



Moving Forward in Union County

Forging a Shared Path



PREPARED BY THE HARWOOD
INSTITUTE FOR PUBLIC
INNOVATION IN PARTNERSHIP
WITH HONDA

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The Harwood Institute for Public Innovation is a nonprofit, nonpartisan organization that equips people, organizations, communities, and networks with the tools to bridge divides, build capacity, and tackle shared challenges. The Harwood Institute's work is rooted in a philosophy of Civic Faith and the practice of Turning Outward. Founded in 1988, the Institute's approach has spread to all 50 states across the U.S. and 40 countries around the world.

For more than 60 years in the U.S., Honda has been committed to making positive contributions to the communities where its associates live and work. Honda's mission is to create products and services that help people fulfill their life's potential, while conducting business in a sustainable manner and fostering a diverse and inclusive workplace. Advancing its corporate social responsibility, Honda and the Honda USA Foundation support this direction through giving focused on education, the environment, mobility, traffic safety and community. Learn more at csr.honda.com.

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Letter from Honda

Honda believes in The Power of Dreams. And our American Dream started right here in Union County, with the first U.S.-made Honda product rolling off the line in Marysville in 1979.

Over these past 40-plus years, our commitment to quality and the unstoppable spirit of our highly skilled associates have allowed us to continually set new standards of engineering and production excellence. Today, our Ohio operations include five state-of-the-art manufacturing plants, a North American automotive development facility, parts centers, purchasing operations, and considerable support functions that employ more than 15,000 associates and contribute millions of dollars to the Ohio economy every year.

Our dedication to Union County goes far beyond the jobs we provide. We work to ensure our associates have opportunities to engage with and serve the community. We are dedicated to ensuring that Honda's philanthropic investments create sustainable impact aligned with the community's shared aspirations and needs.

Reflective of the company's values, Honda's five pillars of Corporate Social Responsibility are Education, Environment, Mobility, Traffic Safety, and Community. In Union County, and in our communities across the country, we seek to make investments that advance each of these areas. That's why we partnered with The Harwood Institute for Public Innovation

to identify the community's strengths to build upon and the challenges to address moving forward.

Honda neither conducted this research nor produced this report. The views reflected in this report are not necessarily reflective of the company's perspective. Still, we believe this report can help illuminate the county's strengths and the key issues that matter to residents. It can also help catalyze the community to work together in new ways, building upon its strengths and rich history. As for Honda, we will use this report—and the discussions that come from it—to help inform our strategy for future community investments. We deeply value the trust and relationships we have built with residents and leaders across Union County and look forward to discussing how Honda can best partner with the community in the future.

In addition to our belief in The Power of Dreams, we believe in being a company that society wants to exist. We hope this report helps residents and leaders as they work to further strengthen Union County for all who call this community home. Honda is so proud to be a member of this community, and we are excited and ready to keep moving forward in and with Union County.



Yvette Hunsicker

VP of Corporate Social Responsibility and Inclusion and Diversity, Honda

Preface

Union County is vibrant and healthy. It is growing fast. At the same time, the community faces a vital choice: How will it maintain the good things it loves while confronting the challenges of growth and change?

Communities have the ability to shape their own futures. And yet, not all communities grab hold of the opportunity to engage people, face hard issues, and find new ways to tackle shared challenges. The pull of the status quo creates a kind of inertia. Sure, there are conversations taking place and actions being taken, but they can fail to truly address key issues.

When you listen to the voices of Union County, what becomes clear is that people are seeking better ways to move forward together. They want deeper connections between residents and leaders and more open and authentic discussion about the challenges before them. They yearn to maintain the community's close-knit, neighborly feel even as growth brings new people to the area.

This report doesn't prescribe specific solutions; instead, it seeks to illuminate a path forward that enables people—all people, from all parts of the county—to bridge divides, generate shared purpose, and discover ways to move forward together.

During my more than 35 years of doing this work, I have seen what it takes for communities to move forward. Enough people must make the intentional choice to step forward, Turn Outward toward one another, and set in motion meaningful actions that spread throughout a community like a chain reaction. Developing new initiatives and programs cannot be the sole focus. Communities like Union County must remember: How we do the work is as important as what we do. Thus, our work must forge a stronger civic foundation upon which positive actions can take root, grow, and spread over time.

Our country needs more examples of communities coming together to forge a common future, especially in the midst of people's real differences. To achieve this, people must show up and work together to shape the community's future. In Union County, people have the opportunity to create new ways to move forward while honoring what they love about their community.

Moving forward in Union County requires forging a shared path. Now is the time.



Richard C. Harwood
President and Founder

A Guide to this Report

In 2022, Honda began discussions with The Harwood Institute for Public Innovation about how to help build upon the strengths of the Union County community through its Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) activities. As a down payment on this work, Honda asked the Institute to help further identify those strengths to build on and things to address moving forward. This report, *Moving Forward in Union County: Forging a Shared Path*, presents what we found. Honda neither conducted this research nor wrote this report. As such, the views contained within are not necessarily reflective of Honda's perspective.

This report is not intended to be a scorecard on the community; nor does it prescribe specific solutions for moving forward. Instead, it is intended for the community to better understand how people across the county see and experience life in Union County, and to offer key areas for strengthening its civic culture. Note that throughout this report, we use "Union County" to refer to the whole Union County community, not just county government.

Over a six-month period, The Harwood Institute undertook a series of 16 conversations with community residents from different areas across Union



County, with multiple conversations held in Marysville. Each conversation was held with cross-sections of approximately 10 people. We held three conversations specifically with high school students.

In addition, The Harwood Institute conducted 36 in-depth interviews with community leaders, which included elected officials and leaders from nonprofits, education, religious institutions, businesses, and other areas. There is one additional point to be made about how the report was done. Each individual quote was selected only if it represented larger patterns found in the research. The selected quotes come from across all of The Harwood Institute's interviews and conversations.

Here are the sections of the report that follow:

Introduction

This section provides an overview of the report. In it, we outline four main themes that emerged from the conversations and interviews in Union County.

Our Voices

In this section, you will hear people in Union County describe how they see and experience the community and share their hopes and concerns about the future.

Union County's Public Capital

This section is a snapshot and analysis of the fundamental structures, networks, and norms of Union County through the lens of The Harwood Institute's Public Capital Framework. This snapshot reflects what it takes for a community to work together effectively. It was developed through the Institute's research and on-the-ground work in communities in all 50 U.S. states.

Building the Community's Civic Strength

This section lays out key recommendations for Union County to invest in and develop its civic capabilities alongside the steps to catalyze and grow efforts that build trust and a sense of possibility and hope.



Introduction

People love Union County. So many enjoy life here because of the close-knit feel, small-town character, and good schools. Many lifelong residents can't imagine living anywhere else. And new residents keep pouring in. Union County is growing fast; in fact, it's one of the fastest growing counties in all of Ohio.

Yet amid all the growth, concerns are growing, too.

People are wondering—indeed, some are concerned—about where the county is headed. Union County has worked hard to preserve its natural beauty and neighborly connections over the past decades. But how can Union County continue growing while preserving the things that people value? How will growth affect different communities and people? Union County is quickly facing a fundamental choice: Will people wake up one day to find a community they no longer recognize, or will they shape their own future?

Where the Community Stands

When listening to the voices of residents and leaders, it is clear that people here care about each other. When someone is in need, people show up to help. A

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Along with all its benefits, growth brings with it certain pressures and new realities that can shake the foundation of any community. Union County is not immune.

motto one individual offered for Union County is, “People helping people.” This commitment to one another is the bedrock of the community. Even with the county's growth, people still point to this neighborly spirit as a defining characteristic of their lives and this area.

Growth contributes to the vitality and future health of a community. Along with all its benefits, growth brings with it certain pressures and new realities that can shake the foundation of any community. Union County is not immune. Things change, and people wonder: What's next? One Union County resident put it this way: “What's our purpose, what's our vision? I'm not sure that has been fully articulated.”

Many ongoing efforts in the county seek to make growth work for the community. Local school districts are adapting and continuing to provide high-quality education and opportunities for families. U.S. 33 is being developed and advanced as a Smart Mobility Corridor known as “The Beta District.” The Union County Comprehensive Planning process, led by Logan-Union-Champaign Regional Planning Commission, is gathering residents’ views on the community to guide future development and decision-making. Further, numerous efforts aim to galvanize the community around growth, including speaker series and business events led by the Chamber and its business associations. Entities like the Impact60, Hope Center, Health Department, Memorial Hospital, the Mental Health and Recovery Board, and various churches are bringing people together around things that matter to the community.

Today, Union County residents and leaders have a vital opportunity to build on these efforts and forge a shared direction for moving forward. To productively engage with that opportunity—and actively shape the future—the people of Union County must work through a variety of issues and take action, together.

Our interviews and conversations were held with residents and leaders, educators and students, and people

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Union County residents and leaders have a vital opportunity to build on these efforts and forge a shared direction for moving forward.

throughout the county. They revealed four overarching themes, each of which needs the community’s concerted attention and action:

- **People want growth to be more proactively managed.** Union County’s growth is impressive and valued by many. At the same time, some people worry about individuals and families being left behind as growth abounds. Existing housing isn’t meeting the needs of the community. Traffic is on the rise. Farmland is being developed. Safety concerns are emerging. Cherished schools are under increasing stress. Residents see opportunity for more proactive management of these challenges.
- **There is a need to deepen the connection between leaders and residents.** Throughout our conversations, residents expressed frustration that leaders do not



understand their concerns and frustrations, nor their aspirations, for Union County. Even when leaders make room for residents to express their views, residents do not always believe their voices are being heard or heeded. This is a dangerous potential fissure in any community, and one not uncommon across the country. If Union County is to move forward together, more leaders and residents from all parts of the county need to turn outward toward one another and come together.

– **Residents must step forward.** While local residents are quick to watch out for each other, many tell us they have retreated from a shared responsibility for engaging in larger community life. People tend to keep to small circles of those they know and engage in broader community concerns only when their immediate self-interests are at risk. Yet Union County has pressing challenges to work through.

A community thrives only when residents are deeply engaged in talking through important issues, discovering shared aspirations, and helping to set a common direction.

– **Civic capacities must be grown.** This final theme is foundational to Union County’s future vitality. Plainly stated, Union County’s rapid growth could be outstripping the civic capacities it needs to deal with growth. Such needed capacities include more spaces for residents to engage in constructive discussions about the future; more ways for leaders and residents to interact productively; more inclusive networks that focus on issues beyond economic development; real opportunities for groups to collaborate and learn from one another; and more leaders—at all levels—who have residents and their shared aspirations in their line of sight. Growing these civic capacities is critical.

In one of our conversations, a resident asked: “Are we equipped to deal with how quickly we’re growing?” Like many similar communities in America, the answer today is not yet. But the Union County community has the ability to build on its strong history and forge an even stronger future.

Which Path Will We Take?

Union County is a beacon for growth when so many communities across America are in decline. But for a community to be healthy and thrive, growth must come in many forms, especially over time. This includes developing the civic capacities to engage with hard issues, various tensions and challenges, and abundant opportunities that come with rapid



growth. Real, concerted action is needed to forge a shared path moving forward.

The city of Marysville’s slogan is “Where the grass is greener.” Well, in Union County, some people told us, “The grass is growing!” Indeed, it is. This report reveals that people like the “green grass” of Union County; they just want to ensure that it’s cared for properly.

Let’s be clear. How the “green grass” is tended to is up for discussion. Will Union County be overrun by challenges, or will it come together to forge its future? If the community wants to take the hopeful path, it must consider these questions:

- How does the community build on the good things that are happening?
- How can it ensure that all people are included and that people do not get left out or left behind?
- What will it take to strengthen the civic capacities of the community and to catalyze and support more progress?
- How can action be taken by honoring the past and seizing the current opportunities for intentional growth?

There is no clear-cut way forward. Instead, there are choices and trade-offs to be made. People are calling to engage in that work, together.

Moving Forward, Together

Residents and leaders alike want Union County to continue to thrive while also addressing the challenges that come with growth. This will require some work. It is like a family that from all accounts is doing well, but behind closed doors often has difficulty facing and working through underlying tensions. In Union County, people want to deal more openly and directly with these tensions in order to keep the family healthy.

But not all actions will effectively move a community forward.

Over the past 35 years, The Harwood Institute has learned that it's at this very juncture that people must face reality if they are to create something different.

And yet, too often, those seeking positive change reflexively embrace old habits. We choose a path of comprehensive, highly coordinated plans, where we attempt to bring as many people and groups together as possible. But such efforts often stall out, or fail outright, due to the unwillingness or plain inability of so many groups to work together. What's more, too many community efforts do not truly know, or choose to ignore, what the community actually wants. We gravitate toward a one-size-fits-all approach, often imported from a different community with a different

history and needs. Solutions are imposed upon communities, leaving change undelivered and people feeling that they've lost control over their own lives and futures. There is a failure to understand and account for the community's context.

At the root of such approaches is an assumption that communities need to be "fixed"—as if people and communities are seeking to have someone fix them. As if the persistent challenges reflected in this report can somehow be easily solved.

Communities move forward and thrive by *growing themselves*. They unleash a chain reaction that begins with single steps and expands over time. Such actions, when they are strategic, address the community's fault lines and needs and honor people's shared aspirations. They are designed with the explicit intention to strengthen the community's civic culture: the relationships, norms, leaders, organizations, and networks

“ Residents and leaders alike want Union County to continue to thrive while also addressing the issues that come with growth.

that enable a community to work. Taken together, these expanding steps strengthen the community's civic confidence and belief in itself. Indeed, as communities grow themselves, a sense of possibility and hope grows, too.

Such hope is not based on wishful thinking; nor is it a false hope, made up of unrealistic expectations or utopian visions. What is needed is *authentic*

hope—a hope built upon realistic promises and concrete actions taken and emerging over time.

“What’s our purpose, what’s our vision? I’m not sure that’s been fully articulated.” Now, the Union County *community*—not just local government or any single entity, group, or organization—has the opportunity to engage, shape its own future, and move forward in union. ■



Our Voices

Listen to people who live in Union County, and you'll hear great affection for where they call home. Residents expressed love for the area's small-town feel and repeatedly mentioned it's a great place to live, raise a family, and send your kids to school. As you listen to these voices, you can also sense a desire for the county's rapid growth to be more proactively managed. Some people fear being left out or left behind as things change. Lived experiences vary across the county and not everyone feels their concerns are understood, or even heard. What follows is a series of themes that emerged from our conversations with residents and leaders from across Union County. Keep in mind that each quote was selected only if it represented larger patterns found in the conversations.

People Love the Community

Union County is growing in large part because it's a great place to make a home, raise a family, and send your kids to school. New and old residents alike had positive things to say about their community, with one Jerome resident sharing, "People want to raise their families here because of our values and because we're small enough to know your neighbors."

“People are proud of where they come from here.”

Others described Union County as "close-knit," "a place where families thrive," and as somewhere you "still get that rural feel." Time and again, residents voiced an appreciation for a certain "way of life" that is grounded in small-town living and strong character. "People are proud of where they come from here," a rural resident shared, while a Marysville resident "really likes our hometown feel" and "loved growing up here." The hometown feel is part of what attracts new people to the community. "We are a destination, which is great. People want to come here," noted a Marysville leader. Notably, we heard from numerous residents that "part of the strength of Union County is based on Honda's presence." That's because "when Honda arrived, our area flourished," according to a Richwood leader.

Many people take advantage of their proximity to Columbus. Being nearby "adds some culture and activities that are easy for us to participate in," said



a Jerome resident. Another Marysville resident highlighted their appreciation of “the location being so close to Dublin and Ohio State.” At the same time, there are plenty of things to do and get involved in throughout Union County without having to drive to the big city. Numerous residents mentioned Friday Nights Uptown in Marysville, school and rec sports, county fairs, special holiday activities like Community Care Train, and other community events as things that make their area special. Further, “there’s an unusual amount of art,” one Marysville leader emphasized, which is something “you don’t always find in a rural community.”

While people love Union County’s favorable geography, fun events, and aesthetic vibrance, the people are what really makes the community feel like home. One Marysville resident described “a strong reserve of people

that want to foster that community feel.” “Everybody’s helpful and nice,” related a Marysville high school student. Regarding the people and the opportunities available in Union County, another Marysville student said, “You can always feel like you belong somewhere.”

We Watch Out for Each Other

There’s a strong, deeply-rooted ethic of watching out for your neighbors in Union County. Here, people consistently step up to meet the needs of others. “You need anything, your neighbors help you,” one Liberty Township resident said. This neighborly feel was noted across ages, backgrounds, and parts of the county. A Marysville student said, “I feel like a lot of the community is close. If you need help from somebody, it is really quick to get.” In rural areas, a Byhalia resident explained, “We take care of one another.”

Across the community, you find “devoted people who give and good-hearted people who help each other out,” according to a Marysville resident.

“You need anything, your neighbors help you.”

It's not just neighbors who help each other. Strangers step up too. "If you post something on a Facebook page needing help, someone is always going to respond," shared a Magnetic Springs resident. A newcomer to Marysville said the community vibe is different here. "We respect each other in ways that many of the people when I lived in Columbus did not." This spirit of valuing and supporting each other pervades the community, with one Marysville leader noting, "It's so nice that people are involved. They help each other out."

Most examples residents provided of people helping others were individual acts rather than shared or collective action. One effort called Be the Community brought "all the churches together" for a community clean-up day. But that was in the past, something people remember fondly rather than something they still see today. The lack of collective action frustrates some. In fact, one leader lamented the

pushback that a new homeless shelter received, feeling like the community should have come together to deal with such a pressing need. "I was really disappointed with it, because sometimes we get stuck on our success and don't think there's any problems whatsoever." Another Marysville resident illuminated a similar pattern: "Most of the examples I can think of are just personal." While personal acts of service are critical, meeting the county's current moment will require more than individualized responses.

Growth: Deep Support Tempered by Real Concern

Union County is growing—and fast! Jerome residents describe growth in their area as "rapid," "phenomenal," and "amazing." A Marysville student sees "a constant growth of new people coming in to help make our community better." Many people equate growth with "high





wages” as businesses add new, good-paying jobs to the area. The growth “brings up our quality of life,” said one Jerome resident.

Overall, residents tend to welcome the benefits of growth. Many Marysville residents discuss the benefits of job opportunities, new grocery stores, and the bustling uptown district. But there are mixed views about the implications of such rapid growth. Some residents—especially those living in rural areas—worry that growth in Marysville will bring issues like crime, traffic congestion, and overpopulation. Others are concerned the county will lose its farmland and rural character because of the business development, solar panels, and new housing. “They’re taking good farming ground and making housing developments,” someone in Byhalia noted. The disappearance of farmland

and the notion that development “is taking good land and destroying it” came up throughout rural conversations. One long-term Marysville resident in a leadership position emphasized just how much some residents oppose growth: “Some people are just digging in; they don’t want growth. They don’t want more change.” For other long-time residents, like this one from Jerome who has “lived here for over 39 years,” growth brings excitement and revitalization. “It’s not like it used to be, but some of the growth is great,” they said.

Even as many see benefits from growth, some people fear growth may displace the community’s small-town feel. “We like it small,” was a common refrain all across the county. Another common anxiety is that new residents will be disruptive, bringing views that don’t align with existing perspectives. A Byhalia resident wondered, “With the new people coming in, will they share our concerns?” Many long-time residents, including this one who lives outside Marysville, see newcomers as lacking

“Some people are just digging in; they don’t want growth. They don’t want more change.”

“respect for people that have lived here for a long time and the way things work.” Even relatively newer residents have different perspectives around growth. A 2014 transplant to Marysville said they moved to the area because they “got tired of the big city.” What is important to them now is “keeping the other city folks from coming here and spoiling this wonderful environment.”

For students, many of whom have spent their whole lives in the area, growth brings an exciting influx of “people of different races and backgrounds,” said a Marysville teen. “If you don’t have different people surrounding you, you’re not going to become a better person,” a North Union student shared. “How are you supposed to learn anything? You’re just stuck at a standstill.” A leader sees the importance of “exposure to cultural diversity” for youth, saying currently, “the opportunities are not here.” The pros and cons of growth are often discussed and debated throughout Union County. The tension many people feel is reflected by one leader saying, “We’re losing our culture. But overall, I think most people do enjoy the growth.”

Proactively Managed Growth

A Marysville resident asked a question that many are wondering: “Are we equipped to deal with how quickly we’re

“Are we equipped to deal with how quickly we’re growing?”

growing?” No matter where people live, there is widespread agreement—and a strong desire—for growth to be proactively managed throughout the county. Many people, like this resident, hope that “we figure these things out and start the collaboration earlier instead of being reactive.”

TRAFFIC AND ROAD SERVICE

People in Union County feel traffic problems accelerating even as the Ohio Department of Transportation works to make improvements. Currently, traffic is particularly problematic for those in Marysville but is hardly limited to the county seat. “The freeway going out to Honda is awful. Too much traffic,” an Allen Center resident said. Many roads simply were not built to accommodate so many vehicles. Near Jerome, there are now “thousands and thousands of trucks running on a two-lane road,” explained a resident. Further, people in rural areas are frustrated by increased traffic on county roads that used to be quiet. Roundabouts are a particular point of contention. Referencing a plan to put one in near Bunsold Elementary

School on Highway 4, a Liberty Township resident simply said, “I hate roundabouts.” Some farmers, like this one who lives near Richwood, find them frustrating because, “you can’t get farm equipment down them. They’re not big enough.”

In Marysville, a resident emphasized “the difference in traffic in just four years” due to the area’s rapid growth. “How are we going to manage the additional traffic if it’s already a struggle?” another Marysville resident wondered. Similarly, a Jerome Township local felt, “Traffic congestion is getting out of hand.” Overall, people felt strongly that “transportation and road service” should keep up with the pace of development—but in their eyes, it’s not. This theme connects with safety, discussed below. One Marysville resident said, “There’s this emerging phenomenon of tons of kids on their bicycles sharing heavy traffic roads. Bike lanes would be a welcome addition, but I don’t know if that’s possible.”

HOUSING

Housing inventory and affordability regularly came up as key issues. One leader said, “There is a crazy amount of residential growth and housing developments coming in here. You have people nervous about the changes happening in our community and rightfully so.” Despite new homes being

built in rapid succession, housing stock is not keeping up with demand. “A lot of families that have already moved here are in apartments because they’re trying to find a home,” said one resident. Talking about the area’s growing workforce needs, one leader shared a common sentiment: “Housing is critical to our future.”

Many people worry about how the rising costs of housing impact low-income residents, blue-collar workers, and young people. “The average laborer can’t afford the new housing they’re building,” one rural resident said. “Our high school graduates are leaving the area. They can’t afford it,” explained a Marysville resident. Apartments also seem to be getting too expensive for some in the community. “There’s nothing out there for low-income people,” a Marysville resident said. We heard consistently that, “They’re building huge amounts of housing. None of it is affordable.” No matter how much people say they love Union County, the affordability problem has some wondering if they will

“Are we going to be able to afford to stay in our homes and raise our families?”

be priced out or should leave to save money. One Marysville resident shared, “I love it here, but if the housing prices or the traffic doesn’t get better, we’re leaving.” Another wondered, “Are we going to be able to afford to stay in our homes and raise our families?”

SCHOOLS

Public schools across the county—from Marysville to North Union to Fairbanks to Dublin Jerome—are points of pride and “main selling points” for why people move to the area. Yet many fear growth will strain the school system. “We feel like we have a great school system right now. Is it going to remain a great school system?” asked an Allen Center resident. That question was on people’s minds throughout our conversations. It is critical for local schools to educate students “to be healthy enough and prepared enough to be contributors

“We feel like we have a great school system right now. Is it going to remain a great school system?”

to the community,” shared a leader, which is a real challenge given growing enrollment.

Worries over stretched schools are compounded by a nervousness about paying for growing needs. “Now there’s the school levy on the ballot,” one Allen Center resident said, in reference to the May 2023 ballot. “People are having a hard time affording more taxes, so how are we able to support the schools?” they asked. Shortly after that conversation, the levy was rejected. While many are relieved, others are



concerned about the implications of not passing additional funding for schools. People are worried about larger class sizes, future cuts to extracurriculars, and trouble retaining the best teachers. One Marysville educator shared, “We’ve got to be able to continue to attract quality teachers and continue to offer after school activities that keep kids busy.” Will school quality continue to define Union County?

INFRASTRUCTURE

Insufficient or lagging infrastructure is a key growing pain for residents across the county. Some people mentioned roads, while others discussed utilities like water, gas, or broadband internet. Regardless of the specific need, infrastructure issues held special weight among rural communities. A Raymond local said, “I just want the basic necessities of life,” when discussing the lack of quality water in their area. An individual in the Liberty Township conversation shared their own infrastructure challenge: “One thing I’ve heard a lot of people say, ‘God, I wish I had internet cable.’” In Magnetic Springs, the big concern is sewage and flooding issues. “Our storm drains can’t flow properly. I pray all this money being dumped into this sewage project is actually going to work. If not, our town is screwed,” stated a resident.



While a number of upgrades are underway, some Marysville residents feel infrastructure requires even more attention. “It doesn’t really seem like the money’s going back into the things it should. Our roads are really bad,” one said, echoing county-wide concerns about traffic and road quality. Down in Jerome, residents said that their “explosive growth is not supported by infrastructure.” The lack of sidewalks and bike lanes is inconvenient and raises safety concerns. “It’s difficult to imagine your kid is going to walk or bike safely,” said one resident. Insufficient infrastructure is felt throughout the county. And it is something citizens desire urgent action on.

SOLAR FARMS

Solar farms are top-of-mind for those in rural Union County as people talk about the rapidly-changing landscape of the area. A Richwood area resident shared a perspective we heard across rural areas: Solar farms are “destroying

or taking away our prime farm ground when those panels could be supported in areas where there's no fertile ground." That echoes feelings some hold about new housing developments. For others, it's about appearance. "Would you rather look at a plot of woods or a field or would you rather look at a bunch of pieces of metal?" one rural resident asked.

A discussion of solar farms led some residents to express concerns with national politics. A rural leader said, "the majority don't like the initiative toward green that our current administration is pushing." Another said that for many rural residents, solar farms are a "forced pill to swallow." At the same time, many people we spoke with sympathize with farmers who embrace solar, recognizing "they can make more money" that way. Some feel that it should be the landowners' decision for whether to embrace solar or not. "I shouldn't be allowed, and other entities shouldn't be allowed, to stop them," a rural resident said.

SAFETY

As growth spreads, so too does an undercurrent of worry related to safety. Residents reported frequently hearing about violence in Columbus. A Milford Center individual said, "I personally see Columbus creeping up on us at a pace that I'm not really comfortable with." In

Raymond, one resident said they "worry about my grandkids going to school and getting shot."

"More problems, more traffic, and more crime" are the major growth-related concerns for a Plain City resident.

"When I was growing up here as a kid," a Marysville resident shared, "we didn't hear about people getting stabbed and people getting shot. But it seems like it's getting a little bit more real." Across the county, people "want it to remain a safe community," in the words of an Allen Center resident. "Accomplishing that will require more funding for different community resources and things to keep people safe. Fire departments, police departments, that kind of thing," another added.





YOUTH SUPPORT

Things to do and places to go are few and far between for Union County youth. In Marysville, a leader said, “There’s not a ton of activities to engage youth. That is a concern.” A Plain City leader sees the same problem: “We don’t have spaces for youth right now at all.” Especially given the area’s growth, “We’re going to need more things for kids to do,” added another leader. Having nowhere to hang out is the simple reality for youth. “There’s not really much to do outside of school,” a North Union student said.

In pursuit of places to go, many students leave the county. “I really wish there was more to do here and that I didn’t have to drive 20 minutes to see a movie or go shopping,” one Marysville student said. Another student shared a joke among their friend group that, “Going to Walmart is one of the only things that you can do in Marysville.” Students connected the lack of places to go with teen drug use. “We have nothing to do

here so that’s where a lot of the drug problem stems from,” a North Union student shared.

Seeing the challenges facing youth, adults express concern about mental health support for youth. “We’re seeing so many more overdoses, deaths. We’re seeing a higher rate of suicide in young adults,” one Marysville resident shared. A leader recalled the tragic suicides of two local students several years ago: “We haven’t responded the way we should as a community to better support our kids. We’ve got to have a stronger mental health system here. It’s really lacking.” Students agree there’s

“I really wish there was more to do here and that I didn’t have to drive 20 minutes to see a movie or go shopping.”

a need for more support, “especially in small-town schools where anxiety is a lot higher because everyone knows everyone, and if you do one thing wrong, everyone knows,” explained a North Union student. A Fairbanks student added, “there are definitely people who need somebody to talk to.”

Different Lived Experiences

Where people live shapes how they view and experience life in the county. One farmer said, “What’s important to us is we keep our little farms so we can feed the world. Marysville residents don’t get that. They live different lives.” Capturing these different experiences, one Marysville resident described the northern part as “more agrarian and family-oriented,” Marysville as “more growth and business oriented,” and the southern part of the county as “oriented toward a commuter sort of citizen” with many residents traveling to Columbus for work. In Magnetic Springs, a resident echoed this characterization, saying, “There’s a big difference between northern Union County and southern Union County.”

Indeed, most residents we spoke with identify with their specific pocket of the county rather than the county as a whole. People also tend to stick to areas that feel most familiar. Some even leave the

“There’s a big difference between northern Union County and southern Union County.”

county to find familiarity. “Part of our community sees themselves as part of Dublin,” explained a Jerome resident. “Their kids go to Dublin City Schools. They have friends that live in Dublin.” Meanwhile, some rural residents avoid going into “hectic” Marysville by going outside of the county to run errands. They go to Marion, Mount Victory, or Kenton “which is slower-paced, what Marysville used to be like,” according to one Byhalia resident.

Some Marysville residents mentioned that they rarely travel to—or even think about—the northern part of the county. Rural residents feel that. One shared, “Marysville is an independent area.” Various leaders and residents in the northern half of the county referenced Route 347 as a physical dividing line. Some called it a “Mason Dixon line” that separates the rural northern half of the county from a rapidly growing southern half centered in Marysville. This phenomenon of intra-county separation—one that is common in rural American communities—predates recent

growth, with a Richwood resident saying, "It's been that way my whole lifetime. It was that way prior to my lifetime." Exemplifying this division, people noted that the county has two different fairs, and even used to be "the only county in the state with three agricultural fairs."

In It Together?

Across the county, there's a general sense that "We have the same kinds of values," according to an individual from Marysville. Union County residents are united in valuing schools and families and counting on neighbors for support. Most people describe themselves as politically conservative. Many are churchgoers. But given people's different lived experiences and additional challenges discussed below, these shared values do not always translate to people being in it together.

One leader said shared goals "depend on who's in the know and who keeps up with what's going on." Meanwhile, there's "an entire population that's not being heard," shared a resident. Are those "in the know" and others truly in it together? Are people across the county aligned on how to move forward? Many residents are uncertain. Seeing the need for togetherness, one Marysville resident suggested "coming up with a profile for the area and saying, 'This is what we're going to pursue.'"

People love their community and want to help it flourish. But real obstacles are getting in the way of the community working together. Some fear national polarization is creeping into the area, even if it isn't showing up as the typical political fault lines seen elsewhere. "The polarization of politics is a nationwide thing. There's only so much we can do



about that,” shared a Marysville high school student. “As far as a united front goes, our community is still quite a ways away from that.”

A lack of cohesion and cooperation has some people feeling disheartened. “I don’t know that there are common goals anymore,” said a Marysville resident. “Compromises are not really possible, because no one can be happy with a true moderate stance.” A Magnetic Springs resident said, “people care about the same things,” but too often people “put their tails between their legs and run away.” However, some still think the right issues and conditions can bring people together. “I want to say if we had to get together, we would,” explained a Richwood resident.

Quality education was named as an important goal across the county. Yet the recent school levy demonstrated what one leader called “a misalignment of solutions.” Anticipating the ballot measure’s failure, a Marysville resident explained, “Everybody will say, ‘We got to have strong schools.’ Then you ask, ‘Okay, so you’re willing to increase your taxes to support schools?’ And they’re like, ‘Oh, I don’t know about that.’” A faith leader interviewed after the levy failed was concerned by low voter turnout. They said, “less than a quarter of people went out and voted.”

“As far as a united front goes, our community is still quite a ways away from that.”

Are the people who live in Union County truly in it together? Over time, how can the community become more in it together? These questions need to be explored through meaningful engagement, with various perspectives reflected, if Union County is to create a culture of shared responsibility.

Disconnected Leaders and Residents

Both residents and leaders were asked to rate, on a scale of one to 10, how “in it together” leaders and residents are in the community. Overall, across all conversations, both groups came in around a five—not a particularly high score. The disconnect between leaders and residents can foster distrust and resentment. According to a Magnetic Springs resident, current leadership has a “very limited viewpoint. They talk to one another instead of the population.”

A Jerome resident voiced a common frustration that “government is not working with the people.” Existing



opportunities for genuine community engagement seem to be a box-checking exercise. One Marysville resident felt that leaders “need to have more discussions with people that live in the city and ask them what they want, instead of making decisions for everybody.” Absent real conversation, misalignment between leaders and residents is inevitable—and a real concern. People, especially rural residents, feel like leaders make decisions without them. “There’s been a lot of decisions politically that have favored other areas and haven’t looked at us,” said a Byhalia resident. Many people feel out of the loop—even voiceless. “We live in a town where decisions that impact all of us have been made under the radar, and no one has a voice in it,” said an Allen Center resident.

While many residents are frustrated, some see leaders “doing their best. There are a lot of alligators to feed and they’re all hungry and they all want something,” shared a Marysville resident. Some see leaders, especially local ones, working to bring people together. In Magnetic Springs, “the council does a pretty good job creating opportunities to bring people together,” explained a resident. Yet, given the disconnection between leaders and residents, it can take “a clearly defined goal” to bring people together. That rang true for a Marysville resident who said engagement is often “a one until there’s that one issue the community needs to get together on. Then it’s a 10.” If the community is to forge a path forward that leaves no one behind, leaders need to turn outward and authentically reconnect with residents.

Who Will Step Forward?

“What’s here is what you put into it,” said a Magnetic Springs resident. People in Union County love to call the area home and want a thriving community. Yet, across the county, we heard people say, “We have a very serious problem with lack of civic participation.” As it deals with growth, difficult issues, breaches between people, and disconnects between leaders and residents, Union County finds itself at a critical juncture. If the community is

“Everybody wants to complain on social media that they don’t have a voice. But when given an opportunity, nobody shows up.”

to forge its future, people need to step forward. These conversations indicate that the status quo is not working. An Allen Center resident explained, “Everybody wants to complain on social media that they don’t have a voice. But when given an opportunity, nobody shows up.”

Across conversations, people indicated a desire to engage but named real barriers that stop them from doing so. One barrier is the lack of opportunities and places to engage. Many residents—especially in rural areas—voiced that “there’s just not a lot of public meetings here” and “there’s not a lot of common meeting places.” One common resident suggestion to increase engagement—“try to hold a meeting”—received pushback, including from a Marysville resident who indicated “very few people attend them.” Another resident worried that simply meeting could be unproductive or devolve into “complaining or griping about things.”

For opportunities people are aware of, feelings around being “just one voice” or thinking “someone else will do it”

stop people from stepping forward. A Magnetic Springs resident agreed, noting, “Say 100% of people care about the same things, maybe 10% care enough to do something about it.” We commonly heard the sentiment that, “We’ve become complacent.” For some in the community, “there’s not a gigantic need in their minds,” shared one leader. A Richwood resident, referencing a perceived decline of social clubs and volunteerism, said, “We as a society have lost an important part of what got us to where we are today.”



Still, many residents crave more communication around and better knowledge of community issues. Lacking quality sources of information or productive public outlets, many turn to social media, namely Facebook. One rural resident shared about the personal benefit of using Facebook. "If you post something on Facebook like, 'Hey, my mower broke, I need help.' There's always going to be someone that responds." But most of the people we spoke with see Facebook as a dysfunctional public square. Yet they acknowledged the page is "probably the only kind of community-based town hall-ish kind of thing" available. After all, "We do not have any local source of news. Basically, people get their information off Facebook and that's dangerous" because "a lot of things that are brought up aren't true," explained a Jerome resident. Another shared, "If you don't have a trusted source of news, it's hard to pull the community together when there's a challenge."

“We have a voice
Whether we know how
to use it or choose to
use it is a completely
different story.”

Despite frustration and the presence of real barriers, residents have not given up. A resident in Jerome declared, "We have a voice. Whether we know how to use it or choose to use it is a completely different story." Forging a new path requires that more people engage. Yet as a Marysville resident cautioned, "that's a much bigger step." A rural resident believed, "You can help make the change." Who will step forward in Union County? ■





UNION COUNTY
VETERANS
PLAZA

Union County's Public Capital



The Harwood Institute's research and on-the-ground initiatives in communities across the U.S. and elsewhere suggest that for a community to work effectively, it needs a web of fundamental structures, networks, and norms. "Public capital" is what we call this rich, complex system. Nine factors make up The Harwood Institute's definition of public capital, each of which a community can actively develop.

In this section, we offer a close look at Union County through the lens of public capital. This framework should be thought of as a touchstone—not a scorecard—for understanding the current conditions of the community and how to strengthen it so it can tackle its challenges and create a greater sense of possibility and hope.

While trying to picture how public capital works, keep in mind an ecosystem that exists right outside your door—or put more simply, think about how our air, water, land, and habitat interact daily. On their own, each of these factors seems quite simple and isolated at times. Indeed, each is often talked about as an independent element. Yet what makes an ecosystem work is not only the robustness of each element, but the healthy relationships between and among them. Public capital operates in much the same way. The nine factors are both independent and highly interdependent. It is the rich, complex interaction between them that makes a community work.

Public Capital

An Abundance of Social Gatherings — that enable people to learn about what is happening in the community and begin to develop a sense of mutual trust.

Organized Spaces for Interaction — where people can come together to learn about, discuss, and often act on common challenges. These spaces help a community begin to identify and tap resources to address concerns.

Catalytic Organizations — that help engage people in public life spur discussion on community challenges and marshal a community's resources to move ahead. These organizations help lay the foundation for community action, but do not act as the driving force.

Safe Havens for Decision Makers — where a community's leaders can deliberate and work through community concerns in "unofficial," candid discussions.

Strong, Diverse Leadership — that extends to all layers of a community, understands the concerns of the community as a whole, and serves as a connector among individuals and organizations throughout the community.

Informal Networks & Links — that connect various individuals, groups, organizations, and institutions together to create the cross-fertilization effect of experiences, knowledge, and resources. People carry and spread ideas, messages, and community norms from place to place.

Conscious Community Discussion — where a community has ample opportunity to think about and sort through its public concerns before taking action. People play an active role in helping decide how the community should act.

Community Norms for Public Life — that help guide how people act individually, interact, and work together. These norms set the standards and tone for people's engagement.

A Shared Purpose for the Community — that sends an explicit message about the community's aspirations and helps reinforce that everyone is headed toward a common goal.

An Abundance of Social Gatherings

One of the most tangible dimensions of public capital is the presence of social gathering spaces. From youth sports to potluck dinners, these are occasions for people to learn about what is going on in the community, forge relationships, and begin to develop a sense of mutual trust. These gatherings are the seedbed for creating and maintaining public capital.

WHAT'S GOING ON?

Schools, sporting events, and restaurants are common social gathering places. “Most people are surprised by how many people they meet through their kids. That’s where those relationships form,” a leader said. In Jerome, “a lot of the community engagement centers



“Youth sports are a huge part of our community.”

around our schools,” added another leader. “Youth sports are a huge part of our community,” one leader said. A rural resident emphasized high school sporting events are “sold out” across Union County. Beyond schools and sports, restaurants are “where people get together,” explained a leader. Richwood residents meet up at Kelly’s Kitchen or the Villa; near Allen Center, it’s Ramsey’s; and Der Dutchman is popular in Plain City. Marysville has an array of options.

Church is an important gathering place for many residents. People across the county indicate that it is a “fairly strong faith-based community” and “a lot happens on Sunday mornings.” Churches are regarded as “very welcoming to new residents,” according to a leader. Congregations often share meals before or after services, and “many churches have great programs going on,” explained a Byhalia resident. A Plain City individual said, “Our community is pretty faith-based. We have a number of churches and a lot of folks who participate in that.” One leader put it simply, “Church is a big place for interaction.”

Much social activity is centered in Marysville. Marysville hosts many of Union County’s biggest events, including Friday Nights Uptown, which “truly belongs to everybody,” attracting “different nationalities and backgrounds, different ages, different ethnicities.” While some residents travel to Dublin or Marion for various events, Marysville has a lot going on with its various parks, the YMCA, and festivals and events like the county fair and festive Christmas walk. The newly-renovated Avalon Theater is “bringing cultural arts back to downtown,” shared a leader. While there are farmers’ markets across the county, the Marysville market is especially popular on summertime Saturdays. “There’s huge attendance and farmers from all over the county.” People also like eating at Marysville’s different restaurants.

County fairs are the biggest gatherings of the year. Both the Union County Fair and the Richwood Independent Fair were widely mentioned. The Richwood Independent Fair in September attracts many residents from northern Union County. “We get a week off of school for it because everyone participates,” explained a North Union student. The Union County Fair in Marysville “is centrally located to the rest of the county, keeps our ties to the rural community, and basically shuts down the county for a week because everybody’s there,” according to one

leader. Another leader joked that “you can get a lot of politicking done at the Union County Fair.”

WHAT LIES BEHIND IT?

People across the county stick to their close-knit groups. The “close-knit” and “hometown feel” is part of what defines life in Union County. It can also lead to people sticking to what’s familiar—their specific part of the county and close-knit group—and not venturing far from home. Overall, the county is “pretty insular,” explained a leader. This was especially heard among rural residents, with one saying, “Everybody likes the country living. The goal is to be away from other people.” Another resident explained, “People from Richwood aren’t going to Marysville and people from Marysville aren’t coming to Richwood.” Some students also noted



the insular feel, with one saying, “We are a close-knit community, and I think it’s only extended to a certain extent.” People do “go to other areas for things like gas or groceries,” said one resident, but they typically stay in local villages for social gatherings.

Fewer social gathering places exist in rural parts of the county. While neighborhoods in Marysville and Jerome often have regular gatherings, including various “neighborhood clubs,” rural areas have fewer common gathering places. “We’re a small village, so there’s not a ton of places,” explained a rural resident. When they do get together, it’s usually at houses or after church. Sometimes people meet up at farmers’ markets on the weekend. But overall, we heard repeatedly that rural Union County lacks social gathering places and “does not have spaces for youth right now at all.” Outside of fair week, a student shared, “There isn’t a lot of stuff to do in Richwood.”

Youth need more social gathering places. A Fairbanks High School student said they go to “different places like friends’ houses and farms,” but there is not much else to do in their area. “There’s a pool for the kids, but we do lack spaces for kids that are going to be a positive influence,” explained a Plain City resident. Students and adults alike noted that young people lack places to gather. A North Union student said, “We

have a pond that we call a lake, and it has a trail, and we have a park and a library. That’s it.” Other North Union students said, “We need more stuff to do in our area, because that will help with the drug problem.”

Organized Spaces for Interaction

These spaces provide room for people in a community to come together to learn about, discuss, and often act on common challenges. Organized spaces for interaction help a community begin to identify and tap resources to address concerns. The focus is on the opportunities that exist for people to come together—and not necessarily the existence of physical buildings.



WHAT'S GOING ON?

Most organized spaces are geared toward the business community. “The chamber meetings are very much a who’s who in the community,” one leader reported. Business impact breakfasts “typically have 50 to 70 people every month, and we talk about impactful issues.” Business associations in Marysville, Richwood, Industrial Parkway, and Plain City provide opportunities to discuss current events affecting the area and look for ways to improve the business environment. Other organized spaces exist, including political groups and the Marysville Area Ministerial Association, which meets monthly. Still, the most widely-cited spaces are business-focused.

Various spaces exist to address community health issues. Various health entities convene spaces focused on pressing health issues, including drug abuse, mental health, and hunger. The Drug-Free Coalition, according to a leader, “has worked really hard to pull in people from different avenues to bring together a dialogue on figuring out solutions.” Another leader shared, “Our Mental Health and Recovery Board pulls together community members in the behavioral health and social service space.” Prevention Awareness Support Services (PASS) “partners with the Mental Health and Recovery Board to form a Suicide Prevention Coalition.”

And the Union County Food Council, convened by the Health Department’s Creating Healthy Communities program, brings together various partners to address food access in the county.

More opportunities are needed to explore challenges around growth.

Dealing with Union County’s rapid “growth and the plan for growth”—which feels “out of control” to some—is a critical focus for the community. Various planning meetings are “setting the tone for the growth for the next five to seven years,” explained a Marysville resident. Indeed, there are some “multi-agency and multi-organizational” spaces that deal with growth, according to one leader. But another leader only sees “strategic discussions specific to economic development” and not so much the management of growth-related challenges. When speaking about growth, one leader said, “We need to get together more. There are things changing that people have not really addressed or thought about.”

“We need to get together more. There are things changing that people have not really addressed or thought about.”



Residents seem to not be included.

A leader shared that residents “read the paper and complain, but they don’t have any avenue of acting.” Indeed, conversations indicate that residents are rarely engaged to learn about, discuss, and act on community challenges. One leader said that while residents hold various hopes and worries, “I don’t know if they’re being adequately shared or heard by people that might be actually making the decisions.” Residents’ lack of involvement in spaces can ultimately lead to frustration. “People get emotional because change happens,” a leader explained, “and it seems like it happened overnight because they weren’t aware of all the discussion that happened months and even years ahead of time.”

Most organized spaces are in

Marysville and Jerome. Overall, many organized spaces tend to be “very Marysville-centric”—they usually take place in Marysville and focus on Marysville issues. People outside Marysville tend not to know about them. “You don’t hear about the stuff that goes on in Marysville out here,” explained a Byhalia resident. “There could be 500 meetings today in Marysville, and I doubt any of us would know where one of them was.” Jerome has its own organized spaces, including “a dynamic, amazing group of business leaders and community members that work with Dublin City Schools to build partnership.” Outside of Marysville and Jerome, while there are some “groups of people that make things happen,” few organized spaces exist.

WHAT LIES BEHIND IT?

Existing organized spaces typically include the same leaders. “I’m on this new board now,” shared a leader, “and half the people I was on another board with before.” Various efforts “usually come from a handful of people who have done a huge amount of legwork, and then they present it,” said a Magnetic Springs resident. “As far as broad conversations with multiple stakeholders around the community, I’m not seeing it,” one leader said. The people who are typically involved in these spaces “have predominantly been here and are accustomed to knowing who to talk to. Some people new to the area don’t know,” explained a Marysville resident.

A lack of interactive spaces leads to siloed efforts. Rather than looking at how issues affect the wider community, a leader explained, “Sometimes we compartmentalize and we look at what the business community needs...more employees and more housing.” Some organizations are working to address similar issues without communicating, collaborating, or marshaling common resources. “There are a lot of really great people doing a lot of great

things that don’t even know about each other. How do we bring that all together?” one leader pondered. The integration that does happen is fostered by the aforementioned spaces that do exist, along with individuals carrying information to different groups.

People want more spaces to work through common issues. Leaders and residents alike see a need to create opportunities for people to work through challenges together. This leader sees the need for spaces that reconnect leaders with residents. Right now, “The only way leaders can get input is by watching social media and trying to understand it, and then we can discuss it and try to act upon it. But we can’t really close that circle back, because we’re not speaking to the person. We don’t have a method to reconnect to those folks.” Currently, community leaders are “missing the mark on connecting, aligning our mission, and the action steps that follow.” Beyond reconnecting leaders with residents, the benefits of having more spaces would include “greater levels of awareness and levels of support for our organizations and county at large,” shared another leader.

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“There are a lot of really great people doing a lot of great things that don’t even know about each other.”

Catalytic Organizations

Catalytic organizations engage people and institutions in the work of public life, spur discussions on community challenges, and marshal community resources to move ahead. These organizations help lay the foundation for community action, but once an initiative is up and running, these organizations often move on to the next challenge.

WHAT'S GOING ON?

There is a small group of catalytic organizations. The Chamber of Commerce, Impact60, Hope Center, Health Department, Memorial Hospital, and the Drug-Free Coalition stand out as key catalytic organizations in Union County. The Chamber is “the conduit to bring resources together to solve big issue problems,” said a leader. Impact60 spearheads efforts on the homeless shelter, does “tremendous work supporting schools,” and encourages people to do service for “60 minutes a week.” Meanwhile, Hope Center “is a backbone of the community, having led the way for those who are disadvantaged financially,” reported one leader. The Health Department was instrumental in the area’s COVID-19 response. It also convenes working groups, like the Food Council, to address health issues. Memorial Hospital is described as “outstanding at many different levels,” by a Marysville resident, including

“supporting school districts as well as other local community initiatives, local parks, and overall health efforts.” Notably, the cross-sector Drug-Free Coalition is catalytic in its marshaling of shared resources to deal with substance abuse issues.

Respected organizations abound.

Across Union County, people name an array of impactful organizations. The Union County Community Foundation facilitates charitable giving, providing funds “that help with adoptions, sending kids to camp, scholarships, and town beautification projects,” among other things. The United Way “brings together social service agencies and industry, especially during their donation drive.” UCO Industries employs dozens of adults with disabilities, while Wings Recovery and the Mental Health and Recovery Board provide critical services for mental health and addiction. Residents point out the impact of “several food pantries around Union County,” as well as assistance provided by Care Train to families and seniors during the Christmas season. Many residents see local libraries as community hubs, including a North Union student who is “most proud of the library.” Other respected organizations include the YMCA, Lighthouse Behavioral Services, Maryhaven, PASS, Department of Jobs and Family Services, Veterans Service Office, Farm Bureau, Union County Convention and Visitors



Bureau, Marysville Art League, Union County Neighbor to Neighbor, Habitat for Humanity, Blessings in a Backpack, Union County 4-H, American Legion, Lions Club, Kiwanis Club, Rotary Club, Marysville Eagles, Marysville Elks, and Loyal Order of Moose, among others.

Honda's investments and support are deeply influential. Honda "made an investment 40 years ago in Union County," a Milford Center resident explained, "and how it has transformed people's lives in the community cannot be understated." A Raymond resident added, "without them, I can't imagine where Marysville would be." Regarded as the county's "economic engine," Honda is also known for supporting "programs from government to health to schools" and "different events." Honda is the "lifeblood" of the community and its widespread impacts "are a real benefit," reported a Richwood resident. While Honda's influence is apparent, some people wish the company could "be more visible" or have a stronger "civic

presence." According to one resident, that means getting "more involved at a local level" across the county.

People say corporations in Marysville foster innovation and improve quality of life.

"This is an innovative community...the NSX project, Honda, patents that have come out of Nestle's, solutions that Scott's has created, Select Sires. There's innovation all over the place," explained a leader. And this corporate-led innovation doesn't stop at the companies' walls; it includes "supporting associates," "charitable things," and "sustainability—how we care for our community through healthy investments," shared another. People, like this leader, want the benefits of corporate innovation to continue because it "could be great for the region if they continue to employ people in different roles and we become a leading hub for the future." Overall, "these jobs and investments result in improving the quality of life" across the county.

WHAT LIES BEHIND IT?

Most organizations are service providers. Throughout Union County, organizations and groups tend to focus their efforts on addressing specific needs by “providing the appropriate services to our residents,” shared a leader. Another leader explained, “Most of the civic organizations and others are geared towards providing services rather than making change. It’s not that they oppose change, but they’re so focused on delivering service now rather than making a change for the future.” Indeed, there are pressing needs in the community. Addressing those immediate needs tends to take precedence over marshaling the community’s resources or engaging people in public life.

Collaboration and partnership are inhibited by the pressures many organizations face. Echoing a theme in this report about local efforts being siloed, a long-time rural resident shared, “I think there are just so many programs out there and this program doesn’t know that program exists.” One leader said service organizations “are having to fight tooth and nail just to keep what they’ve developed and what is loved by the community.” Another leader described having many partnerships, but “Some are more effective than others. If we don’t keep communicating, then the development and advancement of programming or services can get

“ Addressing immediate needs tends to take precedence over marshaling the community’s resources or engaging people in public life.

stalled.” The leader explained that continued collaboration can be inhibited by “a funding stream or organization that goes away. Or a lot of the time it’s staffing.”

People want more organizations to be catalytic. A leader explained that much of the work that takes place in Union County “is not holistic” and is often “very specific to business concerns.” Some health organizations have momentum in spurring discussion and action on community challenges, but overall, people believe organizations could do more to lay the foundation for community action. One leader said churches can play the role of “connecting congregations with each other to discuss things happening.” Further, many people shared ideas for Honda and other organizations to be catalytic on issues like “housing and workforce.” People said organizations

should open themselves up to the community so “we can be more supportive, understand their situation, and make them prosper.”

Safe Havens

Safe havens are places where community leaders—leaders at any level—can come together to talk and work through community concerns in “unofficial,” candid conversations.

WHAT’S GOING ON?

Some leaders get together in informal groups to discuss shared concerns.

People mentioned a few spaces where leaders gather for off-the-record conversations, including “a CEO roundtable” that meets monthly and talks about issues.” Other leaders meet up at restaurants. For example, “If you go to Der Dutchman on a Wednesday, sometimes you’ll see the group of farmers or you’ll see the group of business owners all having coffee. They do a good job at all staying in contact.” One leader meets with others weekly at Panera Bread in Marysville. And in Richwood, it’s common for leaders to engage in open conversation at Richwood Coffee.

Safe havens only include a small group of leaders. Many people, including this resident, noted that candid discussions for leaders typically include “a small handful of people.” When they feel

the need to connect informally, some leaders will ask each other, “Hey, do you guys want to go out one night after work and talk about what you’re seeing as a need?” as one leader explained. There are limitations to these groups being small. “We’re trying to attack the right things,” said another leader. “Do I know of every issue that’s going on in the county? I do not. Are we missing some gaps? I have no doubts. I just don’t know what they are.”

WHAT LIES BEHIND IT?

Leaders find it easier to connect individually. Many leaders talked about their ability to reach other leaders with ease. “There’s a network of stakeholders and leaders that you pick up the phone and they’re going to do anything that



“There’s a network of stakeholders and leaders that you pick up the phone and they’re going to do anything that you need them to do.”

you need them to do,” explained a Richwood leader. When describing their method for connecting with other leaders, one said, “Mine is more ‘pick up the phone.’ I’ve got good friends that I personally connect with, and that helps keep me grounded to be able to share with them.” Rather than establishing “more structured ways of getting people together to discuss topics that matter,” leaders find it easier to connect individually.

More safe spaces are needed to help deal with leadership stress and fatigue. Many leaders noted the challenges that come with their roles. One mentioned having to be very careful about what you say because the area “is so small that there’s probably not a place you can just be 100% transparent.” Reflecting on his experience in leadership, a former school board member said, “I dealt with anything and everything other than what the board of education should have to deal with.” Leaders sometimes “get stopped by somebody to complain,” according to one. With many leaders feeling under pressure and constantly “on the record,”

more safe spaces are needed to help leaders share their challenges and talk through concerns openly.

Strong, Diverse Leadership

Strong, diverse leadership must extend to all layers of a community. Leaders must understand the concerns and aspirations of the community as a whole; they must serve as connectors among individuals and organizations throughout the community.

WHAT’S GOING ON?

Leaders know and name many other leaders. During leader interviews, leaders readily reeled off long lists of people in leadership roles. For example, one leader had county commissioners top of mind, saying they “are very active in the business community” and “know all the farmers in the area.” Bill Narducci, the County Administrator, is known by many. In Marysville, City Manager Terry Emery and President of Council Henk Berbee are key leaders. Another leader rattled off a list of leaders and what sets them apart: Dave Amerine because he’s

a “servant leader,” Bruce Daniels for his “generosity,” Tom McCarthy for his “transparency,” and Adam Hodnichak for “his humility.” Chip Hubbs and Melanie Ziegler of Memorial Health are also regarded as important leaders. Business and nonprofit leaders were repeatedly invoked as highly-respected leaders as were local mayors, school superintendents and educators, small business owners, city managers and village administrators, city and village councilors, township trustees, judges, farmers, law enforcement, and church leaders and pastors. Notably, most leaders’ lists were predominantly populated by men, with fewer women named. Still, multiple women leaders were mentioned as engaged difference makers, including State Representative Tracy Richardson, Becky Bolt of Hope Center, Holly Zweigig of the Mental Health and Recovery Board, Lavona See

of Impact60, former United Way Director Corinne Bix, and current United Way Director Brandi Hibbs.

Residents name less robust, more local lists of leaders. Beyond someone like Bruce Daniels, owner of local car dealerships and a driving force behind Impact60, residents’ lists of community leaders tended to be much shorter and focused on more local leaders they personally know. Some residents named trusted local elected officials, like Richwood Mayor Scott Jerew and Council President Reddy Brown who “really cares” and “is absolutely on it,” according to Richwood residents; others occasionally pointed to their own council, local mayor, or township trustee. School board members, principals, and teachers were named as leaders by many families and students. A North Union student said, “Teachers will help you as much as they can to reach where you want to go.” Beyond education leaders,





community members tended to mention pastors, fire chiefs, sheriffs, officers, and librarians as key leaders.

Business leaders are seen as instrumental to the community. As previously mentioned, Bruce Daniels was named by both leaders and residents as a key figure in the community. A fellow leader said, “He’s probably the biggest champion that we have in Union County” and a resident described him as a “rallying point.” Several other business leaders are widely recognized and appreciated across Union County, including Chad Hoffman of Richwood Bank, Eric Phillips and Tonya Woodruff of the Chamber, Dave Amerine of UCO Industries, and Tom McCarthy of McCarthy & Cox. Some people

view well-known families as leaders. “There’s five families in Fairbanks,” one individual shared. In Marysville, some family names are widely recognized, including the McCarthys, Eufingers, and Hoffmans. Regarding local corporate leadership, a community leader said “[With] Honda, Memorial Health, Scott’s, the big companies, we’ve got really visionary leaders that certainly have the best interests of Union County in mind.” However, it’s not just corporate leaders that people recognize. There are also “small business owners who are big voices in their pockets of influence.”

Some residents find personal leaders in their churches. When asked about people they trust, a rural resident said, “our pastor, the church family. They’re the ones I go to first for anything.” A Richwood resident trusts “our church leaders.” Reflecting on their role, one faith leader said their congregation “sees me as a leader who needs to intervene with another leader to try to get something fixed.” One pastor in Marysville is trusted because the congregation “have watched him grow a church. They know his heart.” While clearly trusted by their congregations, faith leaders may be less engaged in the community at large. One leader said, “Unfortunately, right now I haven’t been able to be involved in the local community much because our church is planning for the future.”

A few young leaders are emerging.

The majority of named leaders tended to be long-time leaders rather than younger or emerging. There are some organizations that are led by a newer generation, including the Farm Bureau, which in one leader's telling has "become a really youthful organization that goes to D.C. and lobbies on the Hill for the small-town farmer. That was just unheard of." The Union County Foundation's new leadership was described as "young and innovative" leading a "humble organization that ripples through the community in a powerful way," according to a leader. Some parts of the county are seeing a group of young leaders emerge, including in Plain City, where a resident described "some really good young leaders in their mid-to-late thirties that are getting involved and doing amazing things." In Marysville, one leader was optimistic about new leaders emerging in time. They said, "I think there are a lot of influential leaders here. They just haven't been found yet. They haven't had the opportunity or the platform."

WHAT LIES BEHIND IT?

People trust leaders who are there "for the cause, not the applause."

Leaders' trustworthiness is largely determined by their "willingness to roll up their sleeves and find solutions," according to a Marysville leader. Those people "have the best interests of the

community. They're not here to make a name for themselves and go on to the next and biggest position," said one county leader. People value leaders who are "in the know, easy to talk to, and a resource," explained an Allen Center resident. A leader said those who are trustworthy "embrace and try to further the culture." In Byhalia, people said they valued a person they called a "servant leader," someone who "calls everybody or goes to people's house and checks on them."

Some residents, especially in rural areas, feel neglected.

With continued growth in the southern part of the county, residents in more rural areas feel increasingly left behind. "We just don't see them," explained a Richwood resident when discussing their impression of county leadership. "We don't hear so much about what they're trying to do for our end." Another lamented, "I feel like Richwood is a thorn in their side and they just want to go, 'Marysville.' And that's not how it should be. They should be worried about

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Leaders' trustworthiness is largely determined by their "willingness to roll up their sleeves and find solutions."

everybody.” Rural residents want to be recognized and represented; one wishes “the county could be split up so you’ve got a voice somewhere in the north end that could be voting on your behalf.” In Byhalia, an individual said, “There’s been a lot of decisions politically that have favored other areas and haven’t looked at us. We are maybe the black sheep of the county.”

Across the county, residents want to be more “connected” with leaders.

Notwithstanding individual leaders they may trust, overall residents want more leaders to be more deeply connected with them. An Allen Center resident said, “I feel that we don’t really have a connection with our community leaders.” “We know we’re worth more,” said a Magnetic Springs resident. “We just need help and we’re not getting it.” Echoing that, a Raymond individual said leaders “should be finding out what people need.” Another Magnetic Springs resident said, “Our [leaders] don’t know anything going on or what they can do to help.” One Marysville resident offered the following advice for leaders to become more connected: “Be transparent and show you are genuinely here for what residents of the area need.” While a Jerome resident believes “different leaders are listening in different ways,” it is clear that most Union County residents believe leaders should do more to connect with them.

There is a concern about having enough new leaders. “We have a very core older group that has been the foundation of our communities,” explained a rural resident. To that, another resident responded, “One of my fears is how are we going to replace these guys, this generation.” While some leaders that are “starting to retire out are still involved,” a leader said the community needs to “continually be grooming the next round of leaders.” Seeing the need to ensure a robust leadership pipeline, a Richwood resident repeatedly expressed, “the school needs to turn out leaders.” A Marysville resident wants “new blood,” while a Marysville leader said, “I would like to see the younger generation stepping up into leadership roles, and the older generation stepping back and helping them do that.” Various parts of Union



County, especially fast-growing areas like Jerome, need a number of new leaders to emerge. Encouragingly, there are some “good younger leaders,” according to one Jerome resident.

Informal Networks and Links

Informal networks and links work to connect various individuals, groups, organizations, and institutions together to cross-fertilize experiences, knowledge, and resources. Through these networks and links, people carry and spread ideas, messages, and community norms from place to place.

WHAT’S GOING ON?

Networks of neighbors support each other. “People in Union County don’t pull into the garage at the end of the workday and close their door,” explained a leader. Instead, across the county, “everyone pitches in to help their neighbors,” and these neighborly connections weave a web of local networks. Rural residents “cover each other’s back for needs, sometimes unspoken needs.” A faith leader added, “The farming community takes care of their own. They step forward.”

Neighborly networks are steady and reliable. “If someone poses a need, the community steps up to fill it,” said an organizational leader. People are especially supportive “if there’s a tragedy in the neighborhood,” according to another faith leader. Describing the community as “close-knit,” a Marysville student said, “a lot of people know each other and support each other.”

The strongest recognized networks are driven by the Chamber and Union County Leadership Institute.

The Chamber brings together “well over 100 people on a regular basis from all aspects of the community on different issues.” Networks from Marysville, Richwood, Plain City, and Industrial Parkway business associations are even more intimate and discuss things “particular to that group on a smaller scale,” explained a leader. Union County Leadership Institute, the ten-month leadership program intended to ignite and develop community leaders, allows deep, robust connections to form among a network of new leaders. One leader who went through the program shared that “it’s 25 to 30 people a year. It was one of the best opportunities that I ever

“ Neighborly connections weave a web of local networks.



got.” Strong relationships form during the program as leaders connect while they “learn about industry and this city.”

Other networks are particular to people’s interests. Networks form “organically with things that people are involved in.” Union County has “Rotary, Lions Club, Chamber of Commerce, and social clubs,” said a leader. An array of organizations, groups, and clubs foster networks around particular interests like community service, economic development, farming, and gardening, among other things. Residents did not name broader networks that span interest areas. Yet some social gathering places naturally foster relationships and networks among individuals. For instance, people “go to the park and sit there with their friends and talk,” explained a resident.

Churches connect people within congregations but not necessarily across them. For some residents, church is their main link to others in the community. In Byhalia, a resident said, “the whole church, they’re family.” A Richwood area leader shared, “Our churches pretty much replace the civic groups.” Meanwhile, connections between different congregations appear weak or limited. While the Marysville Area Ministerial Association came together to form the Hope Center, religious leaders indicated that it now mostly provides “updates on things,” and “most aren’t aware” of the association. In addition, one Marysville faith leader noted that churches in Union County host numerous, well-attended events throughout the year. But they wondered, “How many of them are reaching the community versus just reaching their own church and their church people?”

Facebook groups enable community members to network and connect. People say that in Union County, messages and ideas spread quickly on Facebook. Facebook groups have become “a resource where people ask a question and get answers instantly,” shared a resident. One example is Marysville In The Know, a Facebook group and repository “for what’s happening in the county. It’s a massive source of information and it’s very active,” explained a resident. Union County Facebook groups provide a forum for cross-fertilization of ideas but can also become “toxic” with people’s “complaints about issues but no actual discussion about solutions.” Still, it’s clearly a tool that people use. One resident shared, “Occasionally a topic comes up and you get some good feedback or discussion.”

WHAT LIES BEHIND IT?

Newcomer and long-time resident networks seldom mix. “People who have been here are accustomed to knowing who to go to,” shared a Marysville resident. These existing relationships create networks where people “know each other and have cohesiveness,” which can make it hard for newcomers to integrate. “People went to high school together, or they know somebody’s cousin. Sometimes they’re related,” explained a Richwood leader. Some long-time residents see newcomers as totally different from them. These perceived differences can exacerbate separation. One Byhalia resident shared, “The new breed moving into these new homes don’t care a bit about the area they’re moving into as to what’s there already.” Another chimed in, “So I just stay away from them.” Staying away from each other means



people are less likely to understand one another. Oftentimes, the best way for newcomers and long-time residents to mix is through school activities. A Milford Center resident said, “The school is the community for us. That’s where we meet people and connect.”

Many leaders feel connected, while many residents do not feel “in the know.” For one leader, “as soon as I went through the Leadership Institute, I felt like I became connected really quickly to the community.” But, “If you’re not a chamber member, you’re not in the know,” explained another leader. A resident agreed, saying, “Businesses have a place to go to voice their concerns—the Chamber. But for the common public like us, there’s nothing.” Residents described a “deficit in communication” and a need for “a more robust way of knowing what’s going on” in the larger community. Even long-time residents can feel out of the loop. Some leaders see the need for “connectivity and engagement so that people have the opportunity to feel like they’re truly a part of what’s happening here.”

Networks form around specific issues. “People talk about the same issues,” explained one Jerome resident, and networks tend to form around those issues. For instance, addressing county-wide drug use concerns prompted the formation of the Drug-Free Coalition, which brings together Maryhaven,

PASS, the City of Marysville, school districts, the health department, and others. Grassroots networks have popped up in opposition to certain things, including school levies and solar panels. Other networks have developed around specific economic development projects or service projects. In the past, the Marysville Area Ministerial Association—a network of church leaders—came together to address homelessness. This Milford Center resident considered narrowly-focused networks as a weakness because, “Until it is a directly proximal event, you don’t get involved.”

Intimate personal connections are prioritized over robust networks.

When asked about connecting with other leaders, one leader described their style as “connecting with good friends, just trying to gather information and sharing opinions that may not go any further.” As discussed elsewhere in the report, residents and leaders often described prioritizing close connections formed through church, school, or social gatherings over expanding their networks. Building new connections requires that people “network and get to know each other,” explained a Jerome resident. They admitted this had become harder in recent years because “COVID changed the landscape.”



Conscious Community Discussion

It is through conscious community discussion that a community creates opportunities to think about and sort out its public concerns before taking action. Communities that work together make a conscious point to constantly engage each other—citizens, institutions, leaders, and others. This is a key part of creating a shared sense of purpose and direction within the community.

WHAT'S GOING ON?

Opportunities for genuine community discussion are sparse. When asked where people get together to discuss community issues, people's responses were limited to attending a "city council meeting," "commissioner's meeting,"

or "planning commission meeting." These forums tend to be formal and rigidly structured, providing only brief windows for public comment and little opportunity for real discussion. One Marysville resident said, "We want the interaction. We don't just want them to tell us what's going on." These formal meetings are ineffective opportunities for authentic engagement. "The public conversations need to happen," said another Marysville resident. A leader reinforced that idea. "If proactive community conversations take place, I'm not familiar with them."

Attendance is thin at existing opportunities. When asked how involved people are, an Allen Center resident said, "Not enough." Echoing that sentiment, a faith leader said, "Most people, sadly, don't want to step forward." For an Allen Center resident, that was explained by people feeling like, "They don't have a voice, so why show up?" One Marysville individual noted "not knowing when and where meetings are" stops people from showing up. A Marysville resident shared a commonly-expressed perspective: "We spend way too much time on our phones instead of doing something to help."

Community discussions are often reactionary and heated. When people do come together it happens "very quickly and loudly and largely following some sort of crisis in the community. But

if we stop talking about it, then it starts to lose its momentum, and then we wait for the next crisis to occur to pick it up,” explained a leader. Another said they see virtually no community discussion “unless it’s a real burning issue of imminent interest.” These hot-button topics often lead community members to focus on “voicing their grievances,” taking a stance and forcefully pushing their agenda. People become defensive and finding common ground quickly becomes an afterthought. A Marysville resident shared, “A lot of these kinds of things end up being reactive because people just aren’t paying attention until stuff hits the fan. And then there’s rallying of the factions rather than collaboration.”

People feel disconnected from leaders. Across the county, residents want meaningful listening. We heard numerous stories with one common throughline: “They didn’t listen to me.” One Marysville resident talked about an experience where, “It didn’t matter what anyone said or how many people said it. They had their minds made up.”

As indicated elsewhere in this report, some leaders feel like the burden is on them to get residents to engage. “Somehow you just have to convince people that if they don’t like what they see, they got to get involved,” said a leader.

WHAT LIES BEHIND IT?

People are largely disengaged. Based on these conversations and interviews, being engaged in the community does not seem top-of-mind or a priority for most people. One leader explained, “People are so busy now that getting someone to a meeting, unless it’s one time or directly impacts them, can be hard.” The prevailing attitude, according to a faith leader, seems to be, “Somebody else will do it. Somebody else will step forward and give direction. But I’m busy with my family, I’m busy with sports, I’m busy with my own activities.” A Magnetic Springs resident said, “I think people want to see things move forward, but they don’t have that gung-ho, ‘Yes, I’m going to join forces, I’m going to show up, I’m going to help.’”

“I think people want to see things move forward, but they don’t have that gung-ho, ‘Yes, I’m going to join forces.’”



Community issues are not widely discussed and can be feared. Issues come up on Facebook, where “a lot of people complain but it doesn’t turn into involvement,” explained a leader. Beyond Facebook, community issues and concerns are rarely being talked about or worked through by the community at-large. Some leaders, like this education one, feel the onus is on them to reach out to residents and make space for their voices: “If you don’t meet people where they are, they’re not going to come to you because they don’t want to be lectured.” Another reason people may not step forward is because they want to avoid creating conflict or making waves. One leader said, “Everybody just wants to be quiet and be calm, and

just keep the status quo and don’t let anything bad happen.” Another said, “We don’t like to get messy, and we don’t like to get in the trenches of things because it takes work, it takes frustration, and doesn’t always end up how we want it to exactly, but that’s where people need to be.”

Leaders often focus on their own agendas. Many residents see leaders who are too narrowly focused. They “talk to one another instead of the population,” said a Magnetic Springs resident. Union County residents shared various examples of leaders not taking the time to authentically engage residents. One Jerome resident said leaders in a recent meeting had

“pre-decided what they wanted to be done.” A Marysville resident added, “I’ve actually gone to one of those zoning meetings and I’ve been in a room full of people opposing one of these new housing developments. It was just total disregard for everybody that was there. You could just tell by their demeanor that it was in the bag and that they’re going to pass it regardless.”

People seek more intentional community discussion. “There definitely needs to be a structured way of getting the community together,” explained a Marysville resident. Community leaders and residents need to come together to frankly discuss common issues so “we can rally people and people can trust that it’s not just about money or pushing a certain agenda, but it’s truly for the community,” said a faith leader. A Marysville student thought more discussion would result in more “respect for each other, actual thoughtful talks and debates, or finding a middle ground rather than just I’m right, you’re wrong.” One leader felt urgency about “the need to get together more” because “There are things that are changing in our community where I don’t think people have really acknowledged, or addressed it, or thought about what that means.” A Richwood resident summed things up this way: “People need to get together more. When we get together, I feel like that accomplishes something.”

Community Norms for Public Life

Common community norms for public life help to guide how people act individually, interact, and work together. These norms set the standards and tone for public life and engagement.

WHAT’S GOING ON?

People actively embrace supporting one another. People in Union County define themselves by a willingness to help each other out. One leader said they are united by a “common goal of making sure that everyone is doing okay.” This trait is “very strong in our county,” according to a leader. Another leader noted, “It is not very often that someone poses a need that the community does not step up to fill.” Residents shared numerous stories of people showing up for others in need—from simple things like neighbors helping find a lost dog to people connecting strangers to employment opportunities. Union County is a “can do” and “helping” community. “In this area of Ohio, they take care of their own,” one leader explained.

Help occurs on an individual rather than community level. Few residents or leaders point to collective actions when defining how people support each other. A handful of people referenced Community Care Train, a

widely-supported holiday fundraiser for families in need. Otherwise, few community efforts garner widespread engagement and support. Where one resident declared Union County's motto could be "people helping people," some leaders voiced frustration around the lack of support for broader solutions that address Union County's fundamental challenges. "While people say that they believe that these kinds of resources are needed, when push comes to shove, do they actually want more low-income housing in their community?" one leader wondered. As noted earlier in this report, one resident described the tendency for people to help on an individual level by saying, "Most of the examples I can think of are just personal."

Facebook is functioning as the public square. In lieu of an in-person public square for discourse, residents say, "Right now, there's Facebook." According to one leader, "They don't go to the barber shop and gossip anymore. Facebook is the place." Facebook's displacement of face-to-face interaction deeply concerns most residents. "Everybody wants to complain on social media," explained an Allen Center resident, "but when given an opportunity, nobody shows up." The activity is "staying on Facebook." And what happens on Facebook is often unproductive. "Keyboard warriors" frequently take over conversations that can become "toxic." For many residents,

the tenor of the conversation is only part of the issue. Two Jerome residents highlighted this in an exchange. One said, "On Facebook, a lot of it isn't factual." The other chimed in, "There's no single source of actual truth."

Community tensions are hard to deal with. Union County is experiencing tension and disagreement around a number of issues, including competing perspectives related to growth. Some people fully embrace growth and the opportunities it brings. Others fear it will jeopardize the things they love about the area. Many residents are asking, "Where is this all going?" Lacking a clear answer, they worry growth will bring crime, instability, and insecurity. Meanwhile, in this leader's view, the "folks who could help us grow and thrive are clinging onto the past." Another leader thinks "what's



missing is the acceptance of some need for progress." Overall, what's clear is that people tend to talk past each other. Union County must develop an ethic of truly listening to one another, hashing out differences, and forging a shared path forward. According to a Marysville student, "Settling the tension and being more of a united front will take a lot of hard conversations and finding a middle ground."

WHAT LIES BEHIND IT?

People are separating from each other. Withdrawing into close circles, most people talk with those they know and who share similar views, resulting in "a lot of misconceptions about our community with a lot of things," according to one Marysville leader. That's because, "People are talking about challenges in pockets, maybe not collectively," a faith leader said. These pockets can be digital or in-person. They can be personal or professional. Regardless, it is clear that people are not coming together across lines of difference. For instance, social media was noted as "just random voices

speaking" yet a "good number of people turn to social media for what's going on out there." And in-person conversations are not meaningfully collective spaces, with one leader noting, "I'm not seeing a concerted effort for conversations with community stakeholders."

People feel at the mercy of change.

While residents shared differing opinions around growth, they say that change is happening to them and is largely inevitable. "We know growth is coming," one person said. The county's "proximity to Columbus" makes it ripe for continuous growth. "There's just a constant growth of new people coming in," shared a high school student. One leader said, "There's so much growth [anticipated to happen] in 15, 20 years, Jerome will probably become a city. It won't be Jerome Village any longer, it's going to be the City of Jerome, and it could be the same size as Marysville." After recognizing growth "is going to happen," a Milford Center resident said, "The discussion becomes, 'Is there any effect that we can have?'"

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“Settling the tension and being more of a united front will take a lot of hard conversations and finding a middle ground.”



People do not trust the information they are getting. “We’re suffering from a problem,” a Marysville resident said. “It used to be you could turn on the TV and you got local news. There’s nothing local anymore.” Others in the county reinforced this deficit in quality, trustworthy news and information sources. Regarding the Marysville newspaper, one resident said, “It should be the resource for all sides of a story and to understand issues. I don’t believe it properly fills that role.” A Jerome resident noted they used to have a print daily in the area, but it no longer exists. As a result, “We no longer have a common set of facts,” they said. Absent trustworthy sources, people are turning to what’s available, namely Facebook. Yet social media chatter often devolves into complaints or “rumors” and “innuendo,” which further weakens

people’s ability to understand what is going on and how they can engage. Worse yet, a Plain City resident shared a common sentiment: “What happens on Facebook really divides the community in many ways.”

Some residents feel aggrieved.

Residents are separating, change is happening in ways that feel outside their control, and the predominant public square is Facebook. Amid these forces, a sense of grievement has taken hold. A common refrain across the county: “Here we grow again and nobody’s asking us.” A Marysville resident said, “Leaders need to have more discussions with people and ask them what they want instead of making decisions for everybody.” One Jerome resident shared, “People in the community share common concerns but we are not getting what we want.” In one of the Marysville conversations, a resident noted, “We’re bursting at the seams” and wondered, “Where’s all that revenue from all those new families? Why isn’t it making up for [all the growth]?”

Shared Purpose

When communities have a shared sense of purpose, explicit messages exist about the community’s aspirations and about everyone heading toward a common goal—or at least trying to work at common goals.



WHAT'S GOING ON?

People value small-town life and want to preserve the county's character.

"The county has a rustic feel" and is a "wholesome, family-driven community." Preserving the county's character, and what makes it home for so many people, is important to people across Union County. "We want a community that will still be vibrant and strong, still remember its history, 20 years from now, 30 years from now," shared a leader. People in Richwood, Marysville, and beyond cherish the close-knit, small-town feel. Many residents take great pride in the county's agricultural prowess. However, some feel that growth threatens what they cherish. One leader noted "a lot

of concern from people who have lived here for a long time that things are growing too fast."

Residents take pride in school quality and youth success. Union County values "children first," and schools are a rallying point for the community. "Schools being successful is a community expectation." People are committed to supporting and developing youth. "Folks rally around kids," a leader shared. "We support our kids and teams." Across the county, people have pride in school sports, but

“Folks rally around kids.”

more importantly, in the education that kids receive. "I feel like the community does have a responsibility to make sure that their students are taken care of and get the education that they need," one leader shared. Despite school quality being a shared goal, a school levy in May prompted widespread disagreement around the levels of school funding.

Faith and service are key tenets of the community's shared purpose.

When describing the community, one leader said, "Family and God are first, and it's a good thing." "Most people go to church here," explained a Marysville student. Churches are the backbone of neighborhoods and villages throughout the county. Those who attend seem to deeply trust their church, pastor, and fellow congregants. Beyond bringing people together, churches also connect residents to individual volunteer opportunities. In addition to regular worship services and service activities, a faith leader noted "different church events throughout the year" that bring individual church communities together.

A core group of leaders work with a shared purpose. A "core group of people" lead on most initiatives according to some leaders. Togetherness is strong among this group, with one leader noting, "We all try to collaborate and find solutions to problems." One business leader said, "The CEO of any company can call up the city manager

and the city manager's going to take their call." Another shared, "the folks who are active in the community have a shared purpose." Still, one leader lamented "the mentality that these people should be responsible for everything, that they don't need to get involved. Everybody needs to get involved."

WHAT LIES BEHIND IT?

Union County faces splits and fractures. Does the county have a shared purpose? "It's kind of hard when you don't even know you're in the same community," noted one leader. Union County is "split" and "people have allegiances" to their part of the county. Union County is "almost like these separate communities," according to one leader. This experience of "separate communities" leaves some rural residents feeling left out or altogether ignored by more populated areas. For instance, a Milford Center individual voiced, "There's more to Union County than just Marysville." Meanwhile, some residents in the northern half of the county reference a "Mason Dixon line" running along Route 347 that separates them physically and psychologically from southern Union County.

Existing information sources pull people apart. Throughout these conversations, people repeatedly noted the lack of trusted news and information sources in the county that provide information and connection

with the larger community. This is especially important given how the county seems split and the extent to which people are separating from one another. Many residents referenced Facebook as now the de facto news and information source for the county. But one Marysville resident went so far as to say that Facebook can be a “sewer” including misinformation and ugly arguments; others in our conversations agreed. Indeed, many residents believe what happens on Facebook “pulls the community apart much more than it brings it together.” A Jerome resident called that “dangerous” for the community. Without trusted, balanced, and inclusive information sources, it is hard for a community to create and sustain shared purpose. “Do I think more

people would get involved?” if they had quality information, one leader asked. “I do.”

People say there are barriers to engaging and forging shared purpose.

Some leaders believe people only get involved when they are personally affected by an issue. Others think busyness gets in the way. In either case, barriers prevent a shared purpose from emerging. One leader explained, “We need people to say, ‘Hey, I’m going to make time,’ and you make time for what you value.” Another felt, “The average people in Marysville probably aren’t aware or aren’t getting involved in areas that they can.” Meanwhile, residents believe more leaders need to improve communication and listening while



addressing any preconceived notions about what's best for their community and the county. Currently, residents who try to get involved can feel ignored. "I guess I've given up. I can say whatever I want to say, they're not going to listen," said a Marysville resident. From busyness to a lack of awareness to frustration, there are real barriers that prevent people from engaging in and working toward a shared purpose.

The community lacks the civic capacity to act on underlying shared purpose.

"We have the same kinds of values," a Marysville resident said, referring to the common themes of helping your neighbor, being family-oriented, and valuing schools that have been discussed throughout this report. Yet the community does not have the necessary foundation and capabilities for people to work through issues together. Currently, divisiveness often gets in the way of the community working toward common goals. One leader said, "I see the back and forth, who wants this, who doesn't want that. One thinks they're doing the right thing; another thinks absolutely not. It's divided." This discord,



coupled with the lack of opportunities and communication, often prevents real action on shared challenges. Some people see the need to join together around a shared purpose; one person wants the community to "come up with a profile for the area and say, 'This is what we're going to pursue.'" In order to act on a shared purpose, the community must reinvigorate meaningful engagement in common spaces. ■

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Building the Community's Civic Strength

Moving Forward in Union County is about how the community can come together around a shared purpose and cultivate a sense of authentic hope for a better future. But let's be clear: There's a difference between false hope and authentic hope. False hope is rooted in wishful thinking and setting unrealistic expectations that fail to deliver results. Authentic hope is created when people see real action on issues that matter to them. As people work together and see meaningful progress, civic faith is renewed and positive narratives begin to take root, grow, and spread.

In order to move forward, Union County must invest in two critical areas: growing the community's civic capacities and paying attention to how change happens. This section outlines critical levers for accomplishing each. Doing one without the other will fracture the community and challenges will mount. Mistrust will deepen and calcify. Hope for a better future will diminish.

None of that is inevitable. But if people are really going to move forward—and deal with the pressing challenges that come with growth—it is essential for the community to create a new trajectory

of hope. That starts with growing civic capacities and paying attention to how change happens.



Growing Civic Capacities

It is critical that Union County invest in and develop its civic capacities. Otherwise, the community will be stuck amid competing forces, tension, and mistrust. In short, it will be unable to get on a more hopeful path. The community's civic capacities cannot be built by one entity; no single organization, leader, or group can do all the work on their own. Nor is simply launching new or expanding existing strategies, initiatives, and programs

the answer. Communities need civic capabilities to effectively move forward. Nothing can replace these.

The good news is that building Union County's civic strength is actionable, doable, and achievable. Here are a few key areas to focus on to accomplish this.

- **Engage people authentically and work through tough issues.**

Throughout this report, residents and leaders said that more authentic conversations about the community must take place in Union County. These conversations are needed for people to articulate their shared aspirations for moving forward, and for people with differing views to work through underlying tensions and trade-offs together. Right now, the community lacks an ethic of engagement, both among

residents and between residents and leaders. Indeed, there is a gap in the know-how needed to meet people where they are and to enable conversation to productively move forward. Without making progress in this vital area, the community will be increasingly stymied.

Therefore, Union County must invest in developing the capabilities of organizations, groups, leaders, and residents to engage each other authentically.

- **Create spaces for the community to come together.**

Organized spaces are where people come together to learn about, discuss, and often act on common challenges. These spaces help a community identify and tap resources to address shared concerns. Both residents and leaders lack such spaces today. The spaces





that do exist tend to leave residents out or not provide meaningful opportunities for engagement while being made up of a relatively small group of leaders. Addressing the challenges facing Union County requires creating spaces for residents and leaders to get together, work through differences, and forge a purposeful path forward. As one Richwood resident shared, “People need to get together more. When we get together, I feel like that accomplishes something.”

- **Develop more leaders who are turned outward.** Union County needs more leaders to join with those who have the community in their line of sight, who are focused on the shared aspirations and concerns of all residents, and who will work across various dividing lines in the

community. Leaders must also take into greater account the different views of people in their actual decision-making. Today, there is an opportunity for more leaders to adopt this orientation. Mistrust, division, and frustration fester when communities do not have enough leaders who are turned outward. Union County must continue cultivating existing leaders while developing new ones who hold a mindset of being turned outward toward the community and each other.

- **Invest in informal networks for civic learning and innovation.** Our conversations revealed that Union County is fragmented and that work often happens in pockets. In order to move forward, people in Union County need opportunities to come together across silos to discover

what they are collectively learning and decide how to recalibrate their continuing efforts. It is through these new collective understandings that further possibilities for innovation, collaboration, and growth are unlocked. Union County must create robust networks that allow for intermingling of people and cross-fertilization of ideas.

– **Build more catalytic, boundary-spanning organizations and groups.**

Numerous organizations and groups provide critical support services to the community. They should be lauded, and their work should be supported. So too should the relative handful of organizations that are laying the foundation for community action. Yet leaders and residents both report that there are not enough catalytic organizations and groups that help to spur discussions on community challenges, marshal the

shared resources of the community, and catalyze action on shared challenges. All communities need such entities and Union County is no exception. Building these groups and organizations creates the capabilities to spark innovation and collaboration. This is a critical area for investment.

– **Tap the credibility and trust of the faith community.**

Religious faith is a vital part of many people’s lives in Union County. Faith leaders and churches hold special respect and trust in the community. Yet according to residents and religious leaders, efforts that bring people together across congregations are few and far between. The credibility and energy of the faith community are an enormous resource for people’s lives and the life of the community. Today, there is an opportunity for faith leaders and their institutions to come together to forge new pathways to move the county forward.

– **Cultivate a shared purpose.** People across Union County repeatedly said the community is a great place to live, raise a family, and send their kids to school. And people across the county have shared aspirations: a close-knit community, ample opportunities for youth, and action on challenges related to growth. Yet as a county, and in some communities, people feel separate and divided. “What’s our



purpose, what’s our vision?” asked a resident. “I’m not sure that’s been fully articulated.” To move forward in Union County, the community needs to cultivate a shared purpose by developing a habit of coming together to figure out what should be done.

How Change Happens

Communities that experience divisions must find ways to create a new trajectory of hope, with growing momentum and ever-expanding civic confidence. Coming together to take actionable, doable, and achievable steps forward is critical. Then, it is possible to unleash a chain reaction of actions and ripple effects that grows over time and spreads like a positive contagion. Through these actions, shared purpose emerges.

Make no mistake: None of this happens all at once and there is no magic, comprehensive plan. Change happens only over time. Here are some guideposts for how change can happen as Union County seeks to move forward.

- **Focus on areas that are ripe for making progress.** When communities have fractures, they often seek to solve the biggest, most complex issues through comprehensive plans. Yet at this stage, what is most critical is building civic confidence that addressing people’s concerns

“ Communities that experience divisions must find ways to create a new trajectory of hope, with growing momentum and ever-expanding civic confidence.

is possible and that different organizations and groups can work together. Thus, efforts should focus on issues that are ripe for action, where the possibility—indeed the probability—for forward movement is high. This can include hard, critical issues—such as youth support, affordable housing, traffic congestion and road service, and education—but the initial emphasis must be placed on creating wins. Starting too big, or taking on too much, will cause efforts to collapse under their own weight. As noted throughout this report, actions are already being taken in Union County that can, and should, serve as a foundation for making real progress.

- **Prioritize demonstrating concrete action, however small.** Many residents in Union County don’t believe that some of the issues

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Taking real, concrete actions that address residents' concerns are a down payment on creating a new trajectory of hope.

they care about will be addressed by leaders. Nor do they believe all leaders are listening to their concerns. Taking real, concrete actions that address residents' concerns are a down payment on creating a new trajectory of hope. It is also a requirement for generating lasting trust. For now, such actions can be small. What matters most is that action occurs and that additional actions grow from there. This will demand disciplined, vigilant

follow-up from conversations and meetings. Silence only confirms people's mistrust.

- **Build together, not apart.** People develop trust and a sense of possibility when they come together to build things. Building together can take many forms—from developing and implementing efforts to address common problems to coming together with others to meet the basic needs of the community. But make no mistake: building together is not about simply activating more volunteerism. It is about forging new, common efforts that go beyond one-off service projects to deeply address ongoing issues that matter to people. To take effective action and strengthen civic culture, people will need to bridge divides. This effort should begin with those who are ready and willing to engage and grow through a series of intentional steps. At each turn, people must be open to discovering new partners and contributors who want to be a part of moving forward in Union County. Building together is critical. Nothing



replaces discovering the innate capabilities and shared humanity of other people.

- **Make the invisible visible.** Civic confidence and belief grow from people seeing that progress is possible. But far too often, the progress that is being made remains invisible to the wider community. Sometimes it is even obscured from those who are helping to create the progress. Making the invisible visible enables people to see that progress is possible and that it's happening. Doing this requires intentional efforts to identify where progress is already happening in Union County and where new actions are being

taken. Then, it means lifting up and spreading those stories. One caution: Overstating results or glossing over challenges will undermine authentic hope.

- **Be prepared for resistance and actively address tension.** Making progress will not magically eliminate division or satisfy everyone who is resistant to growth in Union County or who holds firm to some other pre-existing position. In fact, making progress might even intensify disagreement in the short-term. Those who seek to come together and move Union County forward with the community at the forefront must prepare themselves for such



resistance. Tension must be named and addressed, even though full consensus is not the goal. The work ahead is difficult. Finding allies for support and persevering through resistance are both imperative.

The Path Forward

Union County finds itself at an important moment in its history. The investments highlighted here are key to building greater trust and shared purpose. Important work is already being done across the county to make growth work for the area and build a better future.

Now, it's time to double down. Union County can forge a shared path, one that meets people where they are and addresses issues that matter to them. One that reinvigorates the community's civic culture, moves the area forward, and creates a new trajectory of hope.

Forging this shared path means more residents and leaders need to turn outward toward one another. In Union County, people told us "The grass is growing." To move forward, the community must tap its innate ability, resources, and people to tend to the growing grass, together.

“The grass is growing.” To move forward, the community must tap its innate ability, resources, and people to tend to the growing grass, together.





