



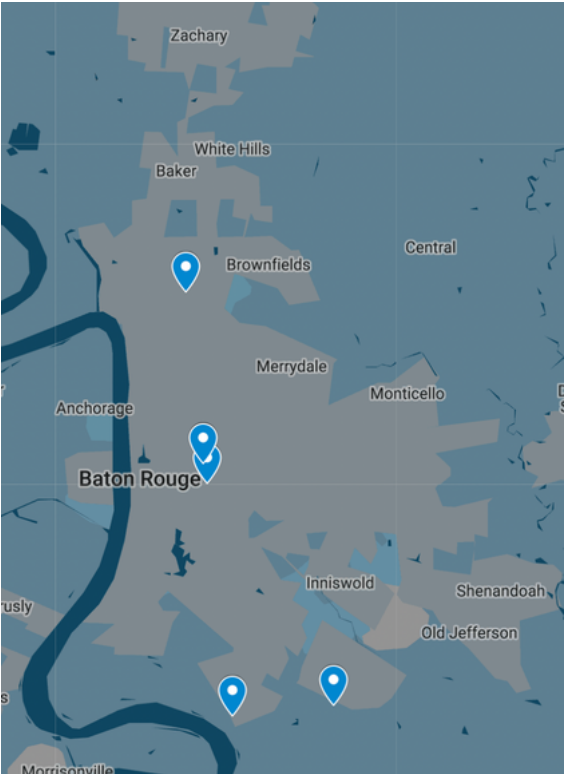
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Village Chats

2022

In 2022, MetroMorphosis conducted **five** Village Chats across Baton Rouge. In these conversations, members from various communities shared their insights into the current state of their communities, as well as their neighborhood aspirations. Many themes emerged from the dialogue.



The four most frequently occurring were matters of:



Stakeholders



Resources



Community Building



Infrastructure



STAKEHOLDERS

Throughout the Village Chats, the conversations often centered on who community members believed to be best suited for creating and sustaining change and bringing their collective vision to fruition. When asked what people and/or organizations they expected to be involved, community members frequently emphasized the roles of major stakeholders in their neighborhoods.

Stakeholders were identified as people and/or organizations with a personal stake in the future success of the neighborhood. These include local churches, schools and educators, law enforcement, and other volunteers and community members.

Churches

In all the Village Chats, respondents called on their churches to make their vision happen. Community members mentioned they believed their local churches to be pillars of support for after school care programs and activities. Participants also suggested churches served as shelter for people experiencing homelessness. Additionally, community members emphasized the importance of the church as a stakeholder in the future vision. During one of the Village Chats, a participant shared that churches are a big instrument in creating community, emphasizing the influential nature of churches within the community and on other community members. Participants also spoke to the utility of churches collaborating with other organizations and community leaders for the betterment of their neighborhoods.

Law Enforcement

Community members spoke frequently about the necessity for increased community-based policing practices, particularly in response to

Schools

Community members believe educators play an influential role in their community vision. From the school board to individual teachers, participants emphasized the importance of schools in the daily lives of youth and the overall success of the community. Participants identified teachers, school administrators, and several specific schools and universities as essential to community progress. Some community members suggested schools serve as a source of volunteers for organizations to engage youth in their neighborhoods. The Village Chat conversations proposed collaboration between BRCC, Southern University, LSU, and local churches, organizations, and community centers.

(1) how they will achieve the community vision and (2) in addressing their safety concerns. Citing their desire



STAKEHOLDERS

for the sheriffs to play a more integral role in collaborating within the neighborhoods, community members talked about law enforcement as a key stakeholder both now and in the future. Moreover, community members were vocal about the violence and crime they have experienced and how this violence is directly tied to law enforcement's need for increased engagement with the community. Participants said the police must do more to stop violence and decrease risks for community members, in turn reducing fear and aiding in meeting the community's vision for the future.

Volunteers and Community Members

Finally, the village chat participants identified themselves as key players in achieving their goals and bringing their vision to reality. Between mentorship, coaching through sports, and community leadership, the participants believe they carry much of the responsibility in co-creating their ideal neighborhoods. Community members include homeowners and their neighbors, parents and their children, and prominent community leaders. During the Village Chats, participants insisted mentors and sports coaches would provide much needed guidance for the youth.



This, coupled with multiple generations engaging and connecting with one another, they believe will contribute to their vision for the future.

Overall, community members in the Village Chats spoke about who the stakeholders are and the important roles they play in the development, maintenance, and future of the community. Across all neighborhoods there was an emphasis on local churches, schools, law enforcement, and community members themselves as the key players in achieving the shared vision for the community.



RESOURCES

The next most frequently mentioned suggestion and critique offered across all Village Chats is the need for additional resources within these communities.

Resources are defined as any asset that can be drawn from to make the neighborhood operate more efficiently.

When visualizing a more vibrant and prosperous neighborhood, community members reflected on what resources would play a role to make this vision a reality. Three resource areas were prominent across the villages: organizational, financial, and educational.

Organizations

Community members believe that different businesses and non-profit organizations are essential to improving and co-creating a successful neighborhood. The comments recorded during the Village Chats reflect ideas that more organizations located within the community could be helpful in meeting the needs of the residents. Organizations that service children and youth seem important to the community vision. Participants mention the need for more daycare centers, extracurricular activities, and after-school programs operating in their communities. They suggested AAU sports, Boys and Girl Scouts, Boys & Girls Club, Gardere Youth Alliance, and children's arts programs (choir, theater, music), just to name a few. Part of their justification for this is to increase "youth programs to avoid trouble," which is often associated with idle time.

Participants also suggest collaborating with non-profit organizations as a resource to help co-create thriving communities. Many of these organizations are majority Black organizations with histories of volunteerism and uplifting the Black community, like 100 Black Men, the

Divine Nine, McKinley Alumni Association, and The Links as well as local Black churches. They also point out that these organizations need better funding to effectively serve their communities, which transitions smoothly into the next area or resources, financial.

Financial Assistance

Community members also spoke about financial resources as a major asset that is lacking in their neighborhoods. They identify that money is needed to cultivate a prosperous neighborhood. Participants also acknowledge poverty and differences in socioeconomic status is a barrier to building a more unified community. They see a link between poverty and the increased crime and homelessness in their neighborhoods.

Therefore, providing some financial assistance to residents - especially families - within the community may improve these conditions. At the same time, community members push for ways to keep higher income residents in the neighborhood as an important part of a thriving neighborhood.



RESOURCES

Participants went on to discuss how different public monies like grants and government tax expenditures can help with improving their neighborhoods. They mention using these funds to assist existing homeowners, promote homeownership, and better funded community organizations. Community members also asked for equitable division of these funds to ensure that their neighborhoods are included. They stated that certain areas of Baton Rouge receive larger shares of public funds regardless of need. Residents also mentioned local fundraising to help raise money to meet the needs of members within their community. Money collected from fundraising efforts could also be used to organize local events in the community to build a more unified neighborhood.

Education

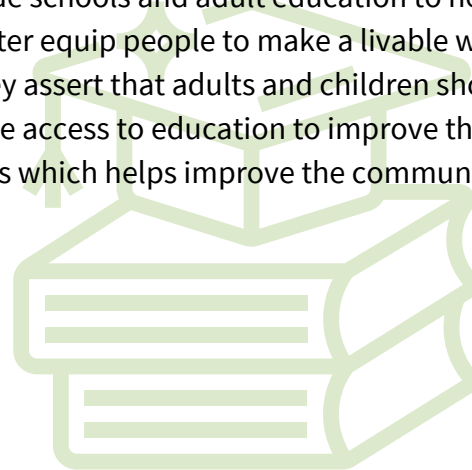
Lastly, there was a large emphasis on education as a resource across all Village Chats. Community members also mentioned education across all questions. They connect lack of and respect for education to the current conditions of their communities. Many believe that education is a key component in a thriving neighborhood. For example, when envisioning a better neighborhood, one participant stated that there would be “more educated people.” Simultaneously, a community that experiences success is better at educating its members (i.e., better schools and more diverse programs).

In general, the call for better educational resources takes many forms among the community members. Some participants suggest that life skills training is an area of education that is lacking in their communities.

They advocated for more classes like:

- Home Economics
- Financial Literacy
- Communication
- Drug Awareness
- Sexual Education
- Community Building

Other community members push for local trade schools and adult education to help better equip people to make a livable wage. They assert that adults and children should have access to education to improve their lives which helps improve the community.





COMMUNITY BUILDING

One of the most frequently mentioned elements in the Village Chats was the importance of community building. Be it concern with the method by which community is built and sustained or obstacles that inhibit community building, participants consistently brought up its vitality to the future vision.

Community building is the process of community members working together to develop or maintain relationships with one another.

Oftentimes in the Village Chats, this materialized in statements like “it takes a village,” which came up very frequently during the conversations across all neighborhoods. Community members emphasized the need for unity within their neighborhoods, prioritizing relationship building, and bridging generational gaps.

Participants reiterated the value of community gatherings and events as a means of encouraging people to come out into the neighborhoods, meet one another, develop relationships, and ultimately, evolve into an ecosystem that invests into the larger community.

While community building does relate to the development of the community generally, participants did also frequently make mention of the ways community building can and has been inhibited.

Participants provided critiques for what they felt served as an obstruction or barrier to the efforts towards community building. Some community members shared their opinions about the damage community separation has caused to Baton Rouge overall. Because of the emergence of individual communities,

community members expressed feelings of disconnect within their neighborhoods, which they say hinders their community building efforts. To this point, participants say they experience barriers to community building because there is no village or sense of community – a direct contrast to what they say is required for adequate community building.

In addition to this, community members suggest an increase in renters also may contribute to the difficulties surrounding community building. Participants contend renters, who are typically not long-term investors in the community, operate as neighbors who do not understand what homeowners are trying to do in terms of community building in the neighborhoods. Moreover, some participants argue renters are frequently moving in and out of the neighborhoods, which weakens the community bonds. Because homeowners perceive renters as less invested in the community, there exists tension that lends itself as an obstruction to community building.



INFRASTRUCTURE

The last thread running through all of the Villages Chat was infrastructure.

Infrastructure means organizational, institutional, and physical structures and facilities that are essential for the operation of a society.

Laws, policies, and practice guide the operation of these structures. In response to all questions, participants made similar comments about infrastructure across Baton Rouge. Participants overwhelmingly discussed desires for improvement in three infrastructure areas: the built environment, the economic environment, and the social environment.

Built Environment

Participants across communities discussed how the built environment plays into their ideas of a thriving community where they could imagine living and working. A major topic within this area is the state of the streets throughout these communities. Community members presented road conditions, especially potholes, as an especially critical area where improvement is needed. Additionally, they suggest that construction of sidewalks, speed bumps, and bike lanes will improve safety for drivers, riders, and pedestrians in their neighborhoods. These improvements will also facilitate the ability to reconnect community members by being safe to navigate within the neighborhood, especially children walking to school in their communities. Tangentially associated with street conditions, participants call for repairing and implementing equipment that makes their streets safer. The most requested improvements involved streetlights and surveillance cameras. Community members speak out about the multiple streetlights in their neighborhoods that need replacing and

repair. They also ask for installation of surveillance cameras throughout their communities. The comments reflect that they believe these enhancements will improve the built environment of their neighborhoods.

In addition to roads, community members talked out housing issues. They pointed out the lack of affordable housing, buyable houses, and housing quality. Participants discussed how rent has skyrocketed, making it hard to find apartments and rental houses that many community members can afford. Additionally, in many areas, heirs' property issues and disinterested owners make it difficult to purchase homes in historical neighborhoods. They also discussed the red tape associated with finding out who owns vacant property to facilitate a purchase and suggest making that process more streamlined. Community residents also talk about issues with drainage and sewage that impacts the housing in their neighborhoods. Comments point to out-of-town property owners and lack of city



INFRASTRUCTURE

assistance for the state of housing quality in these areas. Lastly, community members identified blighted conditions as a major part of realizing the communities that they envision. Participants mention litter, trash removal, and dilapidated properties among the kinds of conditions that exist in their neighborhoods that need to be addressed to increase their enjoyment.

Economic Environment

Community members also pointed to the economic environment of Baton Rouge as a factor that is important to developing a cohesive and flourishing neighborhood. The comments reveal that, across all communities, the broader economic structure has a relationship to each part of the city. One thread discusses the cost of living as an element that impedes their progress towards a better community. Especially in response to things that function as barriers to the vision, participants mention the prices of gas, rent, childcare, and food as ways that the increase in the cost of living is impacting them and building a better community. Community residents also discuss how wages in Baton Rouge fail to keep pace with this higher cost of living. They advocate for better incomes being included in a vision of thriving neighborhoods. Access to higher paying jobs may also be constrained by lack of reliable transportation to get to better jobs located further from these neighborhoods. Participants discussed the current public transportation system as a

barrier to a more livable neighborhood and included a well-managed system as part of their vision. Comments about the current public transit system in Baton Rouge pointed out issues like timeliness, limited coverage area, reduction of routes, and lack of accessible route information. One participant stated, “Small changes could make it attractive.”

Community members also expressed interest in earning and spending their money within their neighborhoods, which is especially important considering the comments about public transportation. They asked for more businesses within their communities that can employ residents. Residents also believe these businesses should be locally owned and should funnel money back into the community. They also asked for an increase in the types of businesses where they do not have to leave their neighborhoods to sustain their households. The most common request is for a grocery store located in each community. They are tired of commuting to purchase food. One comment stated that residents would like a “grocery you don’t have to drive 10 miles for like a Walmart.” Community members made it clear that they would like to keep money circulating in their own communities in their new thriving neighborhood.



INFRASTRUCTURE

Social Environment

Lastly, community residents connect social issues within Baton Rouge to the current state of their communities, which would need to be addressed for their neighborhoods to progress into a better place to live.

Participants specifically reference racism as embedded in the infrastructure of Baton Rouge. Comments identify racism in reference to differential opportunities and people's unfair treatment, which includes job discrimination and voters' experiences at polling places. Community members also advocate for a more equitable distribution of local government resources. They state that neighborhoods with predominantly white residents receive more municipal resources than Black neighborhoods. Participants state that there should not be "differential access" to public goods. Community members believe that "fairness and equality" within Baton Rouge's infrastructure is part of the foundation of a prosperous community. These institutional changes would need buy-in from the city government to facilitate.

It is important to note that although there were threads that ran through all the conversations, **each neighborhood shared aspects that are unique to its specific community.** For example, *Gardere participants discussed cultural tension. Eden Park mentioned issues concerning the generation gap. Scotlandville participants has a unique focus on community memory/history. BRCC participants concentrated a lot of their comments on the*

city's infrastructure. South Baton Rouge participants discussed the community tensions with Louisiana State University and gentrification.

Community Investment

Another key theme that community members discussed across neighborhoods and across questions was the idea of community investment. Community investment in this context involves devoting resources, time, and effort to the community with the expectation of realizing the vision of a vibrant neighborhood. Participants comments reflected the ways the lack of and the increase in community investment is foundational when co-creating thriving living spaces. The comments that reflect the importance of community investment fit into three categories: individual, organizational, and communal.

Individual

Participants in the Village Chats are advocates for individual level community investment. One way they imagine this is through home ownership. Homeownership was discussed as a way to monetarily invest in the community. They believe that more Black homeownership increases the community's tax base; thereby increasing the resources available in their community. Participants also point to homeownership as a way to elicit buy-in from community residents to participate and become



INFRASTRUCTURE

invested in the state of their neighborhoods. Lastly, homeownership is associated with pride in the neighborhood. Community members believe that transitioning renters to homeowners will increase respect for the neighborhood which effects lots of aspects of community living like keeping property in good condition to maintain their value.

Organizational

Community members support community investment by local businesses. They believe that more businesses both big and small should operate in their neighborhoods. *Participants ask that these businesses function as community partners by employing neighborhoods residents.* Comments also stated that businesses should reinvest in the community by donating money back to the communities where they are located. *The main type of business they would like to see integrated with the community is grocery stores.* Not only would these increase access to better food choices but keep money within the community by employing community members.

Participants also believe local organizations, such homeowner associations, should investment more time and resources into the community. This could involve community beautification and community events, like block parties, which participants believe are valuable investments in improving the conditions in the neighborhood.

Communal

As mentioned briefly in the previous section, community members believe that community members should collectively invest more time and attention to improve their neighborhoods. Comments mention keeping their neighborhood and property clean as a collective project that will draw more people to move into and stay in the community. With the assistance of homeowner associations, they also suggest community landscape projects. Additionally, they state that participating in community meetings, a time investment, which informs residents of issues within their communities is important to co-creating the vibrant neighborhoods within which they envision living.

Crime

Participants across all communities expressed concerns about crime during their perspective Village Chats. Crime was discussed in diverse ways, from mentions of different forms of crime to the way crime is an obstacle to the goal of creating a prosperous and livable neighborhood. Community members pointed out how crime and fear of crime is a major concern in their communities.

One major thread across communities discussed the violence within their neighborhoods. Comments about crime



INFRASTRUCTURE

were prevalent when responding to the question, “What is the thing currently happening or in place that gets in the way of the vision?”

The perception is that the violence is actually worsening. In fact, a community member commented that the violence is “worse than Chicago per capita.” Additionally, when responding to the question, “If the vision is realized, what will be different in ten years,” participants discussed less violence and crime-free as part of that vision. *They provided suggestions of collaborations with the Baton Rouge Police department and East Baton Rouge Sheriff’s Office as well as increasing access to needed resources within communities as ways to reduce violence and crime.*

Fear of crime was another topic in these facilitated conversations. Participants discussed how they as residents feared crime. Additionally, they also discussed how outsiders perceive their neighborhoods as places of extreme crime and violence. This exchange among participants was noted when talking about “the thing currently happening or in place that gets in the way of the vision.” Many community members discussed people fear their neighbors, especially young men who they believe are “trying to prove themselves.” Another resident stated that “aren't safe leaving their own yards.” Safety is a large concern across communities included in the Village Chats.

On the other hand, other community members look at the perception of their neighborhoods as “the thing currently happening that gets in the way of the vision.” They discuss how their communities are represented as these exclusively violent places.

Residents argue that is not the case. There is more to their neighborhoods than this one negative aspect. Community members believe that this perception blocks them from receiving resources to improve these areas. One resident stated that “People don’t want to support a high crime area.” They believe that this perception prevents Black people with higher education and income from moving into the community where their presence would also improve the quality of life for everyone in their neighborhoods.

Overall, participants desire safer neighborhoods. They would like to be able to walk down their neighborhood street with their dogs, allow their children to play outside of their fences, and not feel like there is a “war in the streets when the sun goes down.” They believe that crime and the fear of crime impacts bringing in new business, school attendance, and community activities.



CONCLUSION

The comments collected within the five Village Chats should the care and concern that community members have for their neighborhoods. The ideas across communities show that, individually, residents have been thinking through the state of their neighborhoods. They also show that collectively they have a lot of the same revelations and suggestions about how to make these communities better. The pride in being a resident of these different communities was obvious as well as their distress about their neighborhoods' current conditions.

