

South Dorchester Community Conversation

Sunday April 22, 2012

South Dorchester K-8 School – Golden Hill, MD

MEETING REPORT



South Dorchester Community Conversation - Section 1

What was the South Dorchester Community Conversation?

The South Dorchester Community Conversation was an event attended by 85 people from the Southwestern area of Dorchester County, Maryland. It provided an opportunity for those who live, work, or serve in this special part of Dorchester County to have meaningful conversations and discover common ground ideas about how to better support and help those community members who are in need. This “World Café” was an opportunity for stakeholders to use conversation to strengthen relationships, build trust, and identify common ground themes from which to work.

For more about this model and the planning for this conversation, see Section 2.

What happened at the South Dorchester Community Conversation?

On a rainy Sunday afternoon, the South Dorchester Community Conversation transformed the gym of the South Dorchester K-8 School into a warm and friendly café complete with small tables - four chairs and a potted flower at each - and table cloths (really sheets of paper on which participants could write). Each participant was assigned a table randomly to ensure the likelihood of unacquainted people sitting together.



Everyone was warmly greeted by members of the planning committee and received a meeting packet, name tag, and a table assignment. Around 3:45pm the participants were asked to find their seats and the event began.

Facilitator Jennifer Hicks offered her congratulations to the group for making the effort to be in attendance and how it demonstrated their tremendous commitment to their community. She acknowledged the World Café planning committee for their hard work to make the event happen.

Ms. Hicks explained the “who,” “what,” and “why” of the event and the significance of the gathering of so many people. She described what the group would be expecting: three 20-minute conversations answering three “questions that matter” about how to be good neighbors in good times and bad. She explained that after each conversation everyone except a designated “table host” would move to another table to have the next conversation with new people. She reviewed the

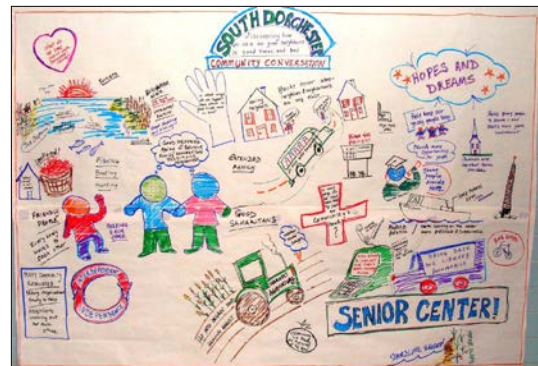
etiquette that is followed during a World Café and encouraged all participants to listen carefully to each other and to try to discover themes for common ground.

Once the instructions were given and participants were ready to begin the group was provided the first question: “What do you love about South Dorchester? What makes it a unique and special place?” Twenty minutes later the participants switched tables and the second question was asked: “In what ways do we support each other in good times and in bad? In what ways do we need more help to meet our community’s needs?” After round two finished the third question was posed: “What are your hopes and dreams for the future of South Dorchester?”



After the group took a break to enjoy dinner from Old Salty’s, the group reconvened to hear reports from paired-up table hosts. Each pair of reporters provided a summary of the three discussions that occurred at their tables including the three most prominent issues and underlying themes. The facilitators documented what was said in their reports. Once the table host reports were completed, the meeting mural created by graphic documenter Tom Briggs was presented. It reflected the common themes heard from the conversations.

The final discussion focused on next steps. Several participants provided ideas verbally and others submitted them in writing. In addition to the list of next steps, the following pages contain the major themes from the South Dorchester Community Conversation, notes from the tables during the three conversations, and the list of participants. Please review the notes and the ideas for next steps and decide where YOU want to take this process. You have a few options:



- *Attend the follow-up meeting at Old Trinity Church Parish Hall on June 12th, from 5:30 to 7:30 pm. Come enjoy soup, salad and dessert and share in a conversation about what we as a community might do next.*
- *Get on the Good Neighbor Project e-mail list to get information about follow up activities. Send a request to hastings@cavehill.com*
- *Visit the Sustainable Delmarva website for updates about South Dorchester’s follow up activities, as well as, the updates for other Delmarva communities: www.sustainabledelmarva.net/current_delmarva_projects.html*

South Dorchester Community Conversation - Section 2

Why a World Café for South Dorchester?

The World Café meeting design was created by Juanita Brown and David Isaacs as outlined in their book *The World Café: Shaping Our Futures through Conversations That Matter*. It has been shown that bringing together the whole community allows for the “possibility of a future different than the past.” The format of the meeting leads to talking, sharing ideas and opinions, and identifying common ground concepts. The event and outcomes often serve as a springboard to more in-depth visioning and action planning.

According to Peter Block, the author of a book entitled *Community: The Structure of Belonging*, a major element of building a plan for the future requires “broadening the conversation and getting people into a room who aren’t used to showing up.” This accomplishes a few things including opening the door to interactions among diverse groups of people, providing space to share important ideas and create bonds, and building the groundwork for the development of a future vision owned by all.

For communities like South Dorchester, who have tremendous opportunities but also face challenging issues, a large-scale community conversation like a World Café offers relief to those whose job it is to “solve problems” as it provides a new way to approach old issues. A World Café event allows the group to focus on what can be created, rather than what problems can be solved.

“No future is created by simply solving problems,” Block explains. “You have to tap into people’s longing, imagination, and possibility, to organize around something larger. Nothing new gets created by better problem solving or by focusing on low-hanging fruit,” he continues. The South Dorchester Community Conversation is the start of a process that moves away from focusing on short-term results. The World Café was designed with the understanding that if our conversations are limited to measurable outcomes, we are simply getting better at a system, not creating a new future.

Who helped plan the South Dorchester Community Conversation?

The South Dorchester Community Conversation was developed by a planning committee that represented many parts of the community. The committee helped design the meeting and invited those in their community to attend. They invited participants and developed the questions for the event. The committee included the following 22 dedicated community members.

Rhonda Aaron	Robin Hill	Nancy Shockley
George Ames	Malkia Johnson	Frank Stout
Rebecca Foxwell	Charlene Jones	Deb Van Dyke
Bertha Gonzales	Kristi King	Stirling Ward
(the Rev'd. Dr.) Robert Gribbon	the Rev. Barbara Mills	Sandy Wilson
Mary Handley	Councilman Jay Newcomb	Susan Windsor
Nancy Baxter Hastings	Ronnie Reynolds	
Keasha Haythe	the Rev. Doug Ridley	

The planning committee met three times to determine:

- Who should be invited to this conversation so it would allow the broadest possible spectrum of citizens to have a voice about their hopes for the future of the greater South Dorchester community?

- What questions should be asked at a World Café that would allow the participants to offer the most insight about South Dorchester?
- Where should the South Dorchester Community Conversation be held? How would it be set up, and what food/drinks would be served?
- What roles would the committee play during the event?

The committee members were responsible for directly inviting members in their community. The planning committee members were committed not to specific agenda outcomes but rather a successful event in which many were involved.

Jennifer Hicks, the founder and manager of *Sustainable Delmarva*, a peninsula-wide project that uses dialogue and regional networking as a tool to increase community well-being, facilitated the process. She was assisted by Jesse Schaefer, a senior at Washington College, and Thomas Briggs, a graphic documenter.

The Jesse Ball DuPont Fund awarded Old Trinity Church a Technical Grant to cover the majority of the costs of conducting the South Dorchester Community Conversation. Old Trinity provided their Parish Hall and dinner for the three planning meetings, and contributed funds toward promotion of the event and food for the community conversation. The Dorchester County Public School opened the South Dorchester K-8 School and provided maintenance staff for the event. Old Salty's restaurant provided the food for the event at a discount.

What is the Good Neighbor Project?

Initiated by Old Trinity Church in Church Creek, and funded by a grant from the Jessie Ball DuPont Fund, the South Dorchester Community Conversation was a one-of-a kind event. However, it is part of a larger idea called the Good Neighbor Project which seeks to discover, with others, how we can make more connections and be good neighbors to one another in good times and in bad.

South Dorchester County is endowed with churches, fire departments and post offices that help connect neighbors. In addition, the libraries, schools and sheriff's office in the region endeavor to reach out and support people in the community. However, many other regional services do not reach this rural area and while people in the community value self-sufficiency, there are services to which all are entitled. In addition, the community needs to be prepared for potential disasters, considering the area's vulnerability to devastating floods. The Good Neighbor Project seeks to bring together community and agency representatives using dialogue to brainstorm how all can be mutually supportive of community needs and continue to be in touch with one another.

Hopefully, as a result of the South Dorchester Community Conversation Old Trinity's Good Neighbor Project will become a project for the *entire community*, not just for Old Trinity Church, and be known as the **South Dorchester Good Neighbor Project**.

What is Sustainable Delmarva?

Sustainable Delmarva is a project that brings together diverse stakeholders within communities of the Delmarva Peninsula to envision and plan for their future and the future of the region. The project emphasizes the important role of local communities as a catalyst for change for Delmarva by providing the tools to determine their desired direction and connecting them with other Delmarva communities to share ideas and resources and moving closer toward sustainability.