


## A CONVERSATION ABOUT JOHNSON COUNTY

**Report on How  
Residents View Our  
Community**

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**2019-2021**

*Aspire*  
economic development  
+ chamber alliance

 **JCPL**  
Johnson County  
Public Library

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*When we decided to take on this task, we had no idea what would lay ahead. Halfway through our Community Conversations the outbreak of COVID-19 temporarily disrupted our work. After a pause, our work resumed virtually. What we heard continued to be similar. Residents enjoy living in Johnson County and have aspirations to improve our quality of life. One of the values of the Library is to make a difference by working together to foster positive change. We believe this effort is another step in the process.*

**Lisa Lintner**  
**Director, Johnson County Public Library**

*Aspire staff was thrilled to be able to work collaboratively with the Johnson County Public Library on this project starting with Harwood Institute For Public Innovation training in the spring of 2019. After completing training, we began hosting community conversations all around Johnson County and continued virtual community conversations through a global pandemic in 2020-21. We are excited to share the results of 30+ hours of conversations and hope that you find the results inspiring.*

**Amanda Rubadue, Vice President**  
**Economic Development, Aspire Economic Development + Chamber Alliance**

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## The Approach Used

Aspire and Johnson County Public Library collaborated to conduct a series of “Community Conversations” utilizing the Harwood practice. Employing a series of ten structured questions intended to provoke constructive conversation around community issues. The questions can be found at the end of this report.

## How It Is Different From Other Approaches

- The conversation begins with asking people what kind of community they want to live in. This is an important starting point because it helps service providers understand how to put their work in a larger, more constructive context — “Where do people want to go?” versus “Who do they blame?” or “What’s not working?”
- People are guided through a series of questions that help them share how the issues affect them personally and what actions they believe would help the community achieve its aspirations. This is much different from a focus group or similar technique that uses a prepared “solution” to an expert-defined “problem.” Participants frame the conversation according to what matters to them. Experts can then use this information to plan programs and responses that better match what people see as possibilities.
- The emphasis is “What do we share? Where can we get started together?” Participants are seen as potential agents of change along with institutions.

## We Held Conversations

In two years, we met with over 160 people representing many local and county-wide organizations.

Johnson Memorial Health

Aspire Talent Attraction and Retention Team

Johnson County Food Council

Johnson County Teachers

Nineveh Heritage Committee

Johnson County Public Library Staff

Aspire Growth & Planning Team

Bridges Alliance: Allies & Circle Leaders Groups

Johnson County Realtors

Homeschool Parents

Johnson County Democrats

Church and Ministry Leaders

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## **We Call Johnson County Home**

321 square miles: that is the size of Johnson County Indiana. It's not exactly Montana, but it's not a small area either. From the suburban areas bordering Indianapolis on the north to the rolling farmland and lakes in rural, southern Johnson County, you will find a variety of communities and lifestyles. Beyond the businesses, farms, lakes, woods and highways, Johnson County is made of distinct people who call it home. During the past two years, the Johnson County Public Library and Aspire Community Matters have partnered to conduct a series of community conversations with Johnson County residents to understand their thoughts and insights on what challenges and opportunities face our County and communities.

### **Residents have Aspirations for Their County**

The people we spoke with made it clear they want to live in a Johnson County where everyone works together to give residents the freedom to live, work and enjoy life. These aspirational goals were widely held, regardless of locale, occupation or community involvement.

**"I want to see opportunities for all."**

**"Who do I reach out to, to pool our money, our vision and make something happen?"**

**"Progress takes time."**

**"Better organizations and lots of ways to hear about them."**

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## Three Key Issues Identified

### *Communication*

**Aspiration: Opportunities for residents to proactively connect and communicate with leaders and decision-makers about the issues that affect their lives.**

Where to find and how to share information are significant issues. Many residents feel they don't know what is going on in their community and throughout Johnson County. One resident commented, "I feel out of the loop. Decisions are made in the elected officials' offices, but how do you find that information? How do you know what will affect you?"

The overall impression was that residents do not understand how to influence their local government and community. They want to be involved but do not know where to start.

**"If it's not on Facebook we don't hear about it."**

**"Elected officials—what are the steps to get their attention?"**

**"When the [citizens] do attend a meeting, it seems they want to complain and want a quick fix. Lots of people are focused on their own issues. When the quick fix doesn't happen, they don't return."**

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## Transportation

**Aspiration: Connected, walkable communities that offer a variety of affordable options for residents to travel to work and recreation.**

Getting around Johnson County is another significant issue. Residents are concerned about how roads have not kept up with the population growth leading to extremely heavy traffic on most major roads. A parent said, "Traffic is unbearable after 3 p.m. It's hard to go anywhere. The road doesn't have the capacity for the amount of development." Even though many of the suburban areas in the County are working to improve roads and prepare for growth, many feel it is coming too late, or they are simply not aware of the work being done which is an example of the first issue, a lack of communication.

**"If you have transportation, you can get to housing and food."**

However, not everyone in Johnson County has personal transportation. Public transportation in the County provides basic transportation needs, but there are challenges. Although Access Johnson County does the best it can with limited resources, many people pointed out that it does not serve all workers because the routes and hours of operation are limited. One employer stated that when considering someone for employment "they need to have a valid driver's license. If they lose their license, how are they going to get to a job?"

**"Under-resourced people have major transportation issues getting to work."**

Another transportation issue is the lack of connection to Indianapolis. The closest IndyGo bus stop is north of County Line Road; that is a significant barrier to employment if you live in one county and work in the other and don't have personal transportation.

Even walking and biking in Johnson County is a challenge. One resident stated you "can't safely walk or bike from east to west" through the County due to the lack of trails and sidewalks. Another person said safety concerns stop them from attempting to cross SR 135 in the Center



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Grove and Greenwood areas or cross US 31 in Franklin while walking due to heavy traffic.

The conversations revealed a view that local officials see transportation as simply automobiles even though the County has adopted a trails plan and cities and towns are working on implementing more walking and biking paths. There is a desire for a holistic approach for getting people from one place to another. Officials shouldn't just look at building roads; they should look at building corridors that include roads, bike paths and sidewalks.

**"[In] a community like ours that is so spread out, a bus could work in Greenwood or Franklin, but for seniors and those in the country, the on-demand buses seem to work better."**

## ***Housing***

**Aspiration: A wide variety of affordable housing options that match local income levels and other community needs.**

In the northern part of Johnson County, it seems like every time you turn a corner more homes are being built. Demand is so strong that you currently cannot build a home, or seldom find an existing home, for under \$250,000. Building more doesn't solve all the problems. One group member said it "causes more problems just to stack housing upon housing."

The unemployment rate in Johnson County is low, and we hear a lot about new employers coming to the County. Just as building more houses can create new problems, adding jobs increases the demand for housing and drives up costs. One employer feels concerned that "as a small employer I can't pay people a wage that allows them to live in this county."

**"It's getting worse in Johnson County to find a place to live and to earn a decent wage."**

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Affordable housing is defined as spending no more than 30% of your income on housing. By that standard, a person who earns \$30,040 a year can only afford a one-bedroom apartment in Johnson County. One resident commented, “I have a job but still can’t afford a place, and I make too much to receive help.”

“People think of ‘Section 8’ when they hear ‘affordable housing’, but it’s more than that.”

“In many places, when there is a new subdivision built, they have to put aside money for greenspace.”

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### ***Actions That Would Make a Difference***

1. Getting people to engage in more issues than just those that impact them personally would promote communication and a better understanding of how their community works. Finding ways to disseminate information about local governments and getting people to pay attention to local elections would also help bridge the communication gap.
2. Improving transportation options, including but not limited to public transit, ridesharing and employer-sponsored transportation, would benefit the County in multiple ways. Local employers would gain access to a segment of the workforce that cannot reliably commute to work presently, and residents would have multiple transportation options.
3. Finding innovative housing solutions is the goal. One option could be tiny houses located near larger employment centers. Transitional housing centered around a service organization that helps people move from poverty to employment is another. Perhaps, more mixed-use developments would allow people to live and work in the same area. Other communities have these approaches; why not ours?

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Do you know of a group that would like to host a community conversation, have questions about this report or want more details on what we learned and how we conducted this research? Please contact us by using the form you will find at this QR Code:

Or go to: [bit.ly/JoCoComment](https://bit.ly/JoCoComment)



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## Conversation Questions

- 1. What kind of community do you want?**  
Why is that important? How is that different from the way things are now?
- 2. Given what we just said, what are the two to three most important issues or concerns when it comes to the community?**  
Decide which issue is most important for the group, and use it for the discussion. If you are going to test a specific issue, introduce it here. (e.g. Substance Abuse)
- 3. What concerns do you have about this issue? Why?**  
Does it seem like things are getting better? Worse? What makes you say that? How do you think the issue/concern came about?
- 4. How do the issues we're talking about affect you personally?**  
What personal experiences have you had? How about people around you—family, friends, coworkers, neighbors, others—what do you see them experiencing? Are some people affected more than others? Who? In what ways? Why?
- 5. When you think about these things, how do you feel about what's going on?**  
Why do you feel this way? How do you think other people (in different parts of town) feel about this?
- 6. What do you think is keeping us from making the progress we want?**
- 7. When you think about what we've talked about, what are the kinds of things that could be done that would make a difference?**  
What do you think these things might accomplish? How about in terms of individuals: What are the kinds of things that people like us could do to make a difference? What's important for us to keep in mind when we think about moving ahead?
- 8. Thinking back over the conversation, what groups or individuals would you trust to take action on these things?**  
Why them and not others?
- 9. If we came back together in six months or a year, what might you see which would tell you that the things we talked about tonight were starting to happen?**  
Why would that suggest things were changing? What would it mean to see that?
- 10. Now that we've talked about this issue a bit, what questions do you have about it?**  
What do you feel you'd like to know more about that would help you make better sense of what's going on and what should be done? What kind of follow-up would you like out of this discussion?