We the people are

Ready for Change

We the People
AMERICA SPEAKS
21st Century Town Meeting®

The people's priorities from the Owensboro-Daviess County

We the People
21st Century Town Meeting®

November 10, 2007

Executive summary

The fact that 600 people showed up for a day-long town meeting to talk about the future of Daviess County is evidence, in itself, of residents' desire for change and devotion to their community.

Beyond that, participants discussed more than 30 specific options for change and recorded their thinking for future reference. And they voted for the options that they believed were the most promising, producing even more information to guide community efforts toward change.

This report explores the hundreds of comments that participants recorded on laptops as they discussed the options with each other at tables of 10. It also examines the votes for the top three options in each of five areas -- education, jobs, environment, health and government.

Overall, participants expressed:

- great concern for the community's neediest citizens including young children, low-income families and people requiring health care
- a deep and at times desperate desire for the kinds of high-quality jobs that will keep young people here and will allow families to make a better living
- a variety of visions for a revitalized downtown to help sell the community's quality of life to potential employers and employees
- strong interest in both simple and complex steps to protect the environment, from expanding recycling to reducing air pollution
- general agreement that local government, including the city and county governments and the public school systems, should make changes to improve performance in order to move the community forward
- a conviction that Daviess County could be a leader in areas of economic growth that build on local strengths, including agriculture
- aspirations for the community to be seen as "progressive" both by potential employers and the rest of the state

Among the report's specific findings based on a qualitative review of comments and quantitative analysis of voting results:

- Expanding recycling won the most votes of any option, largely because participants saw it as an easy and obvious step that would be convenient for citizens and build support throughout the community for protecting the environment. However it was not as clear whether participants agreed that local government should mandate curbside recycling or expand opportunities for volunteer efforts.
- Consolidating local governments, in whole or in part, received significant support. Sixty-one percent of participants voted for either consolidation of city and county governments or consolidation of some city and county departments, or both. Participants who supported these options saw them as essential for economic development, influence in Frankfort and government efficiency; opponents feared consolidation would mean higher taxes and less representation for county residents.
- Support also emerged for consolidating local public school systems, which had not been included by town meeting organizers in the original options. After discussing the original options, participants themselves proposed merging the schools as a way of helping the community get the most for its money in education. This option came in third in the voting and was also mentioned frequently during participant discussions of consolidating local governments or local government departments.
- Two of the top options may have been at least somewhat influenced by the recent local debate over a "tax-increment financing" (TIF) district along Highway 54 that would include a convention center. The mayor and other city leaders supported the TIF proposal while opponents said there should have been more public discussion about it and that the convention center should be located downtown instead. A majority of participants voted both for "transforming downtown" as an option for improving job opportunities and more "openness and transparency in government" among the government opportunities. They also widely supported leadership training for top government officials.

Values for our 21st Century Community

Integrity, honesty, trust in government

Spiritual, moral and religious values

Lifelong education opportunities for everyone and cutting-edge education facilities

Job opportunities that offer a living wage

A healthy environment and preservation of green space

A healthy lifestyle, people staying active
Safety and justice for our community, especially children

Accessible and high-quality health care services, especially for those with special physical and mental needs

Respect for diversity through tolerance, acceptance and compassion: "Input from everyone from all walks of life."

Preservation of our sense of community and its uniqueness: "Preserve the past, restructure for the present, and make provisions for the future."

While these options require government action or involvement, participants also stressed the importance of the involvement of citizens in making changes to the community. The top option for improving education, for instance, was more parent and community involvement. Also, citizen input is important along with openness and transparency in improving the performance of government, some said.

The qualitative and quantitative data

Here's how to read the rest of this report.

At the meeting on Nov. 10, participants were asked to "vote" for their top three options in each of the five categories. This report examines the three options in each category that received the most votes.

After introducing a category, the report summarizes the comments from the table discussions that preceded the voting (a recorder at each table took notes on a laptop). The comments are summarized in bullet points under "strengths" and "concerns." Each summary also includes actual comments, in italics, that reflect the thinking of the participants.

The introduction for each category includes data from the voting that reflects any significant demographic differences (whether, say, more county residents than city residents chose a particular option in their top three). "Significant" means differences of more than 10 percentage points. Overall, there were not many significant demographic differences; however, each category had a few.

TOP 20 Recommendations

1. **Expand recycling (75%)**
2. **Establish practices that ensure openness and transparency (in government) (63%)**
3. **Transform downtown and insist on well-planned suburban expansion (61%)**
4. **Continue to attract, grow and retain businesses (60%)**
5. **Increase parent and community involvement (in schools) (54%)**
6. **Be a leader in conservation and develop renewable energy alternatives (53%)**
7. **Reduce air pollution from coal-fired power plants (51%)**
8. **Require leadership training for elected and appointed officials (49%)**
9. **Help low-income get on solid financial footing (48%)**

   Fight substance abuse (48%)
10. **Provide high quality preschool experiences for more children (46%)**
11. **Consolidate city and county governments (44%)**

    Expand and sustain programs that promote healthy lifestyles (44%)
12. **Expand public health services when needed (43%)**
13. **Maximize new technology opportunities (41%)**
14. **Merge city and county school systems (40%)**
15. **Expand workforce training (38%)**
16. **Support local entrepreneurs (37%)**

    Financial incentives for healthy living (37%)

    Consolidate (city and county government) by department and collaborate (37%)

**A cautionary note: Only about half of the options that participants chose in their "top three" for each category received more than 50 percent of the vote (they are in bold above); the rest of the top options received less than 50 percent. Receiving less than 50 percent of the vote does not mean that an option was opposed or rejected by the majority of participants. It simply means that, for a particular category, participants prioritized a wider variety of options.*

A community committed to education and learning

Top three options:

- Increase family and community involvement in education
- Provide high-quality preschool experiences for all children
- Merge city and county school systems

Much public attention in recent years has been focused on increasing education levels of Daviess County residents so that more have four-year college degrees and qualify for higher-paying jobs. Town meeting participants took the long view, suggesting the early years are critical to educational achievement. Their top option was increasing family and community involvement in education; second was expanding preschool opportunities.

Parent involvement is critical, participants said, though they also pointed out that work obligations make this difficult for parents. Several tables recommended more mentoring of students by members of the community.

In support of expanding opportunities for preschool, participants said that a strong start is essential for all children, particularly those who are at risk for problems in school.

However participants also seemed interested in getting the most out of existing resources for the public schools. That was at least part of the reasoning behind the third most popular option, merging the city and county school systems.

Merging the school systems was not included in the original list of education options, thus participants did not record their thoughts about it. However when it came time to propose additional options, several tables suggested merging the schools, saying it would help the community get more for its money as long as funds were distributed equitably.

Other points of discussion included:

- the value of technology in schools and the need for updates
- concern about the teacher tenure system and whether it is allowing poor teachers to remain in the classroom
- the affordability of college

Assets*

Affordable early college opportunities through OCTC

Additional opportunities through Brescia and Kentucky Wesleyan

Expansion of Western Kentucky University programs and local campus

New or up-to-date schools with appropriate technology

Excellent and highly qualified teachers and administrators

Excellent K-12 school systems

Excellent early childhood programs including HeadStart and pre-K

Strong educational partner in the hospital

Numerous amenities to support education such as museums, RiverPark Center, symphony, Theater Workshop of Owensboro, library, etc.

Community advocacy such as Citizens Committee on Education and The Learning Community

Partnerships among stakeholders (business, government, labor and citizens)

**Identified by town meeting participants.*

There were very few significant differences (of more than 10 percentage points) among demographic subgroups on the education options, meaning there seemed to be general agreement between men and women, county and city residents, etc. Among the differences:

• More county residents favored increasing parent and community involvement in education than did city residents (though both were close to 50 percent). Also, half of white participants chose this in their top three compared to a third of black participants.

• Higher-income participants favored merging the school systems more than lower-income participants.

Increase parent and community involvement in education

Strengths:

- Parent involvement is key to children's success
- Need help for parents so they can be more involved
- Community members should be involved as mentors and in other roles

"Get parents involved; teachers can't do it all."

"(If her parents and the community are behind her), a child will know and want to succeed; we feel that parents need to be involved; parents are important."

"Parents feel inadequate and intimidated when going into school. Need more advocates and resources to help involve parents and grandparents."

"Have teachers build a relationship with child's parent; make technology work for us by (making it) easy and accessible to parents."

"Need role models, more parent volunteers, more business people to come to the schools and be mentors."

Concerns:

- Schedules interfere with involvement of working parents

"Not every parent has the time and resources to devote to volunteer work. To provide a stable home life, parents must spend a lot of time working and taking care of the home. Family values are also not held as highly in modern society as in the past."

"Not enough community support as transportation issues arise for full-time working parents who are in middle class who do not qualify for government programs as (they are) over income limit (for financial assistance) and send children to preschool that is only a half-day program. How is child to be transported in the middle of the day while the parent is working?"

Provide high-quality preschool experiences for all children

Strengths:

- Starting early is essential
- Preschools and day cares are too expensive for low-income families
- This is an opportunity to get parents involved in furthering their education, too

"Get the children a good start with momentum … A good start helps get a good finish."

"Single parents have difficulty providing preschool opportunities for their children. Need more after-school programs to help those parents."

"Get parents involved early as well as kids."

"Work to make sure that all children are ready for school from literacy standpoint."

"Children in low-income/poverty backgrounds need to be brought in early to give them a better opportunity for success for education in kindergarten and the future."

Concerns:

- How do we pay for it?
- Logistics of transportation, parent work conflicts
- We may be pushing children too early

"How do we pay for it? How do we get people to utilize the services that already exist?"

"Children might be pushed too early."

"Funding, logistics of parent work/geography conflicts."

Merge city and county schools

There were no comments or concerns associated with this option because it was added by the participants after the other education options had been discussed. The strengths and concerns below were drawn from the discussion of what to add to the education options.

Strengths:

- Better utilizes money, resources
- Increases equity for all children

Concerns:

- Need strict controls on how money is spent to be best for all

A region of opportunity and appeal

Top three options:

- Transform downtown and insist on well-planned suburban expansion
- Continue to attract, grow and retain businesses
- Maximize technology opportunities

Town meeting participants gave a great deal of thought to how to improve the economic outlook of their families and the community. One table of participants put it this way:

"We are desperate for opportunity in this community. We need to have great foresight in order to plan for the future of our community."

Two options were strong favorites – revitalizing the downtown area and attracting and retaining good jobs. Participants seemed to see the two options as working in tandem, with a vibrant downtown making Owensboro more attractive to businesses and their employees.

Some of the attention to downtown may have resulted from the debate, in the months before the town meeting, over a proposal to build a convention center as part of a new development on the outskirts of town; some residents had protested that the convention center should be downtown, particularly because of $50 million in improvements that is being planned along the Ohio River.

If downtown were to be the focus of development, however, participants offered different ideas about how to do it. Some talked about preserving history and culture while others talked about starting over with a new vision, adapting to new realities. Still others expressed concerns about the cost of renovating old buildings and suggested it's unrealistic to think that employers will locate downtown, especially given lack of parking. Some suggested that housing and entertainment should be an important part of downtown development.

Participants were perhaps even more emphatic about the need for higher quality, better paying jobs, including attracting new businesses, workforce training and encouraging entrepreneurs.

While some participants encouraged the use of incentives to bring in and retain businesses and industry, they also raised questions about how to hold businesses accountable for the jobs they promise to provide, or for staying in Daviess County once the incentives have expired. Participants also emphasized the need to improve Owensboro's transportation infrastructure, including the airport, to make the community more attractive to employers.

The third top option, maximizing technology, was the only one to reflect a significant demographic difference – it was favored by half of town meeting participants ages 18 to 24 compared to only a third of older participants. In addition, white participants favored this significantly more than black participants.

Assets*

Great diversity in employment opportunities – Owensboro Medical Health System (cancer center, HealthPark); agricultural (farming, bio-tech and bio-diesel); manufacturing (Mid-America Airpark Development); and more

Centrally located to two-thirds of the East Coast

Ohio River which provides transportation, recreation and economic opportunities

Strong education focus (Learning Community program plus OCTC, Brescia, Kentucky Wesleyan for postsecondary learning)

Cultural and arts facilities and environment (RiverPark, museums, festivals) which are attractive to businesses

Active and recognized Chamber of Commerce

Improving transportation infrastructure

Identified by town meeting participants.

Transform downtown and insist on well-planned suburban expansion

Strengths:

- Downtown is the community's front door, will help attract businesses and new residents
- Revitalizing downtown is the foundation for the other options
- Downtown revitalization could include housing, convention center, entrepreneurial district, more entertainment/arts
- We should capitalize on the river
- We need to preserve history and culture

"Downtown is important ... leverage the beauty."

“ Bigger is not necessarily better. By developing downtown, having housing, businesses, will make it a thriving community. Help fight global warming, driving shorter distances, less fuel emissions. Wonderful options for higher quality local businesses. Need to come back to roots. Will bring outside businesses to community. We want better-paying jobs for downtown. Too many low-paying jobs in Hwy 54 area. ”

“ Transforming downtown Owensboro would show people that we are organized and that we have a plan for the future. We could have a healthy downtown and a community that is spreading out. ”

“ If we make downtown more attractive, more investors will be willing to locate their businesses there. The physical appearance of downtown shows what type of people we are. With a presentable downtown more people/agencies/business will want to visit downtown and conduct business there. Stadiums need to be on river, not out in the country. ”

“ We like the idea of controlling urban sprawl it seems to be getting out of control. Also we like the idea of revitalizing the downtown. We would hate to have 50 million dollar sidewalk. It is full of history and needs to be revitalized. ”

“ Downtown will help bring in tourism and will open up more living areas. ”

“ Make downtown an urban residential area. ”

“ A good city needs a good downtown hub. If you locate the TIF downtown it will attract hotels. We have to have things to offer people. It will attract visionary people here. Open to any business who wants to come here. More diversity of people here in terms of religion or culture. More businesses in downtown, business-friendly government. ”

Concerns:

- Lack of parking
- Cost of revitalization – refurbishing old buildings is expensive. Who would pay for it?
- Urban sprawl
- We need a new identity for downtown, not an old one
- May not be a good place for businesses to locate, particularly larger ones

“ You will never have businesses come to downtown if there is nowhere to park. ”

“ What’s our vision? ”

“ It is very expensive. Where will that money come from? It’s hard to say that this will result in more employers. ”

“ Buildings are old, costly to renovate/preserve, might as well rebuild. ”

“ We need to create a new identity instead of trying to recreate the old one. A central focus area needs to have places for people to live. ”

“ Housing must be included in downtown for it to be revitalized. Shopping districts are a thing of the past. ”

“ It most likely won’t impact employment opportunities. ”

Continue to attract, grow and retain businesses

Strengths:

- Need higher-paying jobs/employers
- Supporting existing employers helps keep people here
- New businesses, innovation will help attract and keep young people
- Existing businesses need incentives to stay, expand
- Need better transportation infrastructure to support new and existing businesses
- Can focus on developing entrepreneurial, entertainment sectors
- Need bigger employers, more variety

“ New businesses will keep our residents here and bring the young adults back and even recruit in nearby areas. These could include the innovative businesses with growth potential. This will help in the long-term with our other development goals. ”

“ If you retain, they will expand some. Why develop workers if there are not the businesses for them to work in? Entrepreneurs need to be grown at home. ”

“ Need more viable businesses than fast-food restaurants. ”

“ Need to expand private and public partnerships and help existing businesses stay in Owensboro. Don’t need to drop the ball after getting them here. ”

“ Creating an environment that encourages local entrepreneurs and outside businesses to establish themselves in the Owensboro area through tax incentives and low cost of living is of utmost importance. Utilizing our river and rail transportation system while encouraging improved roads and the ability to fly in and out of Owensboro is vital (for) transportation of manufactured goods. ”

Concerns:

- Will companies leave after their incentives expire? This has happened before.
- We've attracted too many low-paying, low-quality jobs
- New businesses should be environmentally sound
- Minority businesses not supported

"Try to look for quality jobs over quantity."

"Businesses get incentives, then leave once they are gone."

"The companies we attract and recruit need to be environmentally friendly and responsible in their practices. Also moral issues such as gambling and bringing in casinos will lead to more problems."

"Hard to draw big industry."

Maximize new technology opportunities

Strengths:

- Will provide the jobs to keep people here, especially young people
- We don't want to be left behind other communities
- Can capitalize on development of alternative fuels, uses of tobacco

"If we put ourselves on the cutting edge, we'll attract more businesses to our community. Tobacco is vital part of our economy, finding new uses for tobacco is important. Can create jobs we don't now have, can open up new wealth of opportunity. Owensboro Community and Technical College has new Advanced Technology Center offering robotics and new technologies."

"Our community (needs) to get in on technological advances that are going on everywhere else. Everyone knows that technology is advancing faster than ever and if we don't keep up we will be left behind."

"Will be expensive but worth it … like railroads."

Concerns:

- Need to build technically experienced workforce
- Favoring one type of industry over another

"We would have to bring people in right now for technical fields until we get education levels up with residents."

"Need to make sure we don't lose our existing industry while going after new high tech businesses."

A uniquely green and clean environment

Top three options:

- **Expand recycling**
- **Be a leader in conservation and develop renewable energy alternatives**
- **Reduce air pollution from coal-fired power plants**

The most popular of all the options considered at the town meeting was to expand recycling -- a clear, concrete step that could be taken quickly and easily and would touch everyone in the community. An unresolved question, however, was whether it would include mandatory curbside recycling or simply more opportunities for voluntary recycling.

Participants were arguably even more concerned about reducing air pollution, the environmental option that came in third, partly because of its effect on health. At the same time, they questioned if much could be done at the local level.

This was also true of the option that came in second, developing renewable sources of energy. Yes, participants seemed to be saying, this seems like a good idea for our community given our strong agricultural base -- but can we pull it off anytime soon, and if so, how?

Overarching concerns for all the options included the cost of implementing them and how to get started. Developing renewable energy could be a source of higher-paying jobs for the community, some said.

Demographically, the youngest participants overwhelmingly supported the recycling option and were significantly more supportive than older people (by at least 10 percentage points) – though 70 percent of older participants also supported it. Older participants, on the other hand, were significantly more likely to favor reducing air pollution than younger participants.

There were also demographic differences among people who worked in different industries – agricultural workers, for instance, favored the development of renewable energy alternatives more significantly than, say, construction workers.

In addition, men favored this option significantly more than women, county residents more than city residents, higher-income residents more than lower-income residents and whites more than blacks.

Assets*

Location on the Ohio River, transportation access

Excellent parks, Western Kentucky Botanical Gardens, Greenbelt, green space

Responsible farming and abundant farmland

City beautification and neighborhood alliances

Local groups such as PRIDE, Sierra Club

Well-run Owensboro Municipal Utilities – clean power and water

Biodiesel plant – use of local natural resources

Excellent sports facilities

Smoke-free facilities

Countywide planning and zoning, landscape regulation

Identified by town meeting participants.

Expand recycling

Strengths:

- Easy to do
- Can be done locally
- Owensboro/Daviess County is far behind other similar communities which already have this, needs to catch up
- Convenient for citizens if mandatory
- Community-wide effort, allows participation by all in environmental protection
- Reduces landfill space
- First step to other ways of protecting the environment

“Easiest to implement.”

“Can be done locally.”

“It’s shocking that we don’t already do something as easy as curbside recycling.”

“This is the most feasible and will be extremely beneficial for little cost. Currently with the voluntary program too few

residents are encouraged to recycle, but with curbside recycling many more would take the minimal effort to reduce their waste.

In addition to curbside recycling, reach out to businesses and the big producers of waste and include them in innovative recycling techniques.

This should create jobs.

Would cut down on landfill space; create job opportunity; encourage community involvement.

Something everybody can do and feel good about. Convenience would encourage participation.

Recycling should be mandatory in O/DC. Should not be an option. All major Ky. cities have curbside recycling programs and we lag in this area. If we can have leaf pick-up and limb pick-up, we surely can have a curbside recycling program. Our community should stop our "use it up and throw it away" attitude.

Concerns:

- The cost to consumers and government if mandatory
- Who would do this, government or private industry?
- People won't recycle if it's still voluntary
- City leadership opposes curbside recycling (allegedly)

Money that it would cost to implement the mandatory or roadside recycling.

How would the collections be made? City-sponsored or private services?

Citizens won't volunteer to set out recycling trash.

Be a leader in conservation and develop renewable energy alternatives

Strengths:

- Inevitable that we will have to reduce dependence on coal so we should be proactive
- We have the resources to manufacture alternative fuels, could be leader, gain economically

Need to be proactive, not reactive.

Our community should be a leader for our state in developing renewable energy sources and conservation. Residents would like to see our city and county government be leaders in this regard.

We have the resources in our area to manufacture alternative fuels. Coal has been the main source of energy for Americans for too long -- there are plenty of other options. It is time that we save some money rather than giving it to fossil fuel companies. It will save money for everyone. Also mentioned concern for global warming. If we don't take time to research and develop alternative fuels now, it might be too late by the time we do it.

Concerns:

- Can't do much locally
- May be costly, long-term commitment

Probably can't be done locally.

Alternatives are not always cheaper, but just possible. Will it be cost effective? Is the extra cost going to be worth it for everyone?

Reduce air pollution from coal-fired power plants

Strengths:

- Critical for our health
- Local options for action -- could set regional standards and/or take lead (as a community that depends on coal) in finding the way to reduce emissions
- Business friendly

Essential for health (many comments along this line).

Parents and health officials could form an alliance to educate about health problems. People will respond more to health concerns than environmental problems.

Because of so much coal in area, we need to lead nation in how to decrease pollution from coal. Systematic replacement of coal plants; clean air bringing higher emissions to lower emissions.

It is stated that this is a must for our community. It affects everyone sitting in this room, with 10 coal plants within 50 miles of Owensboro.

Concerns:

- Effect on jobs, workers
- Would have to be cost-effective for businesses
- Can't do much on the local level

How does changing the coal plants affect the people who work there, and the coal miners?

Where will money come from? Can't be done locally. Must be shift in federal focus.

Loss of jobs.

A healthy and caring community

Top three options:

- **Help low-income families get on solid financial footing**
- **Fight substance abuse**
- **Expand and sustain programs that sustain healthy lifestyles**

Addressing the financial needs of low-income families, many of whom can't afford health insurance, and attacking substance abuse in Daviess County got equal support among town meeting participants.

But no option in health care got at least 50 percent of the participants' votes for the top three. Instead, participants seemed to see significant needs in several areas affecting the health of the community. They also noted that some of the options are interrelated – people with mental illness, for instance, may be more likely to abuse alcohol or drugs. And low-income families would benefit from expanding public health programs.

In discussing the financial needs of low-income families, participants commented helping families get on their feet will save tax and health care dollars in the long run. Families need help in affording both child care and health insurance, participants said. More than half of participants younger than 44 favored this option compared to about 40 percent of older participants.

In regard to the substance abuse option, county residents were significantly more likely to support it (by more than 10 percentage points) than city residents.

Participants said it is important to prioritize education, particularly among young people, to prevent substance abuse. However it is also critical to provide more services to addicts. In the words of one table of participants, the abuse of methamphetamines and other drugs has become a "plague" on the community.

Several advocated for prioritizing treatment over punishment for illegal drug use. Some expressed concern that existing treatment options don't last long enough, and that people need support for longer periods.

The third most popular option was to expand and sustain programs that sustain healthy lifestyles. Again, focusing on children is important, some said.

Assets*

No smoking ordinance

Healthy lifestyle infrastructure – Greenbelt, parks, sports facilities, bike trails, HealthPark, exercise facilities, advocacy groups

Social services agencies for children, underprivileged, elderly

High-quality hospital services and new cancer center

Free clinics and public health department services

Churches and faith-based initiatives

Community interest in a clean and green environment

Services for mental illness/health and substance abuse

High level of volunteerism: "We're a caring community which rallies to help people in need."

Identified by town meeting participants.

Help low-income get on solid financial footing

Strengths:

- Helping low-income families become stable helps the whole community
- Families need assistance for longer periods; don't pull the rug out too soon
- Families need more help with child care
- Families need reliable access to health care

"Single women need access to child care in order to work."

"We penalize some folks who are trying to improve their lives by not supporting them long enough."

"Helping people improve their lives will help us all in decreasing taxes/health cost."

"The community needs some stability and reliable access to health care."

Concerns:

- Too many cash advance businesses
- Could create dependency on assistance

"The time frame to phase out of public assistance is unfair to some that are truly trying but just need a little more time than some one else. It may take a few more months or years for some to get back on their feet because of circumstances like education and training and the ability to learn."

"We are creating new generations of children who only know dependence on "handouts."

Fight substance abuse

Strengths:

- This is a plague in our community; meth is a major concern, but we also have other major substance abuse problems
- Need to focus on treatment more than punishment; need more, better treatment options
- Addicts need more support after rehab
- Prevention and education are important

"Focus on treatment instead of punishment and incarceration."

"We have a big meth problem locally. There needs to be a re-evaluation of how we assess illegal drugs. Money is wasted incarcerating marijuana users that could be used for other purposes such as to prevent more serious drug problems."

"It is like a plague to our community … Everyone is eventually touched by substance abuse. We should all do our part to help prevent substance abuse if possible."

"People don't have the support they need after they rehab ... they need on-going support for their recovery."

"We think it is vital that Owensboro and Daviess County do something to help people on substance abuse and to prevent people from ever using drugs through education and other methods."

"Unless you have the money or the insurance to cover an out-of-state facility, we do not currently have the systems in place to take care of the needs in this community."

Concerns:

- Many people don't want treatment centers in their neighborhoods
- Other problems are tied to this – homelessness, crime
- Need inpatient as well as outpatient treatment

"Underlying mental health concerns that could be the cause of substance abuse need to be addressed."

"Public resistance to having rehab centers in their neighborhoods."

"Need inpatient treatment, and not just outpatient, that gets them away from the temptations that they have in their surroundings."

Expand and sustain programs that sustain healthy lifestyles

Strengths:

- Awareness and prevention are key to everything else, especially focusing on children
- This is something we can all do
- Could offer incentives for healthy living

"Prevention is the key. By promoting a healthy lifestyle so many health concerns are addressed and prevented. This brings health care costs down for everyone and prevents so many people going to the emergency room with preventable problems."

"It really needs to begin with children."

"Offer incentives for healthy living and public awareness. Cheaper to prevent than to cure."

Concerns:

- Should target those in need, not just HealthPark clients
- Cost (overall and at exercise clubs)
- Need more programs in schools (education, physical activity)

"Money is not there for this option. Who would put forth this initiative?"

A government for the 21st century

Top three options:

- Establish policies that ensure openness and transparency
- Require leadership trainings for elected and appointed officials
- Consolidate city and county governments

Over the years, studies of Owensboro's civic life have repeatedly found that citizens believe too many government decisions are made without appropriate input from the public. This was borne out again in the town meeting participants' discussion of ways to improve government – the top option was to ensure more openness and transparency in government.

The second most popular option, requiring leadership training of all government leaders, was not among the original options; however, it was added after participants were asked to suggest additional ones.

Overall this option was much more significantly supported by younger participants than older ones (nearly three-fourths of those 18 to 24 compared to a third of those ages 45 to 54) and by participants with lower incomes compared to those with higher incomes. In addition, more than half of people who work in government supported it compared to, say, only 13 percent of those who work in agriculture.

At the same time, the participants also had quite a lot to say about merging local governments, long a controversial local issue. The third most popular option was to consolidate city and county governments, and it received by far the most comments from participants. The fourth most popular option was a variation on the same theme -- consolidating departments of local governments.

All told, 61 percent of participants chose either consolidation of governments or consolidation of departments among their top three options (a few chose both). Keeping the governments entirely separate was in the top three of only 22 percent.

Advocates of merging the governments said it is essential for the community to speak with one voice to attract employers and influence the governor and legislature on behalf of Owensboro priorities; they also said it will eliminate duplication and strengthen safety services.

The most abiding concerns included the possibility of another divisive community battle over the question; some of those supporting consolidation of individual departments said that it would be a first step toward merger or might be the best the community could do.

Concerns about consolidating governments also revolved around the impact on county residents – that they may pay higher taxes, pay for services they don't receive or don't need, or won't have equitable representation in government.

Many advocates of merger said the issue needs more study and residents need more information about the impact merger would have on taxes, representation in government, and local services.

Demographically, residents from Owensboro were significantly more likely to favor consolidation of governments than county residents (46 percent versus 28 percent. Also, participants with higher incomes were significantly more in favor than those with lower incomes, and whites more in favor than blacks. Nearly six in 10 participants who work in government put merger in their top three, as did nearly half of workers in education, health care and social services; only 40 percent of participants in other industries chose it.

The TIF debate was mentioned in discussion of openness and transparency, though not always directly -- participants mentioned decisions being made "behind closed doors" and the resulting "smell factor," even if nothing wrong is going on.

Assets*

Good basic public services: fire, police/sheriff, streets, roads, government facilities, library, parks, sanitation

Citizens who are willing to serve as resources to local government leaders

Quality and commitment of elected officials, past and present

Opportunity for personal contact with government officials

Professional and competent staffing in local government

Diversity and collaboration between local governments: "City and county working together for the betterment of the community." Some see two governments operating together as a strength. Some see a need to merge governments.

Take advantage of technology (in government)

Good tax base: "Maximize use of tax dollars."

Development of neighborhood alliances

Identified by town meeting participants.

Establish policies that ensure openness and transparency

Strengths:

- Too many decisions made behind closed doors
- People get information by rumors, creates perception of shady dealings (TIF)
- Citizens need more input, voices heard
- Would ensure more accountability
- County residents might trust city more

"Too many important decisions are made behind closed doors."

"We need to get rid of the "good old boy" network or the perception that there is one."

"We, as Owensboro citizens, need to have our voices heard."

"Would help people be more informed about local government because people are more willing to pay taxes when they know where the money is going."

"Too many important decisions without public input; decisions are already made before we make input; we have to be open with the public before we merge or do anything; if we have promotion of meeting more people will come."

"TIF was done behind closed doors, not everyone had a voice, an example why option 6 is important."

"We need to know what is going on before it happens, not after it happens. Or, though the information may be out there, people may not be aware of it."

"Eliminates "smell problem."

"Just good common sense, thoughts that too much is done behind closed doors, minds made up and know how going to vote before meetings even begin."

Concerns:

- Need not only transparency but citizen input
- Openness should include school boards, hospital
- Some citizens sound off at meetings, aren't productive
- Meetings aren't held at times convenient for working people

"Transparency is also important, but so is citizen input into decisions."

"The apparent lack of transparency with the Gateway TIF has created wounds that need healing."

"Some people go to open meetings and sound off and are not productive."

"Public meetings are held at times not available to working people."

Require leadership trainings for elected and appointed officials

(No comments; added as a theme after discussions were over)

Consolidate local governments – 44 percent

Strengths:

- One government will provide unity, which is important in attracting businesses/employers and leveraging power in Frankfort
- Reduce duplication of effort, save money
- Increase population (with related benefits)
- Possibility of greater tax base
- Community will be seen as more progressive
- Will solve problems with emergency services
- Better communication among government leaders
- Build a stronger sense of community
- It has worked in other places
- Same tax scheme for both city and county residents
- One voice for all, government accountable to all
- Should merge schools

"A combined government presents a united front to prospective businesses, to Frankfort, to Washington, and "unity equals prosperity."

"The main thing that is killing this community is lack of coordination."

"It would allow for us to have more power in Frankfort and allow to better serve our community in the city and the county."

"More efficient and less costly. Could be more representation, maximize tax dollars. All working toward one common goal."

"What we're doing is not working and if we keep doing what we're doing we'll keep getting what we have and that's not good for the future."

"Sends progressive message to state that we can make unified decisions and be a unified community."

"We need to consolidate to save money; there is so much inequity in system, city taxpayers are paying so much more for services."

"We need to work together as a unit. If we are going to grow, we need a unified voice. Infrastructure needs to be under

one leadership. Through consolidation, our city and county governments should partner together...the future lies in consolidation. Bowling Green is growing in spite of higher taxes and will soon outgrow us.

We believe it would be best for Owensboro and Daviess County governments to merge. We think that we should do it slowly, however, by merging the parks department and the 911 services first and then continue to merge the rest slowly. We believe that the two governments cannot agree on issues so it would be better to merge them.

Would decrease oversight problems, would make it easier to encourage business development. Erase tax disparities and lead to faster services. Decrease overlapping government services and decrease fees.

One voice for all residents of Daviess County. Responsibility and accountability for all citizens. Concentrated leadership with reduced cost. Equitable taxation. We're looking for less confusion, and more cost-effective government.

We will pay for only one government instead of two.

Concerns:

- How will taxes be determined and will they go up for county residents/everyone?
- How do we bring in county residents, assure equality (services, representation)?
- Will merger change existing laws/ordinances?
- Can't compare to Lexington and Louisville because we're more rural
- Centralized government won't be as effective/responsive in the county
- Big system can't deal as effectively with little problems
- Merger is divisive
- Needs study; too vague
- We need more education/plans to look at

Will we have one tax or how will taxes be determined?

We should not be compared to Louisville or Lexington because of the rural land percentage vs. the urban land percentage.

Concern that if there is merger county residents will have to pay taxes for services that they will not receive.

General concern that the subject of merger causes friction and division among the people.

County residents feel like they've been run over with the merger.

Would there be changing of laws, ordinances with consolidation?

One big system may not be able to deal with smaller problems and differences in county and city.

People always say we need to do it, but how do we?

If we merged the governments, we are concerned that the elected urban government would not be concerned about county residents.

I don't want my taxes to raise!

Monopolizing of government; no checks and balances.

It is too vague. Still need same number of police, firemen, etc.

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