Community Conversations
Participant Guide

FEBRUARY 2006 | WWW.VOICESCHOICES.ORG

Voices & Choices
One Region. One Future.

Jobs
Education
Equity
Quality of Life
Cooperation
The Fund for Our Economic Future

The Fund is an unprecedented collaboration among over 70 philanthropic organizations from across Northeast Ohio. Its goal is to encourage and advance an agenda for regional economic transformation. The three-year initiative has raised nearly $30 million to further its objectives. (www.futurefundneo.org)

AmericaSpeaks

AmericaSpeaks is a nonprofit organization that engages citizens in the most important public decisions that impact their lives. Since 1997, AmericaSpeaks has conducted 21st Century Town Meetings across the country and around the world on such subjects as the redevelopment of the World Trade Center after 9/11, the creation of Washington, D.C.’s municipal budget, and the development of global priorities at the World Economic Forum in Davos, Switzerland.
(www.americaspeaks.org)

The Universities Collaborative

The Universities Collaborative is a coalition of local institutions of higher learning that is serving as a key partner in the implementation of Voices & Choices and the Dashboard of Regional Economic Indicators. The Collaborative will play a significant role in strengthening the region’s civic infrastructure and capacity through Voices & Choices.
Voices & Choices is your opportunity to help shape the future of Northeast Ohio. You are joining thousands of residents from across the region who are working together to decide what we must do to create more jobs and better opportunities, and to improve quality of life for all.

This winter and spring, hundreds of conversations will be held across Northeast Ohio to consider the challenges facing our region and to identify priorities for moving forward.

Conversations will take place in homes, schools, businesses, places of worship, community centers and more.

Your conversation will build upon the input generated by other Northeast Ohio residents in a series of forums last Fall. Together with thousands of other citizens, you will help to create an action plan to revitalize our region. Specifically, the decisions you make today will shape a series of choices that will be presented to the region this spring.

Voices & Choices is your opportunity to help shape the future of Northeast Ohio. You are joining thousands of residents from across the region who are working together to decide what we must do to create more jobs and better opportunities, and to improve quality of life for all.

This winter and spring, hundreds of conversations will be held across Northeast Ohio to consider the challenges facing our region and to identify priorities for moving forward.

Conversations will take place in homes, schools, businesses, places of worship, community centers and more.

Your conversation will build upon the input generated by other Northeast Ohio residents in a series of forums last Fall. Together with thousands of other citizens, you will help to create an action plan to revitalize our region. Specifically, the decisions you make today will shape a series of choices that will be presented to the region this spring.

Voices & Choices Accomplishments

**Citizen Interviews**
August – December 2005
3,000 citizens identify Northeast Ohio’s greatest strengths and assets in one-on-one interviews across the region.

**Leadership Workshops**
August – September 2005
1,000 leaders representing governments, businesses, and non-profits discuss the greatest challenges and opportunities facing Northeast Ohio at 11 four-hour workshops.

**Regional Town Meeting**
November 2005
750 citizens and leaders prioritize the challenges facing the region and identify potential solutions at the largest Town Meeting ever held in the region.
What Makes Us a Region?

We share a common history and industrial past

We share a common workforce that travels across the 15 counties for work; 23% of our workforce lives in one county and works in another

We share common assets, like our universities, our natural resources, our health care system, and our cultural institutions

We share a growing transportation system and infrastructure that links us together

We depend on each other for our future prosperity

Together, we are competing against other regions around the world for jobs and opportunities
Global Competition
The world is changing. The communities of Northeast Ohio are competing against other regions across the country and around the globe for better jobs and opportunities. Individually, our communities are not large enough to succeed in this global competition. We need to pool our resources and work together as a team if we are going to win.

Regional Strength
The 15 counties of Northeast Ohio are home to more than 4 million people, making the region larger in population than 23 states. Our regional economy is greater than many small countries and employs one-third of all workers in the state of Ohio. Together, thinking and acting as a region, Northeast Ohio can be a collective force to be reckoned with in the global economy.

Team Northeast Ohio
One way to think about why the region must work together to compete is to consider a favorite sports team. Each player on a team has a certain set of skills; he or she may be fast or tall or strong. But alone, individual strengths are not enough to succeed. In order to win, a player, even a superstar, must combine his or her strengths with those of his or her teammates.

The same is true for a region. A city may have a number of assets: like a strong university or a pool of skilled workers. But these strengths are not enough to compete with regions around the world. Alone, our major cities – Akron, Canton, Cleveland, Lorain, and Youngstown cannot attract new industries, spur innovation, or prepare a workforce on the scale we need to compete globally.

In Northeast Ohio, we have two options. We can continue to operate independently and continue to compete against our own regional teammates. Or, we can take a hard look at the strengths and challenges of our team and create a game plan so we can compete at the highest possible level in a world where the playing field is evolving and new competitors join the game every day.
What We Love About Northeast Ohio

What makes Northeast Ohio special to you?

What would you miss most if you moved away from Northeast Ohio?

What keeps people here or attracts new people to the region?

Nearly 3,000 citizens have taken part in Voices & Choices interviews to identify what is best about Northeast Ohio that should be preserved and built upon as we work to revitalize the region. The following themes are emerging from an analysis of a sample of these interviews.

Keep these assets in mind as you consider the region’s most important challenges and what we should do about them.

It’s About the People

When asked what makes Northeast Ohio special, many citizens report their deep attachment to the region because their “roots are here” and because they value their family and friends who live here. Many people say with pride that they were “born and raised here.” Others moved here – or moved back after having left – in order to be close to family and friends.

People talk about our culture and how Northeast Ohio residents treat each other. “Northeast Ohioans are genuinely friendlier than people from other places.” They will lend a hand to neighbors and those in need, smile and say hello to strangers and “keep an eye out” for each other. Many describe Northeast Ohioans as hardworking and helpful people.

Residents often comment on how much they enjoy the diversity in their communities. The types of diversity they mention are ethnic and racial, age, education, political persuasions, sexual orientation and religion. Many people enjoy learning about new cultures through dining, music and festivals, thanks to the region’s diversity.

“The thing that makes Ohio different would be the way people act towards one another. We always treat fellow Ohioans with respect and dignity.”
Our Quality of Life: The Feel of the Place

People like the sense of belonging that they feel in Northeast Ohio. Many say they enjoy living in a place where they are known and where they know others. They treasure their involvement with churches, civic and fraternal organizations, school committees and sports teams. They like knowing what’s happening with the people in their community. They like having places to gather and see familiar faces as well.

Many people value the region’s education system, the range of job opportunities here, and feeling safe. They say that the region is a good place to raise a family with room for kids to play and opportunities for them to learn and develop talents. The moderate cost of living in the region is important to many people. Affordable housing is often cited as an asset, although it is also considered to be in too short supply.

People enjoy the diversity of communities in the region with large cities within easy reach of rural areas. One person described the region as: “Cities to cows in 20 minutes.”

Our Natural Surroundings

One of the reasons Northeast Ohioans love their region so much is because it’s so beautiful. Sunsets over the Great Lake, rolling hills, glowing fields of corn, deep silent white winters, and brisk, crisp deeply hued autumns all create a constantly changing view. There are quaint 19th century homes, impressive bank and government buildings, and churches and cemeteries fit for the movies.

Lake Erie has a special place in the hearts of Northeast Ohioans, although people value the many other bodies of water across the region as well. As one moves away from Lake Erie, the contours of the land and the scenic beauty of farms and still natural areas is anchoring and reassuring.

Farming is part of the fabric that makes Northeast Ohio what it is. Those who live in rural or farming areas appreciate the connection with the earth, the hard work, and the special community that agriculture fosters.

Finally, the weather is a constant topic of conversation. Whether one complains or praises, the changing seasons mark the passage of time, give variety to daily life, and sometimes provide us with the sense that we are all in this together.
Lots to Do

The number of local and world-renowned music, art and cultural institutions and venues in our region is phenomenal, and spread out through the region making them accessible to thousands of people of all ages. The array of available options suits every taste and budget. People enjoy the area’s restaurants and shopping.

Northeast Ohioans are loyal to their teams and vocal about it. The belonging we feel as fans, spectators or participants is a tie that binds us together. Youngsters participate in community and school teams that many find rewarding. In addition, there are loads of places to bike, fish, bowl, or enjoy the many recreational opportunities that come with a four-season climate.

Amusement parks, zoos, wineries, libraries, tourist attractions and so much more are right in northeast Ohioans’ backyards. People also appreciate the urban amenities of the region’s large cities.

Infrastructure

Northeast Ohio’s infrastructure makes it very accessible and easy to get around. People love that they can get across the entire region with ease and reach other major cities and travel destinations. Easy access to airports, highways, shopping, and arts and culture districts are important to many people.

By car, one can get to work, school and leisure activities quickly and with essentially no rush hour. The traffic conditions are particularly appreciated by people who have lived in other metropolitan areas. The availability of public transportation (rail and bus) systems are also appreciated by residents who use them.
During your Community Conversation, you will have the chance to talk about the most important challenges facing the region and brainstorm solutions in at least one of these five topic areas. If you have time, your group may choose to talk about several topics.

The five topic areas are not meant to be exhaustive or to suggest that you ignore how issues are related to one another. Rather, they are intended to encourage you to think about the broad diversity of issues that may be considered in setting an economic agenda for the future.

The following pages of this Participant Guide, as well as five accompanying Fact Sheets, provide background information on each of the five topic areas to inform our discussions.

Voices & Choices has divided the regional conversation into five topic areas in order to make sure that the diverse set of issues facing the region are talked about:

1. Employment & Economic Growth
2. Education & Skills
3. Equity & Fairness
4. Quality of Life & Place
5. Cooperation & Governance
While Northeast Ohio has many great strengths, the region also faces many great challenges. In the area of Employment & Economic Growth, Northeast Ohio must find ways to support the creation of more jobs with higher wages, so that everyone can provide for their needs and the needs of their families.

**What Sets Thriving Regions Apart?**
The Fund for Our Economic Future selected a team of national and local economists to analyze Northeast Ohio’s economy and identify the factors that are most closely related to thriving economies.

Based on their analysis, the economists identified three important attributes of competitive economies in the area of Employment & Economic Growth that contribute to a strong regional economy:

- Create a better mix of businesses and industries that are more productive and competitive than traditional Northeast Ohio industries
- Support the creation of new businesses, entrepreneurs and innovations in the region
- Encourage immigrants to settle in the region and minorities to open their own businesses here

**Fast Facts**
Learn more about the conditions of the region in this area by reading the accompanying Employment & Economic Growth Fact Sheet.
Regional Challenges

The following list of regional challenges was identified by citizens, leaders and economists through the Voices & Choices process this Fall. Which challenges do you think are most important for our region to take on? What challenges are missing?

1. Education and training are not linked to the current and future needs of businesses

2. The local business environment is not competitive because of high energy costs, poor labor management conditions and other factors that deter businesses from moving here

3. There is not enough investment and overall support for local entrepreneurs and new small businesses

4. Too many local industries are no longer competitive and need to be replaced with high growth, high-tech industries that can prosper into the future

5. There are not enough job opportunities paying good wages or offering good employee benefits

6. The core cities of Northeast Ohio have not been able to attract new immigrants like they once did in the past

7. Public attitudes in Northeast Ohio tend to resist change, new ideas and new ways of working

8. The region needs a better public transportation system so that everyone can have better access to jobs

9. People and businesses are leaving our core cities (like Akron, Canton, Cleveland, Lorain, and Youngstown) while other communities in the region are struggling to keep pace with population growth

10. Funding for public schools is unequal across the region

Regional Priorities

What are the most important challenges facing the region?

What potential regional solutions could best address the challenges you identified?
While Northeast Ohio has many great strengths, the region also faces many great challenges. In the area of Education & Skills, Northeast Ohio must find ways to better provide residents of all ages with the knowledge and experience they need to find jobs and contribute to the regional economy.

**What Sets Thriving Regions Apart?**

The Fund for Our Economic Future selected a team of national and local economists to analyze Northeast Ohio’s economy and identify the factors that are most closely related to thriving economies.

Based on their analysis, the economists identified three important attributes of competitive economies in the area of Education & Skills that contribute to a strong regional economy:

- Increase the number of people with college and graduate degrees
- Create more jobs in technical, professional and management occupations to ensure that well-educated, highly skilled workers don’t leave the area for better work elsewhere
- Retain and attract workers between the ages of 16-64

**Fast Facts**

Learn more about the conditions of the region in this area by reading the accompanying Education & Skills Fact Sheet.
Regional Challenges

The following list of regional challenges was identified by citizens, leaders and economists through the Voices & Choices process last Fall. Which challenges do you think are most important for our region to take on? What challenges are missing?

1. Funding for public schools is unequal across the region
2. Education and training are not linked to the current and future needs of businesses
3. Parents are not adequately involved at school and at home
4. Student performance, achievement, and completion at the K-12 level is low
5. Public schools are not held to high standards of accountability
6. College education is not affordable or accessible
7. Public schools in inner city areas are poor quality
8. Public schools teach students to take tests instead of preparing them to think creatively and independently
9. The people of Northeast Ohio don’t place enough value on education

Regional Priorities

What are the most important challenges facing the region?

What potential regional solutions could best address the challenges you identified?
While Northeast Ohio has many great strengths, the region also faces many great challenges. In the area of Equity & Fairness, Northeast Ohio must find ways to ensure that all residents have the opportunity to provide for their families and that no one is left behind.

**What Sets Thriving Regions Apart?**

The Fund for Our Economic Future selected a team of national and local economists to analyze Northeast Ohio’s economy and identify the factors that are most closely related to thriving economies.

Based on their analysis, the economists identified three important attributes of competitive economies in the area of Equity & Fairness that contribute to a strong regional economy:

- Decrease the amount of racial isolation experienced by the African American community in the region and improve access to jobs, quality schools and other opportunities
- Improve income equality among people (less distinction between “haves and have nots”)
- Reduce the concentration of poverty in core cities and the number of children living in high poverty neighborhoods

**Fast Facts**

Learn more about the conditions of the region in this area by reading the accompanying Equity & Fairness Fact Sheet.
Regional Challenges
The following list of regional challenges was identified by citizens, leaders and economists through the Voices & Choices process last Fall. Which challenges do you think are most important for our region to take on? What challenges are missing?

1. There are not enough job opportunities paying good wages or offering good employee benefits

2. Northeast Ohio has growing income inequalities resulting in an increasing gap between the rich and poor and a greater concentration of poverty in core cities

3. Funding for public schools is unequal across the region

4. Too many people do not have access to quality health care

5. Too many people do not have access to affordable and integrated housing

6. The region needs to acknowledge and address issues of racial segregation and discrimination

7. College education is not accessible or affordable

8. The region needs a better public transportation system so that everyone can have better access to jobs, education, health care, and housing

Regional Priorities
What are the most important challenges facing the region?

What potential regional solutions could best address the challenges you identified?
While Northeast Ohio has many great strengths, the region also faces many great challenges. In the area of Quality of Life & Place, Northeast Ohio must find ways to protect, preserve and grow those aspects of our communities that make Northeast Ohio a place that is desirable to live.

What Sets Thriving Regions Apart?
The Fund for Our Economic Future selected a team of national and local economists to analyze Northeast Ohio’s economy and identify the factors that are most closely related to thriving economies.

Based on their analysis, the economists identified several important attributes of competitive economies in the area of Quality of Life & Place that contribute to a strong regional economy:

• Sustain and enhance higher education, arts and cultural institutions, transportation infrastructure, recreation opportunities, and health facilities.

Fast Facts
Learn more about the conditions of the region in this area by reading the accompanying Quality of Life & Place Fact Sheet.
Regional Challenges

The following list of regional challenges was identified by citizens, leaders and economists through the Voices & Choices process last Fall. Which challenges do you think are most important for our region to take on? What challenges are missing?

1. People and businesses are leaving our core cities (like Akron, Canton, Cleveland, Lorain and Youngstown) while other communities in the region are struggling to keep pace with population growth

2. It is difficult to balance economic development with environmental and natural resource preservation

3. There are not enough job opportunities paying good wages or offering good employee benefits

4. Northeast Ohio has growing income inequalities resulting in an increasing gap between the rich and poor and a greater concentration of poverty in our core cities

5. The region needs to acknowledge and address issues of racial segregation and discrimination

6. Northeast Ohio has a poor image outside the region

7. The local media focuses its reporting on negative news about the region

8. Many people do not have access to recreational, arts and cultural amenities across the region because they need better public transportation

9. There is not enough cooperation between communities within the region

Regional Priorities

What are the most important challenges facing the region?

What potential regional solutions could best address the challenges you identified?
While Northeast Ohio has many great strengths, the region also faces many great challenges. In the area of Cooperation & Governance, Northeast Ohio must find ways to work together and share resources so that we can increase our productivity and our collective strength.

What Sets Thriving Regions Apart?
The Fund for Our Economic Future selected a team of national and local economists to analyze Northeast Ohio’s economy and identify the factors that are most closely related to thriving economies.

Based on their analysis, the economists identified three important attributes of competitive economies in the area of Cooperation & Governance that contribute to a strong regional economy:

- Reduce the number of political jurisdictions in the region
- Decrease the costs associated with maintaining and replacing old housing and infrastructure, like roads and sewers
- Strengthen the region’s tax base so that it can support increased social and public services without needing to raise individual or corporate taxes

Fast Facts
Learn more about the conditions of the region in this area by reading the accompanying Cooperation & Governance Fact Sheet.
Regional Challenges

The following list of regional challenges was identified by citizens, leaders and economists through the Voices & Choices process last Fall. Which challenges do you think are most important for our region to take on? What challenges are missing?

1. Our region has too many local government agencies which leads to duplicated public services and higher taxes

2. Some political leaders resist change because it threatens their power base

3. Communities resist regional cooperation because they fear they will lose their local identity

4. Communities that are doing well fear that cooperation with other communities will bring down their quality of life or quality of services

5. People and businesses are leaving core cities (like Akron, Canton, Cleveland, Lorain and Youngstown) while other communities in the region are struggling to keep pace with population growth

6. Public attitudes in Northeast Ohio tend to resist change, new ideas and new ways of working

7. Not enough people get involved in the community to address public problems

8. The region needs a regional public transportation system

9. The public does not understand the benefits of regional cooperation

10. Local communities compete against each other for the same businesses and jobs rather than cooperating

Regional Priorities

What are the most important challenges facing the region?

What potential regional solutions could best address the challenges you identified?
Revitalizing Northeast Ohio will require everyone to do their part: government, businesses, community groups, schools, foundations and citizens themselves. This fall, Voices & Choices will begin working with leaders and citizens to act on the agenda that emerges from the process. In the meantime, we can all take steps to begin strengthening the region. Below is a list of ideas that people have committed to at previous forums to improve Northeast Ohio.

What Commitments will you make?

Strengthen the Region
- Write a letter to the editor about important regional issues
- Contact local leaders about important regional issues
- Buy local made goods, support Northeast Ohio-owned retailers and restaurants.
- Mentor at least three young people this year so that they don’t feel the need to leave the region
- Make an effort to learn more about regional issues
- Support Northeast Ohio’s downtowns. Commit to going downtown at least five times this year
- Start an internship program at your company – or encourage your company’s management to do so
- Encourage friends and family from elsewhere to visit Northeast Ohio
- Make an effort to visit other parts of Northeast Ohio
- Volunteer in your community
- Act on some of the ideas and priorities that you talked about in your discussion

Advance Voices & Choices
- Make a presentation to a local group about Voices & Choices
- Host your own Community Conversation
- Volunteer to help a Voices & Choices Community Organizer to reach out to others in your community
- Sign up to be a member of the Voices & Choices facilitator network
- Sign up to participate in the Regional Town Meeting
Date of Conversation: ___________________ Name of Conversation Host: ________________________________________________________________

1) Did you learn something during your conversation? □ Yes □ No

2) Rate the quality of this conversation □ Poor □ Fair □ Good □ Excellent

3) Rate the helpfulness of the materials and video for this conversation □ Poor □ Fair □ Good □ Excellent

4) How committed are you to remaining involved with Voices & Choices? □ Not at all committed □ Somewhat committed □ Committed □ Very committed

5) What worked well to make this a good conversation?

____________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________

____________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________

____________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________

6) What could have made this a better conversation?

____________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________

____________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________

____________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________

____________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________

Tear your evaluation form out of this guide. Either hand it in to your host or sent it to:

Voices & Choices
7575 Northcliff Avenue, Suite 201
Brooklyn, OH 44144
216.749.8266 (fax)
The attributes of a competitive regional economy listed on pages 7, 9, 11, 13, and 15 are based on a study of Northeast Ohio’s regional economy conducted on behalf of the Fund for Our Economic Future by the W.E. Upjohn Institute for Employment Research and Kleinhenz & Associates.

The lists of Regional Challenges provided on pages 8, 10, 12, 14, and 16 are based on the results of the Voices & Choices Leadership Workshops conducted in August and September of 2005, the Voices & Choices Regional Town Meeting conducted on November 12, 2005, and the research on the region’s economy cited above.
Thanks to Our Sponsors

The 1525 Foundation
The Abington Foundation
Akron Community Foundation
Ashland County Partnership For Our Economic Future
Ashtabula Partnership
Bober, Markey, Fedorovich & Company
BP Fund of The Cleveland Foundation
The Brentwood Foundation
Brian A. Bass Charitable Fund
Burton D. Morgan Foundation
The Catholic Diocese of Cleveland Foundation
Charter One Bank
The Cleveland Clinic
The Cleveland Foundation
Cleveland Social Venture Partners
Community Foundation of Greater Lorain
D. Robert and Kathleen L. Barber Fund of The Cleveland Foundation
David and Inez Myers Foundation
Deaconess Community Foundation
Elizabeth Ring Mather and William Gwinn Mather Fund
Eva L. and Joseph M. Bruening Foundation
FirstEnergy Foundation
FirstMerit Bank
Forest City Enterprises Charitable Foundation, Inc.
Frances G. and Lewis Allen Davies Endowment Fund of The Cleveland Foundation
Frances G. Shoolroy Donor Advised Fund
Fred A. Lennon Charitable Trust
Frederick W. and Janet P. Dorn Foundation
The GAR Foundation
Generation Foundation
The George Gund Foundation
The George W. Codrington Charitable Foundation
The Golba Foundation
Greater Cleveland Partnership
The Greater Wayne County Foundation, Inc.
Gross Builders
Jeffrey and Stacie Halpern
The Hershey Foundation
Sally and Richard R. Hollington, Jr.
Michael J. Horvitz
The John Huntington Fund for Education
John S. and James L. Knight Foundation
Jones Day
The Joyce Foundation
Katherine and Lee Chilcote Foundation
Kelvin and Eleanor Smith Foundation
Kulas Foundation
Lake Geauga Fund of The Cleveland Foundation
Lloyd L. and Louise K. Smith Memorial Foundation
Mandorel Fund of The Cleveland Foundation
The Martha Holden Jennings Foundation
Meisel Family Foundation
The Mt. Sinai Health Care Foundation
John P. Murphy Foundation
The Murphy Family Foundation
The Nord Family Foundation
The Nordson Corporation Foundation
Northern Ohio Golf Charities Foundation
The Norton Family Foundation
Ohio Savings Charitable Fund
Jane and Jon Outcalt Foundation
Ralph and Esther Warburton Foundation
RPM International, Inc. Corporate Giving Program
Saint Luke’s Foundation
The Sherwick Fund
The Sisters of Charity Foundation of Canton
The Sisters of Charity Foundation of Cleveland
Sky Bank
Stark Community Foundation
The Stocker Foundation
Susan and John Turben Foundation
Thomas and Joann Adler Family Foundation
Thomas H. White Foundation, A KeyBank Trust
Tim and Susan Curtiss Family Fund of The Cleveland Foundation
Vincent K. & Edith H. Smith Memorial Trust
White Hat Management, LLC
Whitehead Family Fund of The Cleveland Foundation
William A. and Margaret N. Mitchell Fund of The Cleveland Foundation
William J. and Dorothy K. O’Neill Foundation
W.K. Kellogg Foundation
The Wuliger Foundation, Inc.