

COMMUNITY CONVERSATIONS

2022

FINDINGS



**POUDRE RIVER
PUBLIC LIBRARY**
DISTRICT



INTRODUCTION

FROM APRIL to August, 2022, Poudre Libraries implemented the Community Conversations project, based on the [Harwood Institute for Public Innovation's "Turn Outward"](#) model. The project aimed to gather, analyze and share citizen input about our community's future while also informing the Library's 2023–2025 strategic plan.

The "Turn Outward" model encourages shifting the organization's perspective from looking inward—at our best guess about what the community needs—to looking outward—at actual aspirations as stated by a wide sweep of residents. In this way, the organization is guided by powerful "public knowledge" to make decisions around serving the true needs and actual ambitions of the community.

During the Community Conversations project, the Library heard from nearly 800 people about their hopes and dreams for our community. Respondents also shared ideas for ways to strengthen the community. A qualitative review of the input revealed seven themes our community cares about and wants.

+ KINDNESS & CONNECTION

**+ EQUITY, DIVERSITY
& INCLUSION**

+ HEALTH & SAFETY

**+ AFFORDABILITY
& GROWTH**

**+ ENVIRONMENT
& SUSTAINABILITY**

**+ EDUCATION
& INNOVATION**

**+ ARTS, CULTURE
& ENTERTAINMENT**



THE PROCESS

THE LIBRARY used Harwood's "Ask" and "Aspirations" tools to engage the community and gather input.

The "Ask" tool engages individuals with four questions:

1

What kind of community do you want to live in?

2

Why is that important to you?

3

How is that different from how you see things now?

4

What are some of the things that need to happen to create that kind of change?

The "Ask" tool was ideal for engaging individuals in quick 3–7-minute interviews, especially in pop-up locations throughout the area.

The "Aspirations" tool engages groups with similar questions as the Ask tool while digging deeper to uncover conditions that need to change in the community to make progress. The "Aspirations" exercise was ideal for small focus groups, partners, and staff to shift the focus from the Library to the community.

Library staff hosted 18 Community Conversations across the District using the Ask and Aspirations tools, interacting directly with 270 people. An online survey elicited nearly 500 responses.

1 Pop-Ups: Interactive pop-ups at various locations and events to encourage participation from a variety of populations including the Fort Collins Farmers Market, CSU Lagoon Concert, Firecracker 5K, and Me Oh My Pie Coffee and Pie café in LaPorte.

2 Small Focus Groups: Conversations with small groups comprised of individuals representing targeted demographics and locations in the Library service area. This included Spanish-language groups, a teen-focused group, and sessions with library partners and stakeholders.

3 Online Survey: An online survey, provided in English and Spanish, to capture additional community input and reach individuals we did not engage with during our pop-ups and focus groups.

18 pop-ups
focus groups

770 respondents

4,000+ comments



ISSUES IMPORTANT TO THE COMMUNITY

QUALITATIVE DATA analysis of the more than 4,000 comments revealed seven key themes. While similar aspirations and concerns emerged, there were differences in comments around how the community should achieve change.

One sentiment that came up repeatedly is concern for current political divisions and rhetoric. People often mentioned “dysfunction” as a barrier to achieving community cohesion and change.

Despite areas of divisiveness, participants are proud of the Fort Collins and Northern Colorado community and feel strongly that there are many benefits to living in the area. Individuals point to places like Old Town and the many wonderful parks and natural areas as highly valued amenities.

1 – KINDNESS & CONNECTION

People in Fort Collins and the surrounding areas want to live in a community that is kind and welcoming to everyone, one that is respectful and open to differences. People want a community that fosters a strong sense of belonging. People desire more opportunities for social connection and conversation, particularly to bridge differences among residents and to learn from one another, but also to improve quality of life.

People frequently mentioned that Fort Collins and the surrounding areas have become less friendly and welcoming. There is a sense from many residents that this change is the result of the growth and development the area. They reported feeling less connected to their neighbors and frustrated by divisions that exist in the larger community.

“Right now, I don’t truly know very many people outside of a small circle. I see the same people every day in my neighborhood, at daycare drop-off, at the grocery store, etc., but there aren’t as many opportunities to truly connect and feel part of something bigger.”

I appreciate that Fort Collins has a number of gathering places (YAC, Senior Center, Library, etc.) that offer people ways to connect and that the City has ways to connect. Fort Collins has grown a lot in my time here and I think it's become more difficult to foster community feeling and connect.

POSSIBLE ACTIONS

- + Listen to one another and say 'hello'
- + Work together
- + Promote civil public discourse
- + Hold more Community Conversations
- + Create spaces and opportunities for people to come together
- + Develop more opportunities to be with people from diverse backgrounds, languages, etc.
- + Find more informal opportunities to get out to connect with neighbors





2 – EQUITY, DIVERSITY & INCLUSION Our community members want to live in a place that values diversity. People want a community that actively works toward equity and inclusion for all people. Individuals took a broad view of “diversity” to include key attributes such as race, religion, age, abilities, political perspective, and sexual orientation or gender identity. There was consensus that diversity is an overlooked asset.

People feel that current social systems and structures keep us separated from one another and even perpetuate inequality. Learning about and interacting with one another is vital to fostering diversity and equity.

Multiple people linked having an inclusive and equitable society to stronger feelings of safety. They also associated having a kind, connected community and an equitable and inclusive one.

“We are better together and what we do now impacts our future. I’m grateful for the quality of life reflected in Fort Collins at large. I believe we’re already on the right path. The rest is about listening to diverse groups of people to be inclusive.”





“

When it's 'everybody,' you have more understanding and respect.

”

POSSIBLE ACTIONS

- + Integrate more voices into community decision-making and local leadership
- + Bring people together, across boundaries, with shared interests or purpose
- + Move beyond “performative” and truly be inclusive
- + Lower barriers for everyone to participate
- + Be open to listening to the experiences of others
- + Encourage diversity through employment, business startup, and housing opportunities
- + Host Town Hall meetings to discuss diverse perspectives and experiences
- + Build accessible spaces for both abled and differently-abled groups to gather and interact
- + Hire consultants who are people of color

3 – HEALTH & SAFETY

Residents we talked to want to live in a healthy community that is safe for everyone to pursue their needs without fear or barriers.

The connection between health and safety meant different things to people and topics discussed ranged from access to affordable healthcare to concerns for personal safety while driving, biking, or walking, and safety from violence and criminal activity.

Access to mental health care was frequently cited as an immediate need, particularly following the pandemic and its effects on individuals, teens, families, and people who are unhoused.

Participants defined a healthy community as being low crime (e.g., violence, guns, drugs, and theft), having safe transportation options and strong infrastructure (e.g., sidewalks and bike lanes), and having safe spaces for all people to enjoy. There was also an emphasis on equity.

continued

To improve the health and safety of our community, people offered various solutions including accessible health services, increased mental health care, more inclusion and equity, balanced police services, clean places, more health education, and access to natural areas, nature, and wildlife.



“ I want to live in a community that is safe and healthy. If people don’t feel protected and well, they can’t learn, work, or play effectively. ”

POSSIBLE ACTIONS

- + Provide more outreach to marginalized populations
- + Focus on shared investments in health, education, etc. to find success
- + Strengthen public health education
- + Provide mental health services and support
- + Improve access to affordable health care
- + Increase access to healthy food
- + Develop a stronger, more adequate budgetary provision for health services



4 – AFFORDABILITY & GROWTH People want to live in a community with balanced growth and development, that maintains small town friendliness and values, and provides economic opportunities for all. Residents hope that as the area grows it will attract more cultural opportunities, diversity, and employers.

People feel there is a lack of economic opportunity for many people, from teens to seniors, which prevents individuals, families, and businesses from thriving. This includes employment and career advancement, fair/living wages, affordable housing, aging in place, and economic silos. People also continue to be impacted by inflation, rising food costs, increasing child care costs, and other economic issues.

Another concern with the area’s growth is its impact on the environment: natural resources (particularly water), traffic and transportation planning, pollution and air quality, shared resources, overcrowding, walkability/bikability, etc.

“FC is an expensive place to live (housing, child care, transportation, services), even for educated, employed and otherwise economically stable people. The struggle is worse for POC, marginalized, isolated. An unaffordable community creates tension, division, anger, and poor health.”

POSSIBLE ACTIONS

- + Create a vision for a responsible and effective growth management plan
- + Conduct public education on growth plan
- + Develop affordable, safe housing for seniors to age in place
- + Place more services within walking distance
- + Focus on small business development
- + Focus on social and economic welfare of existing population
- + Find funding for mass transportation



5 – ENVIRONMENT & SUSTAINABILITY Our community loves the outdoor recreational opportunities available in the region, from good biking, walking and hiking trails to parks and open spaces. Respondents expressed a strong affinity to the natural environment and a desire to protect and steward our land, water, and wildlife.

People want to maintain the high quality of natural resources and activities available throughout Fort Collins and surrounding areas. As growth continues in the region, environmental resources will become more limited and must be addressed through good land-use practices, conservation, and education.

Many individuals reported that eco-friendly philosophies should guide growth and development decisions: “Leave the world better than you found it” and “Think seven generations ahead.” The term “sustainability” was frequently used with issues like natural resources, biodiversity, farming and agriculture, open spaces, indigenous knowledge, and health and well-being.

“ I want to live in a community that provides safe spaces to work and play, focuses on sustainable and equitable development, and promotes environmental quality and access to natural areas... Given the rate of natural resource exploitation, decreasing air quality on the Front Range, aridification in the West, and increasing natural disasters under a rapidly changing climate, communities must adapt to focus on smart growth and environmental management to mitigate risk. ”



“Nature is fun and quiet, and sometimes it’s just nice to sit and feel it.”

POSSIBLE ACTIONS

- + Conduct community outreach and education
- + Prioritize bike laws
- + Improve bike and pedestrian infrastructures
- + Create incentives for sustainable practices
- + Protect open space, natural areas, parks, etc.
- + Promote community gardens and garden & landscape events
- + Develop more public/mass transportation
- + Install more electric charging stations
- + Add more parks and playgrounds
- + Prioritize native plants
- + Increase opportunities for composting
- + Expand recycling

6 – EDUCATION & INNOVATION

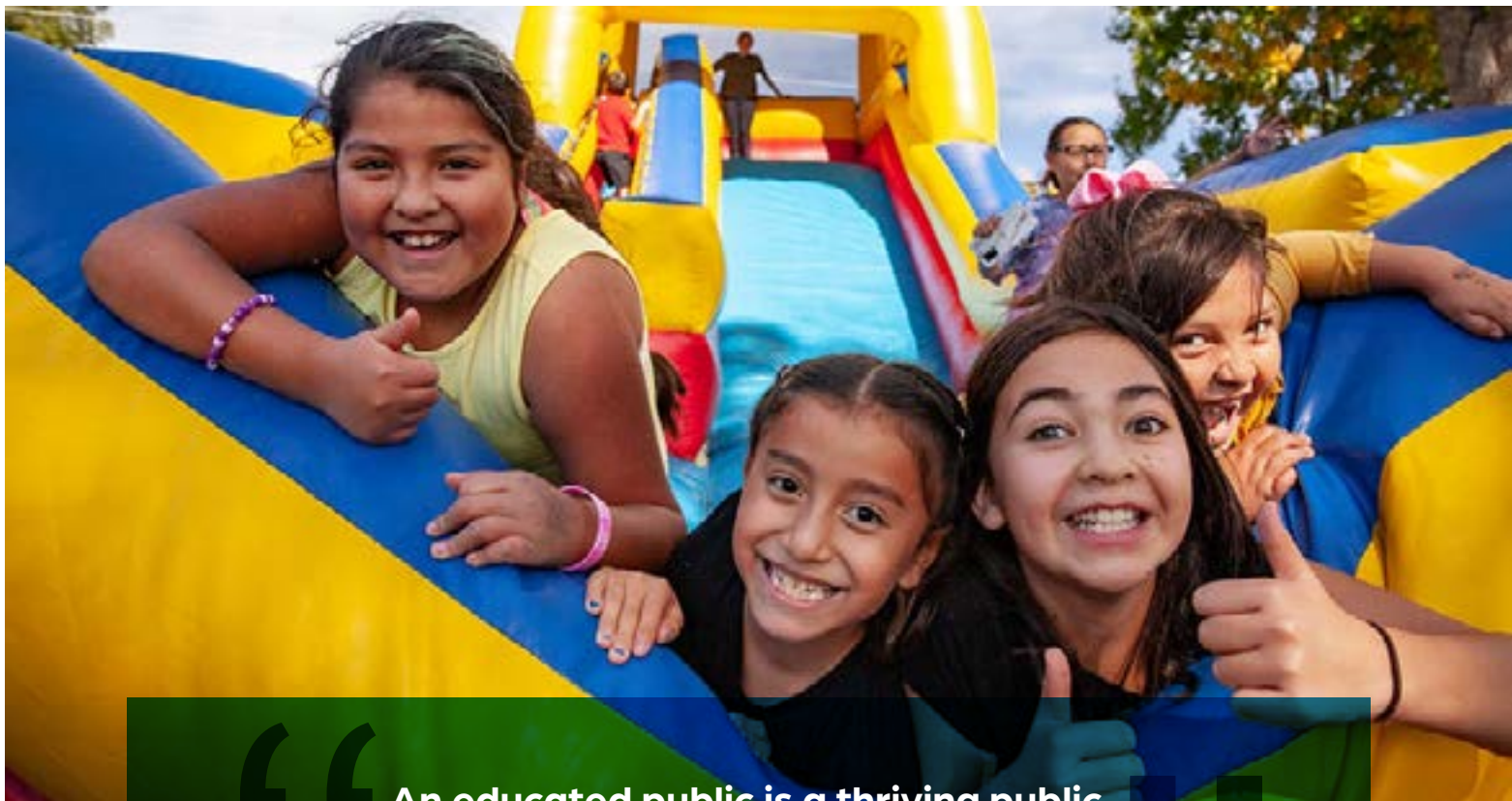
There is little doubt that our community values strong educational systems and opportunities for gaining information and knowledge. People want to live in a place that embraces lifelong learning and community-based education as a means for continued personal and professional growth. This includes engaging in dialogue without the fear of being “canceled” for an opinion or question.

People we spoke with mentioned Poudre School District, Colorado State University, Front Range Community College, and other institutions as being critical to an informed and successful public. Other public entities, like the library, and increased opportunities to volunteer were also mentioned as essential to individual learning and a thriving community.

While there is consensus for the importance of a strong K-12 education, there is not agreement on what should make up K-12 curriculum. Differences emerge when discussing the role of parents vs. teachers, the place for character education, the importance of “core” subjects vs. “electives,” benefits of public school vs. other models (charter, faith-based, homeschool), the place for social issues in the classroom, and more.

With higher education, people are looking for affordable options, whether that is through university, community college, or alternative paths. The rising cost of college tuition, questions about the value of higher education and student costs-of-living in Fort Collins are concerns.

continued



“An educated public is a thriving public.”

POSSIBLE ACTIONS

- + Create more training opportunities
- + Create informal learning opportunities
- + Develop programs about and for diverse cultures
- + Strengthen the Campus–Community connection
- + Increase pay for teachers and educators
- + Build small business / school connections
- + Offer more afterschool activities

7 – ARTS, CULTURE & ENTERTAINMENT

One of the gems of our community is the arts, culture, and entertainment scene. Our residents value the arts as contributing to a higher quality of life. Many people mentioned that shared, cultural experiences like art, music, theater, local history, and food bring joy to their lives.

People enjoy many types of entertainment from happy hour to music festivals to museums. They reported that the arts are an opportunity to bring people together; to explore their passions for learning, discovery, and creativity; and to grow spiritually.

To improve upon the arts and culture scene, people would like to see more affordable activities and to have more culturally diverse and authentic programs for learning and celebration. People indicated it is important to them that local entertainment and arts reflect everyone in the community.

“

We need to continue to invest in arts and culture programs... maintain sustainable funding for these programs.”

”



POSSIBLE ACTIONS

- + Provide more entertainment for children
- + Create “fun” programs for teens like design and costume making, LARPing, etc.
- + Offer free art opportunities
- + Plan more family-friendly community events
- + Offer more community-based events
- + Develop culturally authentic celebrations
- + Provide assistance with starting creative arts businesses



WHAT'S NEXT

WE ALL – local government, schools, businesses, nonprofits, healthcare, individuals, families, the library, and many others – have a shared responsibility to create a more hopeful future for everyone in our community. It will take sustained efforts from everyone to actualize the aspirations we discovered. We will need to work together.

One of the suggestions we heard throughout the Community Conversations was the desire for increased community outreach, education, communication, and engagement.

POUDRE LIBRARIES' ROLE

Findings from the Community Conversations were used to inform the Library's 2023–2025 Strategic Plan and set priorities for library service. While some of the issues identified during the conversations are outside of the Library's scope of resources and expertise, there are many opportunities for the Library to support community efforts. The Library can help advance other stakeholders' efforts by offering space, facilitating discussions, co-coordinating programs, and providing services and learning opportunities for all.

In addition to the work of our Strategic Plan, we identified specific ways the Library can contribute to the community's path forward.

1

PEOPLE ARE LOOKING FOR WAYS TO CONNECT.

The Library is a natural platform for facilitating connections whether through community conversations, programs, or open spaces for people to gather. We can develop meaningful opportunities for people to connect with each other, not just with the Library.

2

PEOPLE WANT SPACES FOR COMMUNITY INTERACTION AND ENGAGEMENT.

We are mindful of the importance of the Library's meeting spaces, study rooms, computer labs, and other essential areas for community interaction. The Library's spaces are public resources open to everyone and can serve as a hub.

3

PEOPLE WANT TO LEARN MORE.

Our community is looking for trustworthy information, opportunities for ongoing education and growth, and access to resources. The Library can continue to serve as a platform for formal and informal learning through our programs, collections, and partnerships. While the Library plays an essential role in literacy and school-readiness, individual learning, exploration, and discovery spans a lifetime.

4

PEOPLE WANT EXPERIENCES.

The Library delivers a variety of programs in its buildings and out in the community, providing many interactive experiences for all ages. We will identify opportunities to align our programs with community priorities around these key issues.

NEXT STEPS

In many ways, the Poudre Libraries' Community Conversations project builds on other local endeavors. For example, the City of Fort Collins' ["Our City"](#) website actively engages the community online around current projects and prioritizing future programs. The City's 2022 Report to the Community also echoes many of the themes from the Library's Community Conversations. Larimer County conducts a Citizen Survey periodically to find out what residents think about county services.

The challenge going forward then is not so much trying to determine what the community wants but how to focus energy and resources around these priorities in order to affect real, lasting change. This report has many recommendations from community members that are actionable. Some recommendations are more complex, requiring multiple agencies to be involved in a larger effort.

When we encounter big problems, the best solutions must involve all citizens and stakeholders in cooperation and collaboration. Together, we can become the community our people dream about.



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[POUDRELIBRARIES.ORG](https://poudrelibraries.org)