

Report on “Possible Dreams 2016: Building Community through Neighborhoods”

The large meeting room at NECC was filled to capacity with 150 attendees—the largest Possible Dreams turnout to date. Even more significant, the diversity of the event was impressive, with teams from ten different neighborhoods and a substantial representation of Haverhill’s Latino and African-American communities.

As people from different neighborhoods and backgrounds remixed several times for conversation in the World Café format, positive energy throbbed throughout the room. Participants identified dozens of “signs of energy and progress” in the neighborhoods, downtown, and citywide. Frequently mentioned were the activation of new or renewed community associations in the Acre, Mt. Washington, and the Highlands; progress at Harbor Place; and the growing number of recreational spaces and family-oriented events around the city.

During a whole-group conversation in the last part of the evening, about a dozen different participants stood to offer reflections about what they had heard. The following themes were voiced:

- Increased civic engagement by people from all neighborhoods and backgrounds, supported by:
 - Grassroots leadership, building unity among neighbors
 - Formal opportunities for residents to participate, such as Merrimack Street planning events (TDI), “Working Cities” community engagement events in Mt. Washington, and the Mayor’s Council of Neighborhoods.
 - New chapter of League of Women Voters, going to Haverhill High School to enroll new voter (150 in last few months, and to Lowell Auditorium to welcome new citizens from 99 countries at regional ceremonies.
 - Self-organized youth networks and events, such as the Youth Engagement Team (launched at Possible Dreams 2015) and the conferences focused on the “School to Prison Pipeline” (next session March 26, at Haverhill Alternative School in the St. James School facility.)
 - Collaborative attitude of City officials, avoiding the gridlock that often occurs at the national level.
 - Profusion of new communication media being used (or planned) to support neighborhood cohesion and resident engagement. (See next item.)
- Exciting potential for new media that are emerging for residents to communicate and self-organize:
 - Effective use of Facebook by neighborhood groups—promoting each others’ efforts as well as their own.
 - “Heartbeat of Haverhill” blog by Alison Colby-Campbell, who invites neighborhood news items.
 - “Haverhill Matters” co-operative news source—prepared to offer neighborhood collaboration tools and event calendars, as soon as they secure 25 more founding members.
 - “Activate Haverhill” text-message communication network, providing brief messages about events and volunteer opportunities. Access the network at 978-228-2116.
- Growing excitement about projects in unexpected places:

- “Creative Placemaking”
 - Disc Golf is a grassroots example—turning an unused landscape into a creative amenity
 - Noah Koretz (TDI) leadership in seeking ArtPlace America grant. Example would be theater, art, or special lighting that would attract people to the downtown passageways (that are often regarded as problem areas).
 - Work to “activate” Goeke Park, with color, activities, performances—to prepare Merrimack Street for the coming development, get people used to coming there as a destination.
- Emerging idea of “Visual Stories”—various media (such as a YouTube video clip) geo-positioned, and accessed through bar code, QR code, or special ap. Could link our rich history to specific places and create ready access by a much larger audience.

The evening ended with a special drawing for the “Neighborhood Project Award”—\$300 in funding plus volunteer support for a project organized by one of the pre-registered neighborhood teams. The team name drawn at random from the bucket was Urban Kindness (Mt. Washington). In a gesture that perfectly expressed the spirit of unity in the room, the group’s president Keith Boucher requested that we pass the award on to the Acre neighborhood group, because “a lot of attention is already being focused right now on Mt. Washington.”) The Acre Neighborhood Association accepted the award, and Team Haverhill volunteers Mark and Cheryl Michel look forward to working with this group to develop a “Small Project with Big Impact” for 2016.