could hurt the community?
- Do you think a community conversation would be helpful? Who should be engaged in the planning and/or invited?
- If we were to host a community listening session, how should it be structured? What are your thoughts on inviting an illustrator or a videographer? Would you be interested in helping us design and/or promote it?
- Can we share some of the things you've mentioned today with the rest of the attendees of that meeting?

Community Conversation Design: Upon entering the room, attendees were given an overview of the purpose of the workshop and invited to visit four stations. Each station had a facilitator and an interactive activity (described below). This format was inspired by Raising Places, a project led by Greater Good Studio to create child-centered communities across the U.S.

- Activity 1: Our Place: Defining Our Community: Use maps and markers to illustrate the boundaries of the community. Use post-its to share anything about why you defined your community that way.
- Activity 2: Our Strengths: What Are Our Assets: Use post-its to share examples of assets such as specific people, places where you feel safe, and/or opportunities in the physical environment. Use the maps to show where specific assets are located
- Activity 3: What are our challenges: Use post-its to list challenges and the factors that drive some of these challenges.
- Activity 4: This Community Matters: Use post-its to share why this community is important and to share ideas about what you would like to see in the future.

Although participants did not have to stay for the entire session, for the last 30 minutes, remaining attendees were convened as a larger group to share their experience, lift up anything that they felt was not captured, and provide suggestions for next time.

The Organizing Committee: Good Shepherd Housing, ICNA, NAACP Fairfax Chapter, New Hope Housing, Northern Virginia Affordable Housing Alliance, South County Task Force, United Community Ministries, and Zero Model.

Community Values, Concerns, and Visions

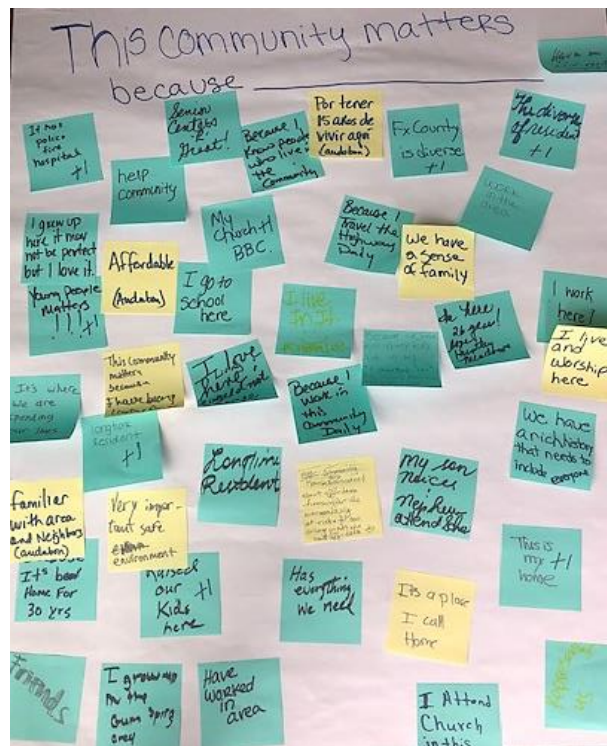
Over the course of the evening conversation, residents not only shared their values, needs, concerns, and vision for how they want to see the area developed but also their perspectives on what decision-makers most need to know about their community. The insights below provide a snapshot of the themes that emerged.



Why This Community Matters

According to residents, this community matters because:

- It is a community, not just a highway
- We have lived here for decades
- We raised our kids here
- It has rich history, especially Black history
- Its location makes it easy to get to work, the store, the District of Columbia, and other destinations
- People worship here
- Children go to school here
- It's safe here
- It is diverse
- People watch out for the disabled here
- There is a sense of community. People are close and watch out for their family and friends
- Contentos 15 anos (We've been happy for 15 years)
- This is where we call home



I Would Describe My Community As

When asked how they would describe or define their community, residents said it is:

- Lovely
- Historic
- My comunidad asequible, comfortable, hermosa, tranquila (My community is affordable, comfortable, beautiful and peaceful)
- My comunidad es bonita, y se vive bien convives con todas las personas (My community is nice, and our life is good, we share in each other's lives.)
- Hard working people who care for one another
- Clean
- Safe
- Historic, rich in culture
- A community comprised of individuals who work together to reach positive outcomes for all its participants
- Family oriented
- Diverse and vibrant and worth keeping

Community Assets

The following assets were identified as community strengths:

- Parks; It's green here just like a forest
- Fire department
- Library
- Bus/transit
- The senior center
- Bethlehem Baptist Church
- Hospital
- The Thrift Store
- The shopping center

Places where people feel safe:

- Home
- Sidewalks
- Church
- Hospital
- The senior center
- My family home
- Church but sometimes nowhere

Often less visible, but significantly important are the social characteristics of neighborhoods.

The following social assets were mentioned:

- You know your neighbors here
- People interact with one another and look out for each other's kids
- We worship together
- Kids play together outside at Audubon

"What I value most about the community is the partnership, is the collaboration of non-profit organizations and individuals really trying to find resources for people who are not just in need but people who are still trying to stay afloat." Lisa, Gum Springs Resident

Insights from the Audubon Community

The Audubon Community is a privately owned, manufactured home community along Richmond Highway. Many parents and children from the Audubon attended the community conversation. Several shared that they were hearing about the Embark Richmond Highway Plan for the first time. A few of their specific concerns were:

- A change that would make us move away from family and friends
- We look out for each other in our community and don't want to lose our neighbors
- Rising housing costs
- Lack of resources and services specifically tailored to the needs of the more than 1500 kids living in the Audubon community
- Not enough programs for youth of single working parents and the elderly
- Incremento de la renta desalojar (Raising rents will lead to evictions.)
- Somos familias de bajos recursos y no podemos con la subida de renta (We are families with little resources and we cannot afford rental increases.)

Lessons Learned from Organizing the Community Conversation

Planning the community conversation was a new experience for the organizers and revealed several insights about what it might take to shift from business as usual:

- Many people have competing priorities and/or other demands on their time, including work and childcare. Designing the meeting in a way that allows them to come when they can and leave when they need to can help encourage participation.
- When asked how attendees learned about the meeting, several shared that it was through their churches, flyers in their neighborhoods, word of mouth or a phone call from a local non-profit, and groups or associations that they participate in. Many also shared that they did not RSVP for the meeting but still felt welcomed and encouraged to attend.
- Organizing the meeting around a meal can create an opportunity for residents to connect with familiar faces and to engage in conversations with people they have never met, which helps to build social connections.
- While translators are essential, creating opportunities for people to participate in their language of choice can be even more powerful. The use of post-it notes allowed Spanish speakers to write their ideas and concerns and to move through the room at their own pace without having to wait for a translator.
- Many people are used to attending community meetings that include a series of presentations or panels. Let participants know and prepare them in advance if you are trying a different format so that they are informed on what to expect and are prepared to engage.
- Incorporate different forms of engagement. While some enjoyed the opportunity to share their ideas via post-it notes, others felt more comfortable sharing with the large group during the closing discussion.
- Invite county staff to dispel any myths and correct misunderstandings about projects that are already underway.
- It is important to host the meeting at a trusted and familiar venue with partners who have existing relationships in the community.
- People want to feel valued. They want to know their opinions were heard and see tangible ways of how their concerns are being responded to.

The community conversation identified several new insights about community values and challenges. However, in some ways, it left the organizers with many more questions than answers. For example, what characteristics of the hospital make it a safe place? When residents say they are worried about the impact of the Embark Richmond Highway Plan on their businesses are there specific businesses they are most concerned about? It is our hope that the community conversation is the beginning of an ongoing dialogue with residents to better understand their priorities so that any new development is responsive to their needs.

Recommendations

Development not only reshapes the physical aspects of a community but can also alter social networks and connections. Based on the input from residents, as Fairfax County works to implement the Embark Richmond Highway Project plan, it is essential that actions are taken to:

- Minimize disruptions in social networks and community bonds
- Address challenges without displacing long-term residents who might be vulnerable to rising rents, displacement or other development impacts
- Maintain and strengthen community assets such as parks and open space, places of worship, and the senior center
- Authentically represent the rich history, culture and essence of the community
- Preserve housing affordability
- Enhance physical safety
- Increase connectivity to public transit and good jobs
- Develop ongoing, interactive mechanisms for residents to participate in decision-making

'We've invested into the county and to the community and to the people for over 30 years. Now the benefits that we would hope that our children and grandchildren will prosper from, they can't because of the challenge of finding affordable housing.' - Bernice, Gum Springs Resident

Conclusion

The people who live in Fairfax County are its greatest assets. When people can work together and provide meaningful input they raise important concerns that may have been missed by traditional community engagement or planning exercises. Effectively engaging the community can be challenging for any initiative but not impossible. Many participants had existing relationships, but some met for the first time. It is important that we continue to find ways to build on this momentum and demonstrate tangible ways in which community input influenced outcomes.

Individuals and families living in this area of Fairfax County must journey across the highway for schools, recreation centers, shops, and faith communities. The Embark Richmond Highway Project plan will inevitably change that journey for decades to

come. While much of the planning is well underway, efforts should be taken to ensure that any new investment or development addresses challenges without displacing long-term residents or harming the social networks upon which many residents depend to get to work, care for their children, and feel safe.

This report was produced for the Northern Virginia Affordable Housing Alliance (NVAHA) by Alyia Gaskins, Founder and CEO of Cities Rx, LLC.