

West Willow Focus Group

On Tuesday, August 8, 2017, focus group participants met at the West Willow Community Resource Center (2057 Tyler Road) for a housing and neighborhood focus group. Due to the size of the group, participants were split into two focus groups (Group A and Group B). Group A included individuals who lived in the West Willow neighborhood and Group B included individuals from surrounding neighborhoods and/or who are otherwise involved in or connected to the West Willow neighborhood.

Participants expressed immense pride and love for their neighborhood, including the Community Resource Center, which hosts activities for residents (i.e. neighborhood meetings and picnics, walking group, etc.). Discussion from these focus groups about housing and neighborhood qualities informed the Assessment for Fair Housing Plan.

Group A

Facilitators: Joann McCollum (West Willow Community Resource Center) and Sam Olson (OCED)
Participants: 13

Ideal Neighborhood Qualities

When asked, "If you could live anywhere and money was no object, what would you look for in a neighborhood?" participants described the following neighborhood qualities:

- Housing values
- Good neighbors
- Schools
- Beauty
- Quiet
- Security
- Access to amenities
- Diversity
- Close to shopping, business
- Mobility:
 - Walking paths
 - Bike lanes
- Strong history
- Parks
- Public transit
- Ordinances enforced
- Governance: township agenda and priorities
- Near bodies of water
- Clean water
- Homeowner associations
- Living without pollution (noise, air, soil, odor)
- Away from airport and highway
- Easy access to other places and cities (i.e. airport, Chicago)

When asked about how West Willow compares to these ideal neighborhood qualities, here's what people had to say:

- West Willow is more diverse than what the US Census indicates (estimated 65% African American and Hispanic).
- West Willow has walking paths, parks, public transportation, and easy access to other places, such as the airport and other cities.
- Residents felt that West Willow didn't compare as well with the following aspects:
 - Housing values - values are not changing and are under average.
 - Beauty - there is litter and glass in the park, trees are not maintained and there are issues with the sewer and infrastructure.
 - Quiet - the nearby highway and airport, and cars with music, make for a noisy neighborhood
 - Security - there is some crime in the area.
 - Access to amenities - it's okay, but mostly dependent on a car.
 - Bike lanes.
 - Ordinances are enforced, but are too restrictive and are not friendly to businesses.
 - Living without pollution (noise, air, soil, odor).
 - Away from airport and highway.

When asked if West Willow is one of the best places to live in Ypsilanti, participants said both no and yes. Here are their reasons:

No...

- Better than what it was in the 1980's (drugs)
- Used to be the best
- If not in West Willow, wouldn't live in Ypsi (city and township)
- It's not the best, but it's not the worse
- Gets the worst reputation
- Local media sources cover negative news, but doesn't cover positive things, such as the summer program
- Police: like their presence, but they speed- need to be more careful and go through more training

Yes...

- Knows all neighbors
- Lots of space
- Secure and stable
- Parks

Participants agreed that there is a need to balance between subsidized housing/rentals and homeownership throughout the neighborhood. Homeownership is more stable because people invest in their homes. Rentals are not an investment.

Resources Used

Participants had learned about things like schools, programs, child care, bus routes, and so on through word of mouth, Facebook, emails, Newsweek, and the library.

Housing

All participants currently own their home. All participants owned their current homes for over 10 years. All participants believe their housing is affordable.

Cost of Living

The group switched gears to talk a little more about affordability and the cost of living, for instance, monthly mortgage or rent, utilities, transportation costs, child care, et cetera. When asked how (if at all) the cost of living in the West Willow neighborhood has changed over the past 2 to 3 years, participants shared mixed responses:

- Cost of living has changed: 4
- Cost of living changed some: 9
- Cost of living changed quite a bit and/or a lot: 0

Education (student loans and tuition for their children), insurance, and food/groceries were among the major expenses after housing.

Looking for Housing

Four participants actively looked for an apartment or house to rent or own in the last two years (three of the four participant had looked in the last 12 months, and one participant had looked in the last two years). When participants were asked if they were to leave West Willow, theoretically, where they would look for housing, participants mentioned the following areas:

- 45 minutes radius of West Ann Arbor: Adrian, Howell, Brighton, Grass Lake - rural areas
- Belleville – schools
- West Michigan
- Wayne County – Romulus, Mt. Clemens (near bodies of water)- grew up in Romulus, want to go back
- Ann Arbor
- City of Ypsi- historic area
- Dexter - can't afford and not diverse
- Chelsea - can't afford and not diverse
- Saline
- Toledo
- Thought of Canton, but now would never go – too dense/too many people

Participants were asked about their experience when applying to rent or trying to purchase a home they were interested in, and if they felt like their options were in any way limited or that they had been treated differently. Here's what they shared:

- Can't afford
- Diversity- how comfortable you'd be
- Someone physically looked at 56 properties in 6 months
 - What was affordable and on the wish list did not match – a lot of work to research
- A lot of work to look for housing
- Tried to sell in 2009 but couldn't because of housing crash
- Had a great realtor to help
- Directed to West Willow – wanted to move here, less risk, school district
- Brick homes- better quality and structure

Themes & Strategies

Participants brainstormed themes that came up in discussion, as well as some strategies to address the themes.

Themes	Strategies
Reputation	
Rentals - lawns are not maintained, lack of lawn maintenance catches on	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Renters can care like homeowners do • Take care of property
Environmental hazards <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • No bike lanes • Car dependent • Pollution 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Listen to residents and take residents' opinions into consideration (i.e. MDOT and the trees)
Decisions are made without public comment <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • MDOT and county road commission 	

Lastly, participants were asked if there was anything else they thought OCED staff should know that hadn't been covered. Participants also listed positive things about living in West Willow.

Other	Positives
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • No political voice like we used to- example of calling the Township and the call was disconnected with no follow-up • Levels of government- when to go to township and county meetings, MDOT and transportation authority meetings • Hard to communicate with 3,000+ people, but communication needs to be improved • Township is working to live stream meetings and post a newsletter 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Annual picnic • Fewer accidents because of stop lights • Neighborhood association – learned how to organize and some leadership skills • No negatives • Children went to elementary school here and could walk to school • Bus routes • Partnership with county and other agencies • Ordinances in place • Summer program • Police presence • House has never been broken into • Political capital- elected officials do listen and host voting day • MDOT and stop lights – learning how and where to apply political pressure • Walkability • Community Resource Center and its 501(c)3 status

Group B

Facilitators: Teresa Gillotti and Tara Cohen (OCED)

Participants: 4

Ideal Neighborhood Qualities

When asked, "If you could live anywhere and money was no object, what would you look for in a neighborhood?" participants described the following neighborhood qualities:

- Good neighbors
- Good Schools
- Spaces for Kids to Play
- Public Safety/Police presence
- Access to amenities – Shopping/conveniences within walking distance
- Walking trails/Open Green Spaces
- Trees
- Sidewalks
- Parks
- Public transit
- Access to Elected Officials
- Well-maintained Streets
- Street Lights
- Neighborhood Watch Groups
- Close to Medical Facilities
- Good Public Services (garbage, fire, water, sewer, law enforcement, reliable power in storms)

When asked about how their neighborhood compares to these ideal neighborhood qualities, participants noted their neighborhoods (including Gault Village, Ford Lake Heights, Fairway Hills, and Pittsfield Township (Clubview)) were quite comparable to their ideal neighborhood. There were some mixed reviews when it came to schools, access to amenities, and parks.

Resources Used

Participants had learned about things like schools, programs, child care, bus routes, et cetera, through Mlive, Google alerts, Newsfeeds, Facebook, Nextdoor.com, neighbors and word of mouth, neighborhood associations, email, doing their own research, public radio (WEMU), the newspaper, TV (MSNBC), and local businesses.

Housing

All participants currently own their home, and all have owned their current home for more than 10 years. All four participants considered their housing to be affordable (all had paid off their mortgage).

Cost of Living

Facilitators switched gears to talk a little more about affordability and the cost of living. When asked how the cost of living in their neighborhood has changed over the past 2 to 3 years, participants shared mixed responses:

- Stayed about the same: 2
- Risen some but not enough to affect having or wanting to move away: 2
- Risen quite a bit to the point of thinking about moving: 0

Utilities (including phone and internet), home maintenance, property taxes, car payments, auto insurance, financial support for their children, and travel expenses are among the major expenses, after housing.

Looking for Housing

Before purchasing their current home, participants lived in the following areas:

- Ecorse/Munger Road area, Ypsilanti
- University of Michigan Townhouses, Ann Arbor
- Golfside Apartments, Pittsfield Township
- Colonial Square Co-operative, Ann Arbor

When participants were asked, theoretically, if they were to leave West Willow, where would they look for housing, participants mentioned the following areas:

- Three participants said they would stay right where they are.
 - Would stay and invest in the local youth/community center.
 - Close to family
 - Would stay but would do a lot of traveling!
- One participant said they would move to Grand Rapids ("Beltline"); a good friend lives there, and the city has undergone extensive revitalization efforts in last decade.

Participants were asked about their experience when applying to rent or trying to purchase a home they were interested in, and if they felt like their options were in any way limited or that they were treated differently. Participants shared they didn't experience many limitations other than financial.

Themes & Strategies

Participants brainstormed themes that came up in discussion:

- Happy where we are
- Long-term homeownership/stability
- Grounded by having family nearby

When asked if there was anything else OCED staff should know about their neighborhood that hadn't been covered yet, participants mentioned:

- Chose to live in Ypsilanti Township because the jobs were here.
- Concept of "Motor State" – focus on car ownership implies that no car means not a real citizen.
- Importance of reliable transportation options – for success in school, job opportunities, etc.
 - Long bus commutes puts people living on East side of Washtenaw County at a disadvantage
- Stark disparities in Washtenaw County - one participant shared they were saddened to see the lack of opportunity as compared to the neighborhoods we envision. Life course of a child is still determined by their zip code and the neighborhood where they grow up. Institutional and inter-generational poverty is a problem in our county.