



RVA Thrives Summer 2017 Survey Findings Summary

Maybe you saw them last summer: Community residents decked out in yellow t-shirts and clipboards. This team of 8 women and men, mostly residents of the South Side, were on a mission to talk to as many residents as possible. They stood on street corners. They attended community events, like National Night Out and Manchester Manifest. They visited churches. They knocked on doors. And one member of the team even rode the bus up and down Jefferson-Davis Highway talking to people on the bus. Each time they had one question, "Will you take a survey to tell us what the Cowardin-Jefferson-Davis Corridor needs to Thrive?"

The purpose of the community engagement survey was to hear from community residents about their wants and needs for the community. In the course of 3 months, June - August 2017, the 8 women and men conducting the survey talked to 700 residents up and down the Cowardin-Jefferson-Davis Corridor. The larger goal was to identify the key issues that residents wanted to tackle to create a community where every individual has the potential to thrive.

The residents that participated had many hopes and dreams, challenges and frustrations that they shared over the course of the survey. This is the first of 3 posts that outline what they said.

There are lots of things the community wants to see changed

In a future post we'll examine all the ways that residents are proud of their community. For now, we're going to start with the biggest challenges. As the team talked with residents they were clear that there is no single issue facing the community. For many residents it boils down to a general lack of resources across a variety of areas. One resident, who has lived in Blackwell, Oak Grove, and Davee Gardens put it this way:

[This area is] poverty stricken and [has a] lack of resources.... They come up with these surveys and papers asking us what we want. Well, you should already know. We want the same thing you got.

This man wants more resources of all kinds--employers, access to food and major shopping, and better education, just to name a few. When all the residents were asked to identify the biggest challenges, they answered:

- Neighborhood Cleanup (42 percent)
- Affordable Housing (28 percent)
- Job training and job opportunities (24 percent)
- Lack of food access (24 percent)
- Feeling safe in my neighborhood (24 percent)
- After-school programs (18 percent)
- Affordable, quality childcare for 0-5 years (12 percent)
- Access to affordable healthcare (10 percent)

The need for neighborhood cleanup is clearly the most commonly identified challenge in the community (and we'll look at that in a moment), but there aren't other clear leaders for biggest challenges. This doesn't mean that these challenges are unimportant, but rather that there are many important challenges facing the communities along the Jefferson-Davis Corridor.

Many of the challenges are interconnected: having a stable, quality job opens more options for housing. Having housing stability can increase neighborhood stability and community cohesion. In these ways, addressing one challenge in the community can have a positive impact on other challenges identified by the residents.

Looking closer at neighborhood cleanup

The need for neighborhood cleanup was noticeably more popular challenge than the other options, but when residents say they want to clean up their neighborhood what do they mean?

For community residents it means more than just picking up the trash. At the heart of the issue is a desire to take pride in the community and encourage investment that will provide additional resources to the people who live along the Jefferson-Davis Corridor. One resident, who has lived on the South Side for 20 years, describes it this way,

Well, I'm proud of the people that live here, but I'm not proud of what I see as far as the cosmetics of the neighborhood. The neighborhood is pretty much neglected as far as on the city's behalf. They have neglected this neighborhood. They have

neglected the school system. They have neglected the neighborhood parks, recreation.

For this person, the need for cleanup isn't just about the appearance of the neighborhood, it also relates to a lack of resources in the community--the schools, the parks, and the general feeling of neglect. Many residents want to see new investment in the community--turning empty buildings into places for families, adding new businesses--but they want to do it in way that remains true to the community. One man, an 8 year resident of Manchester, talks about new investment this way:

If you ride down some areas, all you see is boarded up buildings. Getting a new business in there, or open up a new residency, that is not a bad thing. It's all about how the people go about it. Don't undercut people for their property, just because you want it for a new business. Go about it the right way.

This man sees new business and residences as crucial to improving the neighborhood, upgrading the appearance, and bringing new resources to the community, so long as it isn't displacing the people who currently live in the community.

While some residents want greater investment to benefit the people who are currently in the community, other residents seen neighborhood cleanup as a way to get people in the community to connect with one another. A Davee Garden resident, who has spent 40 years on the South Side, wants to see greater community collaboration.

[The greatest challenge is] getting the community to get out and be more active, more participation.... in improving the neighborhood, like cleaning up or fixing their houses. I guess, getting the community to pull together, to get out and communicate.

These residents tell us that the drive for neighborhood cleanup is not simply about picking up trash, mowing lawns, and fixing buildings. Instead residents see these activities as the first step towards greater investment in the community, more resources in the form of businesses and parks, and greater community cohesion.

Moving to Action

The purpose of the community engagement survey was not to point out the problems with the community. The purpose was to listen to the residents about what they wanted for their community and then to move to co-operative action on those issues.

Over the last 6 months community residents have met regularly, together and with city leaders, to plan ways to create a cleaner, more connected, and more resourced community. Several efforts are underway in the areas of job creation, neighborhood safety,

and neighborhood beautification. One important effort is happening on Saturday, 21 April when neighborhoods along the Cowardin-Jefferson Davis Corridor will come together to pick up trash, mow lawns, and join together with neighbors to clean up the community and inspire community pride.