

# Our Community



# Caro Community Assessment

Prepared by the Caro Area District Library, 2017

## The Spark

What kind of community do you want to live in? When is the last time you were asked that? Over the past five months, Caro Area District Library has asked this of many local residents. We want to know their aspirations, what they see as challenges to those goals, how we as a community could take action to achieve these goals, and who they trust to accomplish these things.

Why is the library asking these questions? By gathering public knowledge of the Caro community's aspirations, we can then design programs and services that aid the community in reaching those goals. The library's mission is to 'Cultivate Curiosity.' We want to cultivate a better community at the same time. Also, sharing is one of the fundamental principles of libraries. We will be sharing the public knowledge we have gathered through this process with as many other organizations in the greater community as we can. Then, they can all make decisions with the citizens' interests in mind. That is also why we are sharing this report with you. When we turn outward with our decision making, the whole community benefits.

We were lucky enough to receive a grant from the Library of Michigan and the Harwood Institute for Public Innovation, utilizing funds from the Institute for Museum and Library Services. The "Library Transforming Communities" program is nationally recognized by the American Library Association as a force for positive change within communities.

## The Community

Over the course of 15 community conversations and several one-on-one interviews, we were able to compile public knowledge on the aspirations of the greater community. We spoke to more than 170 individuals about their goals for Caro. We wanted to make sure that we did not speak only to library users, so we made an effort to reach out to groups and individuals that we do not normally see here. The Caro community does not end at the city limits nor at the boundary of any particular township; therefore we did not limit participants by any specific geographic area. If they feel like they are part of the community, they were invited. Two particularly enlightening conversations were one we had with high school students and one we had with a K-8 group.

## The Conversations

Throughout the conversations, we saw many of the same themes and ideas popping up. Some themes were major in some conversations and minor in others. Some of the things we learned: We want a community that is **connected & engaged, economically prosperous, communicative, and allows for a healthy, active lifestyle.**

## Connection & Engagement

Connectedness is defined as having a link or union. We heard again and again during these conversations that people in Caro want to feel connected to each other. They want Caro to be welcoming, inclusive, and diverse. They want to feel comfortable getting to know their neighbors, and to feel the support of the whole community. Many citizens feel that people are currently connected within their own interests but that there is a lack of willingness to support anything they are not personally interested in. People are “in silos too much.” Some feel this has to do with the current trend of socializing online instead of in person. Others feel that this is affected by family and friends having to move away to find jobs. This theme was repeated over and over in every conversation. Caro wants to be a community that is more supportive, accepting, and tolerant.

Part of the link that seems to be missing is engagement. People are asking for events that bring people together and more “things to do” in the community. They would like to see more young people involved in local leadership with a hope that things would become more progressive. Community members would like to see people work together to move forward, be willing to compromise and work on one goal. More involvement, more engagement, and a spirit of discussion and cooperation are all on the table.

Some citizens mentioned that they would like to volunteer but don't know who wants or welcomes volunteers or how to get in touch with those organizations. Other groups stated that it seems that the same people are always the ones volunteering and that causes burn out. It seems like more communication would be the key to this problem.



## **Economy**

Everyone agreed that in order for many things to happen, Caro needs to improve economically. There is a distinct lack of well-paying jobs. Many people echoed that they long for more opportunity, more education, and more prosperity for the community. Residents want their children, grandchildren, and friends to be able to stay here or to come back after college. They also would like more choices to be able to shop locally, to be able to go out for dinner without driving to another community, and more entertainment choices here. It was mentioned that there is not much here for young singles. If the community is going to grow, we need a way to attract people in the 25-40 age range. They need both a way to make a living and things to do that make living here attractive.

Many conversations mentioned shopping local and supporting small businesses. One of the teens pointed out that small businesses are much more likely to employ those under 18 and also to help make college scholarships available. High school students are often looking for employment, both to save money for college and to get some real world experience.

Others commented that it takes a lot of courage to take the risks of starting a small business. Some of the ideas for helping those willing to take that risk included:

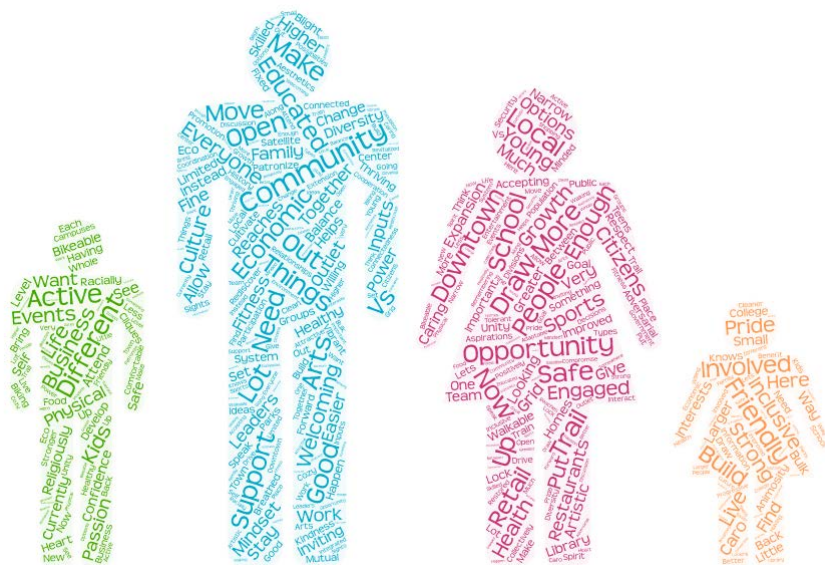
- Creating a Small Business Council
- Education on writing a business plan
- An Entrepreneur Fair
- Small business mentorship
- New business owners' incentives or tax breaks

There were also lots of great ideas on businesses that would attract both current residents and out-of-town visitors:

- Farm to table restaurant (we have great farms, right?)
- Skydiving at the airport
- More festivals and events related to agriculture
- Healthier food store (something like Whole Foods)
- Craft store

## Communication

Many community members pointed out that Caro already has a lot of great things going on. In every conversation, we learned about new things that other people sitting around the table were not aware of. This led us to agree that there is not enough communication to the community as a whole about events, services, and general community information. A suggestion to get the word out about community events was to “pick the demographic that you want to attract and use the medium that demographic uses.” There was a lot of discussion about media types: newspaper, radio, social media, internet, etc. Many local organizations do not have websites or do not maintain their websites with current information. Another resident thought it would be great to have some type of hard copy newsletter that goes out to all area residents, like the publication sent quarterly by the city but with a broader reach. An up-to-date online community event calendar would be a big asset to overall communication.



Promotion of the community as a whole was recommended. We need to market Caro as a great place to live, work, and play. Some suggestions included welcome packets that could be handed out by local realtors and landlords and a visitor center or website that includes positive local information.

Also within communication, it was mentioned numerous times that the citizens would like leaders who get along and work together to solve problems and attract positive attention to our community. They feel there are underlying currents between community leaders that have gone on for decades and cause much of the friction that impedes progress. There is hope that more young professionals will get involved in local leadership. One gentleman pointed out that there are “lots of traditional handcuffs that keep things from happening.” He elaborated to say that when people live in a small town, they often don’t share their real feelings on an issue because it may cause rifts in long standing relationships.

## Clean Living

When discussing things to do in the area, many people mentioned they would like more walking trails, bike paths, and outdoor recreation opportunities. People thought that extensions to the current paths would give the most bang for our buck, as well as a bridge over M-24 from Chippewa Landing Park to the Exchange Club Forest. The Cass River is a great local resource; they would like to have kayaking and canoeing opportunities once the river is cleaned up. Many parents would like small playground parks in the neighborhoods where their children could play relatively close to home. They really enjoy the new playgrounds at Schall and McComb Elementaries as well as Beith Park but felt they are too far from most residential neighborhoods.



We are behind other communities in encouraging active lifestyles. There are high levels of smoking, obesity, drug use, and sexual abuse in the Caro area. Economic depression raises crimes rates and drug use. More education on healthy eating and a community garden were suggested, as was developing a regional recreation authority in order to encourage healthy lifestyles.

One local parent commented that her children always notice how many cigarette butts litter the playgrounds. Cigarette butts are recyclable in certain places and could be collected in specific receptacles to be turned into park furniture or something useful that doesn't litter our community. Many conversations touched on our lack of community pride because of the litter, blight and overall unappealing aesthetics of the community. They would like to see things cleaned up be it homes, parks, or businesses. Ideas to accomplish this:

- A Community Day where everyone works together to clean up yards/parks/businesses
- A citywide cleanup where people put things to the curb that they don't want anymore and anyone who wants it can come pick it up for free
- Community flower planting
- Refacing of downtown businesses
- Cleanup of abandoned houses
- Cleanup of the river
- Signs on historic homes and buildings showing the year they were built



