

Focus Group Results

Spring 2006



A collaborative effort of

- The Community Foundation for the Fox Valley Region
- Fox Cities Chamber of Commerce and Industry
- Fox Cities Economic Development Partnership
- United Way Fox Cities

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Methods

Twelve focus groups were held in the Spring of 2006. In 8 groups, we brought together key informants, experts, and leaders to discuss a particular aspect of life in the Fox Cities, including the environment, health, home (vulnerable populations), learning, leisure, safety, self-sufficiency (basic needs), and work. Other segments of the population participated in groups that overviewed all of these topics, including working parents, people of color, young people attending Fox Valley Technical College, and young professionals. An additional series of discussions with small groups of youth at various regional middle and high schools were led by staff at each location. The youth information appears in a separate report and is not included here.

Participants were recruited by identifying a cross section of organizations or experts dealing with that sector, identifying key informants from those organizations, and assembling a list of approximately 25-28 invitees. We made an effort to recruit persons on the “front lines” along with those likely to know about new developments, trends, and conditions in the area. Some top level leaders were invited due to their unique perspectives. All of the above received a letter of introduction to the 2006 L.I.F.E. Study that requested their participation. The Working Parent participants were offered \$20 cash as incentive. Participation ranged between 6 and 16 people per group, with most groups involving 10-12 persons.

The Community Foundation for the Fox Cities, Inc. hosted nine groups. The following organizations hosted one group: Fox Cities Rotary Multicultural Center, Fox Cities Chamber of Commerce & Industry, and Fox Valley Technical College. All groups were facilitated by Dr. Lora Warner, Planning & Evaluation, Inc. In most groups, we focused on a particular aspect of life, such as the environment or leisure opportunities. We posed the following questions to discussants related to the topic:

- What are some strengths of the Fox Cities region?
- What are some trends or conditions that concern you?
- What are some positive trends that you see?
- What are some crucial actions for the region to take to keep the Fox Cities region heading in the right direction?

In the demographic segment groups (working parents, minorities, youth, and young professionals), we discussed the above questions focused on the Fox Cities region in general, taking all “categories” into account.

The following report summarizes the discussion of each focus group. The sub-headings in each one-page report vary slightly due to the unfolding discussion in each group. Certain groups spent more time on particular questions than others.

Several major themes appeared to cut across many groups and are listed on the next page.

CROSS-CUTTING FOCUS GROUP THEMES

Strengths of the Region

- Highly favorable quality of life in this region and desire to preserve it
- Family oriented area
- Enjoyable leisure time opportunities, including outdoors, shopping, restaurants, the arts
- Great resources exist currently but are threatened (all types—natural, cultural, economic, education, health care, nonprofit, safety system, local governments)
- Proactive, collaborative leadership regionally that identifies problems and addresses them
- Growing diversity being acknowledged and accepted
- Health care system is high quality

Concerning Conditions and Trends

- Higher paying jobs turning over into lower wages; growing cost of living
- Major threat to government safety net and other public services
- Needs are growing (elderly and disabled, loss of jobs, safety threats, mental illnesses, environmental issues, education)
- Untreated mental illness and AODA treatment shortages causing costly ripple effects
- Health insurance costs, complexity, and lack of coverage a growing burden
- Land use issues and sprawl affects leisure, environmental degradation, transportation concerns, access to jobs, housing, safety, business

Crucial Actions

- Building the economy critical across sectors; the New North is positive first step
- Recognition that quick fixes won't work anymore as policy; long term decisions needed
- Need to reach out in new ways to include people of color in the quality of life
- Need for new partners to collaborate and use resources creatively (e.g. schools and nonprofit programs; businesses and governments; environment and recreation groups)
- Need to protect natural environment, reduce sprawl with better transportation options
- Local leadership must take ownership of needs, invest in prevention and early intervention
- Need for adult education and life skill training services

ENVIRONMENT FOCUS GROUP SUMMARY

Six persons participated representing local government, education, nature preserve, and UW Extension.

Regional Strengths and Positive Trends

- **Plentiful surface water in the region**, mainly Lake Winnebago but other lakes and rivers abound, providing not only drinking water but also opportunities for recreation, especially fishing, boating
- The region has the highest concentration of **nature centers/preserves** in the US (17 in the region) and they are well supported with volunteers and funding
- The **land is productive** for agriculture
- The **trail system** is growing and has community support with increasing use
- Regional governments, organizations, educators, and sporting groups are **increasingly collaborative** in addressing environmental concerns in practical rather than ideal ways
- The **Fox River cleanup** is progressing and a collaborative solution was found (not mandated by EPA); this solution receives worldwide recognition as a model for the cooperative process used
- The state has recently passed **regulations dealing with storm water and agricultural runoff** and is looking at others (aquatic invasive species) that are helpful in protecting the environment
- **Public awareness** of environmental problems has increased; everyday people are seeing the need and getting involved in partnerships to address problems
- Municipalities have developed **comprehensive plans for land use**

Concerning Conditions and Trends

- **Sprawling land development** is leading to habitat fragmentation and degradation of habitat and conflict between farming use versus residential development. “Leap frog” clusters of housing developments with no water/sewer services set apart from the neighboring development that break apart habitats and create demands on groundwater supplies
- **Storm water management** challenges due to wetland degradation and more impervious surfaces; smaller water ways and wetland areas are overloaded

CROSS-CUTTING FOCUS GROUP THEMES

Strengths of the Region

- Highly favorable quality of life in this region and desire to preserve it
- Great resources exist currently but are threatened (all types—natural, cultural, economic, education, health care, nonprofit, safety system, local governments)
- Proactive, collaborative leadership regionally that identifies problems and addresses them
- Growing diversity being acknowledged and accepted

Concerning Conditions and Trends

- Major erosion of government safety net and other public services
- At the same time needs are growing (elderly, loss of jobs, safety needs, mental illnesses, environmental needs, education)
- Mental illness and AODA treatment shortages causing costly ripple effects
- Higher paying jobs turning over into lower wages; growing cost of living
- Health insurance costs, complexity, and lack of coverage a burden
- Land use issues and sprawl affects leisure, environmental degradation, transportation concerns, access to jobs, housing, safety, business

Crucial Actions

- Recognition that quick fixes won't work anymore as policy; long term decisions needed
- Need to reach out in new ways to include people of color in the quality of life
- Building the economy critical across sectors; The New North as solution
- Need for new partners to collaborate and use resources creatively (e.g. schools and nonprofit programs; businesses and governments; environment and recreation groups)
- Need to protect natural environment, reduce sprawl with better transportation options
- Local leadership must take ownership of needs, invest in prevention and early intervention

- Decline in the *quality and quantity of groundwater*
- *Lack of water conservation* due to the perception that water is so plentiful
- *Drainage and runoff* from agriculture which threatens surface and water quality
- *Air quality declines* due to transportation patterns; growing population and increased automobiles
- *Invasive species*, especially aquatic, may soon come into the region from Lake Michigan and as a result threaten water quality and habitat locally, increasing costs to deal with the problems it brings
- *Exponential growth in economic value of land* as small farmers retire and sell land to developers; land conservation and public sector can't afford to own the land
- *Transition of small farms to larger farms* has many impacts on water quality, air quality (including smell), and development
- *There is a lack of region-wide land use planning*; comprehensive plans, while important, have been *done independently* by each municipality and do not protect habitat corridors
- *Larger natural areas are not being preserved* regionally rather are increasingly privately owned

Crucial Actions for the Region

- *Protect habitat corridors* from disruption by identifying them and creating land use policies and regulations that preserve what's there; increase awareness of the corridors and threat that degradation poses; create opportunities or forums for groups to collaborate to accomplish this
- *Communicate the value of preserving natural areas* to local government leaders and the public; personalize the information about the impact of decisions and practices on the way of life
- *Understand the barriers to environmentally friendly behaviors* and develop strategies to overcome
- *Broaden the base of support for the environment* by engaging business, education, health care, and leadership from community stakeholders; understand and address common concerns; look at the community as an "ecosystem" in which the environment plays a vital role in quality of life
- *Create various transportation options* that lessen the need to use a car in the region

HEALTH FOCUS GROUP SUMMARY

Twelve health care providers representing public health, dental, long term care, primary care, hospital care.

Regional Strengths

- A variety of **high quality health care resources available locally**, including nonprofits, unusual for a small “market.” A good referral network regionally and statewide
- Local leaders and **benefactors** support the health care system
- Cooperation and **collaboration** between health departments, health systems and public health
- The **health status** of citizens is relatively good

Concerning Conditions or Trends

- **Access to psychiatrists** in the Valley – a crisis shortage of providers with persons having to wait 3-4 months for their first appointment unless an emergency; mental illness leads to many other health problems, including dental, along with many other problems like homelessness
- **Poor access** to services for certain subgroups of residents due to inadequate transportation, language barriers, disabling conditions. Especially true for rural areas
- Substance and alcohol abuse- the region is **not meeting the needs for AODA treatment**
- **Insurance cutbacks** even for those with employer-paid insurance, and as a result delays in care
- Failure by the public to understand the **“underside” of healthcare** and unmet needs in the region
- There are **too few health professionals** being prepared, and quick fixes will not address the problem, which relates to the quality of science in high schools locally
- There are **growing needs of the elderly** for which the region needs new models of care and better prepared workforce
- **Governmental funding cutbacks for health care** force more funding to the local level; soon cutbacks in services must be felt, the good health care system chipped away

Access challenges for certain people

- Physically disabled and elderly
- Off hours, many people cannot take off of work
- Mentally ill trouble getting psychiatric care
- Minority populations, especially undocumented immigrants and elderly Hmong

Positive Trends

- The increasing acceptance of **new models of palliative care** and a holistic perspective on the person
- **Smoke free movement** – workplaces and public places
- The Fox Cities Community Clinic and Tri-County Dental Clinic are positive developments that have made a dent in **access to health services**, although the needs are still unmet
- Increased attention by schools to **healthy eating and exercise for children and youth**

Crucial Actions for the Region

- Improve **care management and support for persons with mental illness and dual diagnoses**, including educating the community on the costs of untreated mental illness, screening and intervening sooner, and creating teams of providers to manage a mentally ill person’s care.
- As a community work collaboratively to **build the healthcare workforce**. Strengthen the health care workforce by preparing high school for health careers, attracting Psychiatrists and Geriatricians, and prescribing Nurse Practitioners.
- **Educate politicians** on the long term costs of “quick fix” policy decisions to the health care system
- **Shift health care spending** to prevention and early intervention, especially in the areas of substance use, lifestyle/exercise, mental health
- Increase collaboration across sectors to **implement the Healthy Wisconsin 2010 goals**
- **Prepare for the aging population** by adopting new models of care, including case management for the elderly and knowledge of Geriatrics among primary care physicians; focus on prevention of illness among the elderly by encouraging active, healthy lifestyles

HOME FOCUS GROUP SUMMARY

Fourteen people participated, representing agencies that deal with vulnerable populations, including childcare, youth, persons with disabilities and elderly. In addition, one pastor and an information and referral director participated.

Regional Strengths

- Community-based **organizations work together**. With all budgets tight, these relationships help and there are regular forums and opportunities to network
- The **counties and local governments collaborate well** on things like transportation, waste, ADRC
- Numerous **free or very affordable programs for families** and youth
- **Opportunities for seniors to stay connected** (YMCA, UW Fox Valley, Senior Center)
- **Recognition of diversity** and support for it shown in programs and funding
- **Numerous volunteers** who do a good job, not just bodies but competent people
- **Good services** including schools, health care
- There is **strong community leadership**, both formal and informal leaders

Concerning Conditions or Trends

- **Accessible, affordable housing for persons with disabilities** with available support when needed
- **Government long term support services are increasingly unavailable**, with waits of 5+ years.
- There are many services available in the community but it's **hard to locate or to coordinate services** especially during a crisis; when several services pieced together cost is a challenge
- **Health care system concerns**: ability to staff health care services, especially long term support staff for jobs that require difficult often unappealing work at low pay and few benefits and the cost of health care and gaps in insurance coverage, making health and dental care access difficult even for those with insurance benefits
- **Programs are reducing services to existing clients** due to budget constraints; concern that soon, needs will outstrip resources
- **Respite care is not sufficiently available**, especially for persons with more severe disabilities (of all ages). Respite volunteers require special training and unique skills not widely available
- **Childcare concerns**: childcare providers do not tend to have staff that are trained/prepared to handle children with behavior problems, a growing concern. Also, quality of care is a concern locally, as well as availability of care for disabled or sick children, 2nd and 3rd shift employees, and the high cost of childcare for those earning lower wages, especially for infant care
- There are **higher numbers of "needy" families** challenged by poverty and weak life skills (including growing numbers of transient families) which impacts all services for children and youth

Positive Trends

- **The New North** has the potential to attract better paying jobs which will reduce need
- **Increasing inter-agency cooperation and sharing resources**
- Several new efforts/programs with **single point of contact to obtain information** on resources: Aging & Disability Resource Center, 2-1-1, and other efforts
- **Wisconsin's initiative to redesign long term care** could eventually improve access to services
- The success of "first time parent" **early intervention program for parenting** support
- The **proven rating system** for evaluating the quality of child care providers is in use locally

Crucial Actions for the Region

- **Funders must operationally support infrastructure**/existing capacity and not favor new programs
- **Encourage more diverse and new leaders**, encourage and strengthen leadership throughout
- Need to stay on cusp of **providing prevention services in all areas** – children (keeping them out of crime), neonatal care, elderly care, etc. Keep people healthy longer to save money in the future
- **Focus on ages 0-5** when so much development is occurring to get children off on right track
- **Address affordable, accessible housing** needs and offer better long term support
- Encourage **economic development** and support **workforce training/re-training**
- As community leaders, make **long-term decisions**

- Protect and expand the *opportunities for local providers to collaborate* and address issues together

LEARNING/EDUCATION FOCUS GROUP SUMMARY

Seven persons participated, representing public and private schools, home school, Head Start, and parents.

Regional Strengths

- There are “*vast choices*” for education of all types at all levels with good quality teaching; especially good Charter schools and international exchange programs
- A *willingness to meet the challenges* of changing demographics through programs, staff development
- Trend in education to “meet kids where they are” and *to individualize programs to meet the needs* of kids; use of team approach growing, especially for disabled students
- *Information* is more available now in the community, e.g. 211 service and because of expanding technology, a parent can access child’s school info online and more home school course opportunities
- Increasing *volunteer opportunities* with the schools as businesses, other students, the elderly, and parents are more involved than ever in working with students especially in early reading

Concerning Conditions or Trends

- *Funding formulas and budget cuts* affect the quality of education; districts are affected differently due to state formula; fewer resources available, larger class sizes, fees are pushed down to families which gets very tough for low income families as they add up;
- *Higher education cost increases* make it more difficult to afford college or go back to school
- *Pressure to succeed* placed on kids by many sources, including parents and society in general; an over-emphasis on grades rather than learning; heightened competition and the pressure of test scores
- *Insufficient non-denominational private school options*
- *Affordable, quality pre-school* is hard to find and 4 year old kindergarten is not widely available; there are waiting lists for “higher quality” preschools and even for those who can afford it, the quality programs are not widely available
- *Schools are asked to do too much* as schools confront all the concerns of society reflected in children; teachers have great demands placed on them with larger classes, more pressure, and more high needs children; staff are taking care of some children (clothing, meals)
- *Segregation of higher achieving kids* via charter schools and special classes; there is less social diversity in schools resulting in pockets of poorer areas or lower achieving students
- *Even Start program* threatened or being cut (helps educate parents along with children)

Crucial Actions for the Region

- *Focus on early ages* to get kids on the right track in early grades
- *Increase public awareness* on the positives related to diversity; continuous, ongoing, multi-level exposure
- *Information on education options* more readily accessible to the community, especially underprivileged families are not aware; a free, easy guide to education opportunities, incorporated with 211 service
- Expand opportunities for *education system to communicate and collaborate with the broader community*; for example if training is offered by a nonprofit, teachers could participate; community programs at schools; a mechanism for the schools to collaborate with the broader community to share resources and to partner on programs; civic groups and PTOs do joint activities
- *Encourage and expand volunteering* by high school students and local volunteers (businesspeople, elderly, etc) but do it without placing a burden on teachers/schools to coordinate all the volunteers
- *Programs that deal with the whole family* must be expanded and supported; programs like Even Start that help the family also end up helping the child;
- Expand and continue to offer parenting, adult literacy programs *and the like but it is essential to offer child care along with it; these programs must be affordable and accessible; they end up helping the child*

LEISURE FOCUS GROUP SUMMARY

Ten people participated representing cultural arts, tourism, recreation, the botanical garden, and library.

Regional Strengths

- Opportunities for **youth**, especially sports
- Variety of opportunities; for an area of this size, there are **many affordable things to do** including outdoors (trails, parks, nature centers), cultural arts, restaurants, golf courses
- **Access to water** and development of **recreation on and around the water** that tie communities together
- **Positive regional attitudes** to cross boundaries and work together
- Commitment to maintain the **good quality of life** in the region; sense of community, people are connected to each other
- **Size of the area** big enough to do some neat, larger things yet small enough to feel safe, easy access
- Good **community events**: festivals, parades, farmers' market, multicultural events with volunteers active

Concerning Conditions or Trends

- Insufficient **public access to natural land and waterfront** that precludes hunting and fishing
- **Not enough cooperation** among leisure-related activities so as not to duplicate events and resources; there are many small galleries, nature centers, theatres; if resources pooled might be able to do more
- **Modern lifestyle of wanting to do it all** (or kids to do it all) in a short amount of time; people want lots of options and choices and convenience; programs that used to go in depth must water things down
- **Over-programming and pressuring kids**; parents pushing their kids too hard to specialize at very young ages and become "the next Michael Jordan"
- **Neighborhoods are spread out** and there are few places kids can just informally gather to play actively
- **Drop in adult participation** in sports recreation programs
- There is so much emphasis on things for kids that **people without kids have fewer options**
- Leisure programs in the area need to do a better job of **engaging minority populations**, the physically handicapped (adults and children) and the economically disadvantaged (especially single parents); while affordable things are out there people may not know about them or can't get their children to them
- **Youth obesity** due to inactive lifestyles

Positive Trends

- More opportunities for **persons with disabilities**
- **Experimentation** with new programming being attempted
- **Revitalization of waterfront** and downtown area with industry moving out and more aesthetic appeal
- **Greenways and trails** are linking and building communities
- **Good exposure and awareness of visual arts** Artists have greater opportunities to display their work;
- **Growing emphasis on fitness** in schools and YMCA-like programs

Crucial Actions for the Region

- Create a **better land use policy** to protect natural spaces and preserve public access to nature
- Municipalities need to **think and program regionally**; rather than each small town offering something, have a regional fee or program (if you live in Neenah can enroll in Appleton programs at same cost etc)
- Leisure organizations must **collaborate to advocate for important issues** and promote awareness
- Leisure organizations must **reach out more and in new ways to non-participants** like people of color, economically disadvantaged, physically handicapped
- Learn how parents and youth feel about **alternatives to the strong pressure and early focus on youth sports**; would they like less pressured alternatives? Educate them on the benefits of casual participation

- Create more parks and *safe places for children and youth to play informally*; child-driven rather than parent-driven recreation
- Recreation departments offer more and offer things locally to attract and retain people of color *casual developmental, skill-building programs* for children

SAFETY FOCUS GROUP SUMMARY

Sixteen representatives of organizations dealing with the public and personal safety of the Fox Cities participated.

Regional Strengths

- There are **good interagency working relationships** among emergency/safety response teams (police, rescue, fire, government, agencies). The Fox Valley is a recognized leader in this
- The region has a **broad range of interconnected support services** available in general
- **Regional leadership is proactive** in identifying and addressing problems and have consistently met the region's needs related to safety, including emergency preparedness
- The region is **strong economically** leading to relatively lower crime rates and severity than elsewhere
- The region shows **community pride** with safe places to go and few run down areas. These values, combined with support for children and youth, helps keep the area safe for the public.

Concerning Conditions or Trends

- The public and area leaders have a **false sense of security**. There is fleeting interest in preparedness and safety that peaks and then quickly goes away, and failure to address longer term more difficult solutions
- Maintaining safety is costly and involved. There is **little understanding of what goes into the safety system** and it's easy to make budget cuts to parts of the system due to lack of understanding
- Communities face **hard financial decisions** due to budget cuts; there is less prevention taking place
- The **economics** of more low paying jobs with few benefits will soon outstrip the community's resources
- **Untreated mental illness**; we are shifting people from the health care to the justice system as a result. Lack of psychiatric care and of mental health coverage
- The community is reactive rather than proactive in dealing with **people at risk: youth, mentally ill**
- **Personal safety crimes** are stigmatized and the general public doesn't want to acknowledge them or face the extent that these crimes are taking place here
- **Ex-offenders released into the community** (locally and increasingly from elsewhere) with little rehabilitation. Labeled as felon, it is hard to get a job or housing and easy to fall back into crime/AODA
- Money allocated to new and pilot programs but not to the existing services that address important needs
- **Identity theft and internet crimes**; youth being lured by internet "predators"

Positive Trends

- There is growing recognition and **emphasis on preventive services** and rehabilitation, not just locking people up
- There are emerging practices that are **creative new ways to deal with needs**; e.g., juvenile offenders
- The state of Wisconsin is organizing **response coalitions for preparedness** across borders
- **Technology** of all kinds and geo-data offer tremendous opportunities

Crucial Actions for the Region

- Leaders must be willing to "do the right thing:" study unpopular issues, get diverse viewpoints, and be willing to invest in the **best long term solutions**
- Engage the broader community to acknowledge and **understand the "underside" of life in the Fox Cities**, be accountable and take ownership of preventing and addressing problems
- **Maintain good jobs** that have benefits and decent pay to prevent crime
- **Early intervention is "evidenced based."** the research is there telling us what works so leaders must invest in these early intervention and prevention programs
- **Do a better job of re-integrating ex-offenders** into society by providing support services and teaching life skills while minimizing the stigma
- Provide **better support for persons with mental illness**
- Educate community leaders on **internet crime, sexual predators** and address them

SELF-SUFFICIENCY FOCUS GROUP SUMMARY

Twelve providers of programs to assist people in self sufficiency participated. They represented homeless shelters, governmental human services and health agencies, food pantries, skills and job training, and support service providers.

Regional Strengths

- Providers agreed that the region boasts a **large number and variety** of effective nonprofit and human services agencies. They are broadly distributed throughout the region and people in need have access to many resources. There is a **strong referral network**.
- Participants perceived these providers as very **collaborative**, more now than ever
- The community is **generous in its funding** of these providers and generous in its willingness volunteer to support the work of these agencies
- The region is action oriented: when problems are identified, stakeholders across sectors take ownership in finding **community solutions to the problems**. There is active leadership.
- Compared to elsewhere across Wisconsin and the US, the Fox Cities is **affordable**.
- Strong **housing partnership** that is active in educating the community about the issues.

Concerning Conditions or Trends

- Across the board, providers strongly agreed that **transportation** is a large barrier for those without cars, especially for those who must transport young children.
- For clients, **cost of living expenses**, especially heat, gas, and health care have risen so dramatically that more people struggle to make ends meet and those with the lowest incomes must choose which necessities to go without. At the same time eligibility for programs has tightened. The **cost of health care** and medical prescriptions is posing a challenge even for those who have employer-paid insurance.
- Providers have witnessed **erosion of funding for the safety net** as all levels of government have cut services. Nonprofits trying to fill the gaps face increased competition for funding.
- People with **low wage jobs**, even full time jobs, cannot afford these increased costs of living.
- Early intervention and preventive care for persons with **mental illnesses**, who, once identified, must wait several months to start services.
- The attitude of denial, i.e., that “we don’t have that problem here.”

Positive Trends

- The community is better able to provide **services to immigrants** and to people with disabilities. There is more awareness and knowledge among providers to do a better job of supporting them.
- There seems to be more emphasis on **“teaching people to fish”** rather than on “giving fish.”
- Growing involvement by the **business community** as they partner with nonprofit organizations.

Crucial Actions for the Region

- Expand **individualized employment education opportunities** with case management for the working poor. There are several successful programs locally that demonstrate the effectiveness of this approach. These programs have waiting lists and need sustaining funding.
- Increase efforts to **teach life skills** (like housekeeping, cooking, parenting, money management) to young people across the community. This should include in schools and programs but also in the form of mentoring. New models and approaches to mentoring should be attempted, including with small groups, by employers, retirees, churches, in a way that youth develop relationships and learn life skills from successful adults.
- Increase efforts to **teach financial literacy**. At a minimum expand it widely or require it for people receiving other human services. Encourage employers to assist in teaching it to employees.
- **Educate the community about poverty** here in the Fox Cities, including elected leaders. Participants suggested that community leaders participate in a “poverty simulation.”
- **Provide sustaining funding** for programs beyond the start up time period. Much funding goes for the first few years of a new program then recedes, forcing program reductions or discontinuation.

WORK FOCUS GROUP SUMMARY

Ten people participated representing small business owners and managers in the Fox Cities area.

Regional Strengths

- The **strong work ethic** of the workforce was a strong consensus of the group
- The **area is progressive**, and the infrastructure (schools, roads, safety, arts, airport) stays up to date
- **The New North initiative** shows public and private cooperation; the effort looks sustainable
- **Quality of life** that this area offers in many different aspects of life
- **A strong manufacturing base** has contributed strongly to the region along with growing smaller businesses that support the larger manufacturers with parts and supplies
- **Land is affordable and available** for expanding businesses
- **Fox Valley Technical College** is a great asset for training the workforce and to teach the trades
- **Affordable housing** for attracting employees from outside of the region; housing is stable and appreciating in value steadily
- **Currently good supply of workers** contrasting to recent past when the supply was inadequate
- **Retail base in Fox River Mall area** draws people in from statewide and supports local economy
- **The community works together** across different sectors to solve problems (public, private, religious, nonprofit cooperation and partnering); local governments are cooperative

Concerning Conditions or Trends

- **Red tape and over-regulation** of business that is more burdensome in Wisconsin and makes it difficult to do business; excessive waiting for approval, many different parts of the government to deal with that don't work together; government administration related to business is not streamlined. This was a strong consensus of the group.
- **Health care cost and growing complexity** is bad everywhere, but seems worse in the Fox Cities; this growing line item directly erodes profits and takes increasing time and resources to research; small and medium sized businesses are especially hard hit by this along with the equity issues that arise within the company as different employees need different coverage or have differing pre-existing health conditions
- The Fox Valley is **replacing higher paying manufacturing jobs with lower paying service jobs**; the new kinds of jobs being created are not the kind that pay well
- **Consolidations and buyouts** leading to corporate ownership located outside of this area; closure of regional small/medium businesses; gives rise to less commitment to this region by these large companies, the local area has less impact on their decisions, less local ownership, less philanthropy
- **Wealthy retirees leaving state** to avoid taxes, removing sources of venture capital and philanthropy
- The area **lacks a major college research institution** to attract jobs and business

Positive Trends

- **The New North** has the potential to attract better paying jobs
- **The regional business park** will create opportunities and attract businesses
- **Riverfront development** will enhance quality of life
- **Increase in support for entrepreneurs** in the form of venture capital, state initiatives, services

Crucial Actions for the Region

- **Local governments cooperate**; break down barriers of local competition to have more shared services
- A few simple changes can **sustain and promote development of downtown Appleton** (eg parking)
- The region must **replace the loss of well-paying, good jobs** by encouraging new business development
- **Health care costs** must be addressed, and local fixes must be explored; this includes educating and giving incentives to employees to be aware of their own expenditures to help them conserve
- **Be proactive within The New North initiative** and recognize that even within the regional cooperation there are local winners and losers; don't sit back and watch new business development occur elsewhere

- **Encourage students to enter the trades** rather than an over-emphasis on 4 year college degrees; make high school guidance counselors more aware of non-college career opportunities; partnerships
- **Educate people with low skills** to make them productive members of the workforce

MULTICULTURAL FOCUS GROUP SUMMARY

With the support of the Fox Cities Rotary Multicultural Center, eleven people of color participated including those from Native American, Hmong, Latino, and Muslim racial and ethnic groups.

Regional Strengths (from the perspective of people of color in general, not individual participants)

- **Strong leaders** within the minority communities and regional leaders (of the dominant culture) who recognize the importance of diversity and support diversity in the region (the New North cited)
- There are many affordable/free **opportunities to learn English**
- The area is **safe** relative to most other places
- **Schools** are strong
- There are **job opportunities**, although most with low pay and no benefits
- **Recreational opportunities** are available
- **Health care** is of high quality if someone has health insurance

Concerning Conditions or Trends

- **Domestic violence and sexual assault** are especially a problem in minority communities, where people (ie victims) do not know their rights and are fearful and reluctant to get help from established systems
- Better support needed for **re-integrating ex-offenders back into the community**. Especially felons have a hard time obtaining jobs, legal services, housing
- There is **insufficient treatment** for those with alcohol or drug addictions, mental illnesses, or who have shown violent behavior (including domestic)
- **Access to health care** is a problem, especially for undocumented residents in the area; the high cost of health care and lack of transportation is a barrier for many in the minority community
- In general for those who don't speak English, while translation services are available, **quality of translation for health care** services is an area of concern
- **Housing discrimination** against people of color that is taking place in the community; people of color tend not to know their housing rights and do not have legal representation
- Affordable housing for **large families**; to get the size that is optimal, the cost is too high
- **Legal services** for people of color is a critical concern since availability of free or inexpensive legal services is so limited; many minorities do not know their legal rights and as a result many are exploited
- **Retention of minority professionals**; the changes in demographics are not reflected in companies and leadership locally; frustration at the practice of hiring "token" minorities rather than their unique skills

Crucial Actions for Regional Leaders

- Leaders of established institutions (businesses, public agencies) must **model positive views about diverse people**; create a "diversity bandwagon:" make the case that the community needs these people; there is enough talk, now the **community needs action**
- People of color must be **included in decision-making** at all levels
- Leaders within the **minority communities must accept the responsibility to lead** and create opportunities for their people. Saying "there are 2 sides to this," focus group participants urged minority leaders to go out and ask to be included, to become more active in making their case to the community
- **Promoting and expanding home ownership** among minorities is a key for dealing with housing concerns. **Address fair housing issues** of discrimination and exploitation by landlords
- **The region needs more purposeful hiring and retention of people of color** to focus on hiring minorities for their unique talents and skills, not for their race or ethnic group they represent;
- **Expand the availability of legal services** with culturally competent, bilingual staff, possibly pro-bono work by local attorneys

- ***Treatment for those with addictions, mental illnesses, and those re-integrating*** into society who need support to not be violent or involved with crime, especially culturally based rehabilitation services
- The local ***media should offer more positive exposure*** of people of color, not just referring to minorities in crime reports or related to bad things that happen
- ***Transportation*** that is affordable and more convenient to where the jobs are
- ***Expand community based education*** opportunities to obtain the GED or High School Equivalency Degree

YOUNG ADULT (FVTC) FOCUS GROUP SUMMARY

Eleven young adults were recruited by Fox Valley Technical College. Most varied in age between 21 to 30; four were minority race/ethnic group, five were single, ten were female, five had children at home, and seven were FVTC alumni (4 students). Nine planned to live in the area more than five years.

Regional Strengths

- **Good amenities like** shopping, Fox River Mall, restaurants, performing and other arts
- **Crime is low**; the area is safe especially compared to elsewhere
- **People are friendly** and helpful and a **small town atmosphere** prevails
- **Nonprofit sector** offers good support and resources and there are interesting opportunities to volunteer. About half the group volunteered recently for a charity.
- **Opportunities for business** including entrepreneurs; jobs were available.
- **Growing diversity** is becoming more accepted and even welcomed; there are more opportunities due to this.
- **Education is strong** at all levels, higher education and K-12.
- **Central location** provides access to many other areas in the state; these participants traveled primarily in state via automobile.
- **Good recreational opportunities** throughout the four seasons. Water recreation was mentioned, trails, High Cliff State Park, clubs for volleyball and darts, other clubs.
- **Variety of entertainment options** to go out. There were affordable places to go and people felt safe.

Concerning Conditions or Trends

- **Inadequate opportunities for people aged 16-21** who want to socialize but did not do so in bars. Currently young people in this age group go to the mall, drive around, and frequent coffee shops to socialize. Participants discussed the need for an affordable activity center for people of this age to socialize. Two places that previously met this need included “Springs” and “Expressions” but participants believed that they had closed. The type of place they envisioned would have darts, dancing, pool, and other activities that young people enjoyed.
- **Cultural events** in the summer, outside. Summerfest, Octoberfest were examples of events that the participants enjoyed. They felt that the Fox Cities area could improve in what was offered. If there were existing festivals and events, participants did not find out about them. They could have been promoted more so.
- **Dental care is costly** and for some, hard to obtain, most did not have dental insurance. For about 1/3 of the group, they identified this issue as the most important thing we had talked about that day.
- **Concern about downsizing** and jobs

Crucial Actions for Regional Leaders

- The **area is changing** and law enforcement must keep up with the emerging safety issues. For example, participants cited gang activities and more violent crimes as emerging challenges. They felt that the police forces needed to include greater numbers of minority officers.
- Throughout the area, at all levels, **businesses should emphasize hiring people of color.** Diversity is more accepted in the area but minorities would become more integrated into the community with better jobs.
- **Businesses should increase family-friendly policies.** The group felt that employees were working more and more hours making it more difficult to spend the quality time necessary with one’s family.
- **Young people need more preparation in financial and budgeting skills.** Credit problems, saving for retirement, using credit cards, and investing were important things that participants believed were insufficiently dealt with by their generations
- **Help young people to be more engaged with local issues** and government by informing them how public dollars are spent. Seek out involvement in local leadership by young people.
- **Health and dental insurance,** especially dental, must be addressed. The Tri-County clinic is now open but one member claimed she was told their was an 8 month wait for restorative care.

- It is important for children to **learn a second language** and at times that opportunity has been cut at schools in the area.

YOUNG PROFESSIONAL FOCUS GROUP SUMMARY

With help from the Chamber of Commerce's PULSE Program Manager, ten residents of the area ranging in age from 24 to 33 participated in this discussion. Half were male. Three have lived in the Fox Cities for about a year, four people between 2-6 years, and three for more than 10 years. Three plan to stay for roughly 3 years or less, four for 5+ years, and three aren't sure. Four are single, six married. Only one had children.

Community Strengths

- **Safe and affordable**, no "bad" parts of town, neighborhoods and properties are maintained. Compared to elsewhere in the US, housing and other costs of living are much lower in the Fox Cities.
- **Friendly people, sense of community, pride.** "Everyone is connected in some way" so it is easy to find what you need. Business relationships are loyal and price is not always the main factor. People are becoming more open-minded to diversity and people with different backgrounds.
- **Small town feel with features of larger cosmopolitan area.** Restaurants, outdoor activities, Performing Arts Center, shopping, arts events available. They liked the community events, arts, parades, festivals.
- **Easy to get around** with little traffic, free or cheap parking. This was especially attractive to those who had moved from other urban areas.
- **Parks, trails, outdoor opportunities.** High Cliff State Park, many smaller parks, trails, soccer fields, baseball diamonds, boating. Easy access to some limited skiing and winter sports.
- **Location, ease of travel elsewhere; great airports.** Both inside and outside of Wisconsin, the location and access to other cities is great. Airports got a unanimous, enthusiastic endorsement as especially convenient and well linked to other destinations.
- **Great place to raise kids, good schools.** Quality education system, community feeling, neighborhoods, and activities for families.

Improvement Needed

- **Mostly homogeneous population.** Although different kinds of people are arriving from elsewhere, the majority of people living here are white and "have been here their whole lives." This makes it hard to attract people with different backgrounds to the area.
- **Negative stereotype of the area.** People from elsewhere (even as close as Milwaukee) perceive the Fox Cities/Green Bay area as a farming, 1950's, pickup trucks, beer drinking small town.
- **Lacking a higher education opportunities and University "hub"** that creates interest and draws diverse, different people to the area. Lawrence University seems insular; UW-Oshkosh & Green Bay are removed. Nearly every participant planned to obtain an advanced degree. Most would leave the area or complete a degree online. Some would take classes at UW-Oshkosh.
- **Lack of leadership involvement by women and diverse people.** Compared to elsewhere, there seem to be more white male leaders at all levels in the Fox Cities.
- **Walking district, attractive pedestrian destination needed** that doesn't require driving. A central hub with interest and activity. State Street in Madison was cited. Suggested waterfront development with cafés, interesting shops, condominiums, and outdoor dining. Downtown Appleton has too much traffic for this.
- The area needs more **themed social events for young people.** Beyond the Chamber Pulse group, participants gave examples of events other cities had for young people. Pub crawls, arts festivals, Summerfest, and the like. Other cities have a "sport and social" clubs.

Crucial Actions

- Need to **connect to young adults** and get them involved in leadership to a much greater extent. If the area wants to attract young people, they need to involve and listen to young people and then take action. They would like to be involved in the New North initiative but don't know how to "sign up." One participant gave an example of HYPE in Green Bay where young professionals were engaged and included.
- Bring back **Rebecca Ryan** and really listen to her ideas and put them in place.

- Create a **central place to go for information** on things of interest to young adults, preferably online. Everyone knew about Jeff Lindsay's website www.jefflindsay.com which was clever and informative. Only one participant subscribed to the newspaper. They get their information online or on television/radio.
- Make the **smoking ban countywide**. Nearly unanimous in positive opinions about the smoking ban.