UA Speaks

A Special Report of the
Upper Arlington Community Foundation

In the beginning

The mission of the Upper Arlington Community Foundation (UACF) is to enhance the quality of life for the residents of Upper Arlington. In pursuit of that mission, the Foundation supports a variety of programs and projects by providing leadership and fund-raising assistance in collaboration with a diverse mix of engaged community stakeholders

In the fall of 2016, UACF board members became concerned that ballot issues, a recall campaign and increasingly divisive dialogue around community projects in recent years have had an adverse impact on community discourse.   The UACF believes that a healthy and ongoing civil dialogue regarding our community and its future would serve to help Upper Arlington move forward in a cohesive, positive direction.

The Foundation believes it is in keeping with the organization's role to help find a strategy to encourage and strengthen citizen engagement in Upper Arlington. It has explored ways to enhance communications with the public. Building on the City administration's periodic use of quantitative community surveys, the Foundation determined that a qualitative analysis could also serve as a helpful complement to the City's ongoing efforts. What emerged was a plan to conduct an open-ended research project that would permit residents to communicate their perspectives on the strengths and weaknesses of the community. The project's data collection allows for ongoing, continuous input from citizens. which could go on indefinitely. The plan was to reach out to as many demographic groups as possible on an on-going basis, using face-to-face forums as well as online questionnaires.

The format for the data collection was to be built around a simple SWOT analysis. Respondents would be asked to express their views on Upper Arlington's Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities and Threats.   To date, the project has interviewed more than 300 residents. This report summarizes the findings that have been gathered to date.

UACF's intention is to share what we have heard. We make no recommendations and would encourage Council to consider these findings, as it works to build consensus around the direction our community will be taking to maintain and foster the unique tradition that is distinctly UA.

Methodology

Qualitative research is a valuable tool for exploring attitudes, discovering the deep "why" of perceptions and opinions, and gathering reactions to a range of ideas. In a group setting, participants build on each other's responses to create a lively discussion. Individually, the interviewee will often articulate attitudes and opinions of which they were not consciously aware.

It is important to note, however, that qualitative research work is exploratory in nature. It seeks to develop insight and provide direction, rather than to generate projectable measures of performance.

Therefore, in reviewing the findings of this study, it should be understood that the results to date are insights to help guide future planning. The findings should not be considered as quantitatively precise assessments of the opinions of the public.

Discussion groups, Individual In-Depth Interviews (IDI's) and online inquiries were held in Upper Arlington in the spring of 2017 among UA residents.   A variety of age groups and income levels were represented and most responses were recorded.

An abbreviated version of a SWOT analysis was used as a Discussion Guide. The respondents discussed the following, as they pertain to Upper Arlington:

- STRENGTHS
- WEAKNESSES
- OPPORTUNITIES
- THREATS

What we are hearing

Strengths

- Schools
- Safety
- High property values
- Parks
- Libraries
- Location (close to Columbus, OSU, Battelle, etc.)
- Tight sense of Community
- Cleanliness
- Established neighborhoods

Weaknesses

- No Community Center – by far the most frequently cited weakness
- Landlocked
- Aging housing and infrastructure
- Lack of diversity
- Resistance to change
- Trash stickers
- Poor sidewalks
- Community divided on critical issues
- Perceived lack of transparency of Council & city administration by small group

What we are hearing

Threats

- Aging infrastructure
- No community center
- Failure to meet demands of younger generations (new schools, more affordable housing)
- The "No" folks
- Opioids, alcohol abuse and drug addiction
- Increasing property taxes
- Residents losing their voice on issues
- Resistance to progressive changes
- Lack of responsiveness from council

Opportunities

- Offer a Community Center: Improve facilities for community engagement, citizens' discussions & forums
- Improve sidewalk system
- Increase commercial zoning/tax base
- Collaborate with neighboring communities
- Enhance technology – citywide Wi-Fi, solar power, clean energy
- More affordable housing
- Improve public transportation
- Improve bike paths
- Attract more/better restaurants

Conclusions thus far…

Upper Arlington was created a century ago and It was beautifully designed with broad, tree-lined streets whose sweeping curves followed the contours of the land; conveniently located close to central Ohio's center of state government, education and research facilities.

However, times changed, and so did the city. The population grew to where it stands today at close to 35,000 residents. And the city's almost ten square miles of land were developed with more traditionally laid out grids lined with smaller homes to accommodate the population boom (post WWII), while still providing the advantages of proximity to the economic hub of the region. The changing needs and preferences of the citizenry continued to guide the growth of the community to where it stands today in its almost fully developed state.

The Upper Arlington Community Foundation has undertaken the current qualitative research project as a means of assessing the evolution of needs and wants of the community. The Foundation's intention is first, to complement other means of data gathering that will be useful for city leaders in charting the future development of UA; and, to more fully engage the community in our ongoing efforts to identify current and emerging issues, stimulate resources to address those needs and help Upper Arlington prepare for the future.

While this qualitative research represents a collective community "focus group" of ideas, perspectives and preferences, there are clearly identified themes that may be valuable for policy makers in our community to consider. Here's what trends have emerged from this research to date:

- The population of UA is getting older
- The housing stock is aging and not meeting the needs of young families
- MORPC predicts substantial growth for all of central Ohio (1 million additional people by 2050!)
- UA has little space to accommodate additional population in its current configuration
- Increases in school enrollment will stress the system
- Increased traffic will result in congestion and parking issues
- Commercial development will become more difficult
- Quality of life features – parks, senior center, etc. – will be diminished
- Lack of a community gathering place creates a competitive disadvantage
- Aging infrastructure requires costly repairs

Meeting these challenges will require a deeper level of thinking and planning. If Upper Arlington hopes to maintain its position as a preeminent suburban community, it must be built on forward looking development with the positive support of an engaged citizenry.