

Summary Memo
Round 1 of Public Engagement
March 5, 2021

This document summarizes the first round of public engagement for All in! Ashtabula County, which was conducted between January 19 through February 12, 2021. Input was gathered in the following ways:

- **Virtual Workshops** - Three (3) “Focus on the Future” virtual workshops were held on 1/19/21, 1/20/21 and 1/22/21 at different times of the day to accommodate schedules. In addition, a special session was facilitated with LEADERSHIP Ashtabula County’s Youth Leadership group in order to specifically gather insight of younger individuals.
- **Online Engagement** - An online survey and mapping activity that was available from 1/19/21 through 2/12/21.

The memo includes the following:

1. Purpose
2. Outreach and Publicity
3. Approach
4. Results
5. Participation and Satisfaction

1. Purpose

Ashtabula County launched a process to update its comprehensive plan in November 2020, called All in! Ashtabula County. The County’s last comprehensive plan was adopted in 2003. One of the key inputs to the process is insight from the community. Through the first round of public engagement, multiple opportunities were designed to provide the platform for anyone who cares about the future of Ashtabula County and to help inform the plan. The engagement lays the groundwork for development of the plan’s preliminary goals, objectives and recommendations as well as its future character and land use plan.

*“I thought this format was well done and thought-provoking.
Thank you!”*

Engagement participant

2. Outreach and Publicity

Extensive outreach was conducted to spread the word broadly about the opportunity to participate in the public engagement opportunities. The Team capitalized on existing networks through community groups, organizations, churches, educational institutions and local governments for outreach. A press release was distributed to local media outlets, a website news post announced the engagement opportunities, and interviews with key stakeholder groups were conducted during this phase (documented separately). Outreach efforts included the following:

- Dozens of organizations or individuals connected to networks of interest were contacted about the opportunity, including schools, nonprofit organizations, interest groups (e.g. Farm Bureau, business groups, etc.), local governments and others.
- Multiple email announcements and invites for engagement opportunities were distributed to members in the community via email with a request to distribute widely.
- Over 1,000 rack cards promoting the engagement opportunities were printed for distribution throughout the County.
- Media outlets reached included The Star Beacon and Jefferson Gazette.

3. Approach

All in! Ashtabula County's first round of public engagement included two parts.

Virtual Workshops

Three (3) virtual workshops were held on 1/19/21, 1/20/21 and 1/22/21 at various times throughout the day. Meetings were held virtually to accommodate COVID-19 advisory warnings. The workshop included an overview presentation about the planning process and conditions and trends highlights that will inform the plan. Activities included interactive polling and small group discussion. Each small group contained a maximum of ten (10) individuals per 'breakout' room and discussion was facilitated by County staff or a member of the consultant team. Workshop participants were then encouraged to complete the accompanying online engagement activities, found on the All in! Ashtabula County project website at www.AllinAshtabula.com.

Following from the virtual workshops and online engagement, the planning team assessed participation relative to the demographic make-up of the County and place of residence. The team found that younger adults were underrepresented and scheduled a separate session with LEADERSHIP Ashtabula County's Youth Leadership group.

Online Engagement

Online engagement included two main exercises: Open-Ended Questions about the County and a Strong / Weak Places online mapping activity.

The open-ended questions were:

1. Which aspects of Ashtabula County do you value most?
2. What do you wish the County would focus on for the next 5-10 years?
3. What is the County's biggest challenge?

The Strong / Weak Places mapping exercise asked participants to identify strong and weak specific places in the County on a digital map and to explain why these places were selected as either strong or weak.

4. Results

This section summarizes input collected. It includes information from open-ended questions asked online, an online mapping activity and the public workshops.

Online Open-Ended Questions

The following section includes major themes and ideas provided in response to the following questions:

1. Which aspects of Ashtabula County do you value most?
2. What do you wish the County would focus on for the next 5-10 years?
3. What is the County's biggest challenge?

This section draws from a database of every comment made through the online engagement (in participants' own words) and is organized around themes and sub-topics. Percentages in parentheses indicate what proportion of comments collected related to the topic. (Note: total percentages totals more than 100% because some comments pertain to more than one topic.)

Which aspects of Ashtabula County do you value most?

Natural Resources/Outdoor Recreation (48% of comments pertaining to this question)

- Preserving the County's abundance of natural resources, including its rivers, lakeshores and recreational opportunities was important for many of the participants.
- In addition to capturing nearly half of the total response themes for this question (48%), Lake Erie was signaled out as a beloved feature (18%), while the County's various parks, trails, and opens spaces garnered ten percent (10%) of total responses.

Identity, Character, and Community (22% of comments pertaining to this question)

- The County's identity, character, and sense of community was one of the most repeated themes for this question.
- Many in the Ashtabula community value the County's small-town feel, its rural lifestyle, and its community charm.
- The County's geographical location (6%) and its overall affordability (4%) were identified as positive assets.

Economic Development (11% of comments pertaining to this question)

- The County's approach to its economic development earned a total of eleven percent (11%) of combined responses.

- Important aspects mentioned included the County's investment in small businesses (6%), its balanced approach to growth (2%), and its commitment to ensuring future prosperity for the County (2%).

Miscellaneous

- Additional highlights included the County's agriculture (5%) and its educational opportunities (2%).
- The categories Health and Safety and Infrastructure and Transportation earned a combined one percent (1%) of responses.

What do you wish the County would focus on for the next 5-10 years?

Economic Development/Activities (19% of comments pertaining to this question)

- Many participants want to see additional economic development initiatives pursued by the County in the next 5-10 years.
- Investing in more jobs, diversifying industry, and prioritizing County-based activities for families and individuals were three common themes mentioned in this category.
- In addition to expanding its economic agenda, some participants thought the County should focus on growing its tourism industry (8%), attracting younger people through jobs and diversifying industry (6%), and enhancing existing educational opportunities (5%).

Services, Infrastructure and Maintenance (26% of comments pertaining to this question)

- Maintaining County-wide services were an important theme for this question.
- Participants want the County to focus on expanding/maintaining its existing infrastructure (8%) and focus on redeveloping vacant or underutilized parcels within the County (9%).
- Achieving sufficient broadband access for the entire County, especially for those in the more rural areas, was a key issue some participants wanted addressed (5%).
- In addition to an emphasis on maintenance, participants stressed the cleanliness of the County as a focus for the future (4%).

Environmental Stewardship (13% of comments pertaining to this question)

- Maintaining the County's environmental stewardship through the preservation of its natural resources (6%) and maintaining/creating new parks (6%) were important for many who saw the County's natural resources as valuable assets.
- Some participants (1%) wanted the County to focus on additional sustainability measures, such as investing in renewable sources of energy production. Renewable energy production could provide an additional means of employment opportunity, as well.

Quality of Life Characteristics (9% of comments pertaining to this question)

- Improving the quality of life for County residents through social service programs (6%) and achieving greater accessibility to economic opportunities County-wide and safety (2%) were important initiatives to participants.
- Recognizing and enhancing the County's diversity (1%) while improving its health services were additional themes in this category.

Miscellaneous (7% of comments pertaining to this question)

- Improving the diversity of housing stock (3%), providing sufficient County-wide transportation options, including additional bike and walking infrastructure (2%), and supporting the County's agricultural industry (2%) were additional themes for this question.

What is the County's biggest challenge?

Attitude & Mindset (15% of comments pertaining to this question)

- Cultivating a positive-growth mindset and an attitude of pushing 'beyond the status quo' was an important theme for participants answering this question.
- In addition, more effective County-wide communication and leadership (2%), tackling systemic racism (1%), and being aware of potential extremism (less than 1%) were identified as potential solutions to challenges.

Jobs (12% of comments pertaining to this question)

- Attracting employers, sustaining a workforce, and diversifying job opportunities were all important themes for participants answering this question.
- In support of expanding job opportunities, investing in all parts of the County earned ten percent (10%) of responses for 'the biggest challenge.'
- The loss of younger people worried some participants (5%), as well as the need to diversify/change industry reliance (5%) and the County's aging population (1%).

Socio-cultural Concerns (29% of comments pertaining to this question)

- Providing County-wide social services and tackling reported drug addiction were repeated themes (11%), as well as addressing poverty in the County (8%).
- More investment in the County's educational opportunities (4%) and a diversity of housing opportunities (3%) were additional themes identified that could enhance the County's quality of life.
- Safety concerns earned three percent (3%) of comments raised for this question.

Upkeep of County (19% of comments pertaining to this question)

- Addressing vacant lots and “blight” within the County was of some concern (6%) to participants.
- Closing gaps in County-wide broadband access (2%) and transportation and infrastructure needs (4%) were also identified themes.
- Preserving the County’s abundant natural resources (3%) and remedying pollution (1%) were additional challenges presented by participants.

Miscellaneous (4.5% of comments pertaining to this question)

- In addition to the diversified themes above, some participants thought that recovering from COVID-19 (1%) would provide unforeseen challenges for the County’s future growth.
- The County’s overall geographical size (1%), the expected growth in tourism (1%), and its lack of winter activities (1%) were also identified as potential challenges.
- Less than one percent of participants thought that government regulation was too strict and posed challenges for future growth, and that the lack of healthcare services could pose challenges for future growth.

Online Strong / Weak Places Map

Below is the summary of the Strong / Weak Places exercise made available on the *All in! Ashtabula County* website during the engagement period. The summary includes a number of over-arching themes that emerged through the exercise.

An opportunities map based in part on the public engagement conducted to date will be developed and made available at www.AllinAshtabula.com.

Strong places were defined as places that are working well, reflect well on the community and should be protected/maintained, or places that represent good precedents that could be replicated elsewhere. Weak places were defined as places that need to be improved or changed, places at risk or are threatened and need attention, or places that have significant, untapped opportunity.

The following are some of the top Strong and Weak places identified:

Strong Places

- Geneva on the Lake was mentioned by many participants as a strong place because there has been a dedicated effort to build more restaurants and entertainment activities, for both tourists and those who live in the County, and it’s a fond “summer destination” for many folks.
- Bridge Street was identified because of the variety of thriving, independent businesses that make it a fun, engaging destination for many people in the County.
- Conneaut Harbor / lakefront was noted for its atmosphere and activity with future opportunity.

- Jefferson was identified as a strong place in the County because of its unique, attractive offerings, such as its village shops and restaurants, and its “small town” charm that appeals to many residents.
- Wine Country was seen as a success story, in terms of it being an attractive place for both tourists and County residents.
- Several beaches, parks and trailways throughout the County were mentioned as strong places, including Walnut Beach for its lake access and its “beautiful sunsets,” and the Pymatuning Lake region for its diverse recreational opportunities.

Weak Places

- Portions of Conneaut were identified as needing more “beautification” and investment opportunities. Perception of crime was reported as an issue.
- Pierpont, Dorset, Austinburg, and some other smaller towns were identified as weak due to lack of investment and a deteriorated physical environment in places.
- Ashtabula City was seen by some as a weak place due to the number of abandoned or run-down structures, creating “eyesores” in parts of the City. Some also noted a lack of healthy food options (“food desert”).
- Several industrial/former industrial sites were identified as weak because of their negative aesthetics and environmental impacts.
- Certain rural parts of the County were identified as weak due to lack of sewer, internet and amenities that are present in other parts of the County.

Workshop Input

During the public workshops, participants were asked some online polling questions and had the opportunity to participate in small group discussion. Below is a summary of some of the key input collected at the workshops.

- Participants were asked, “When you think about the future, what is most needed to keep Ashtabula County a desirable place to live?” and were able to choose two options from a list. By far the most common response was jobs (84 responses), followed by good schools (41), amenities and things to do (34), infrastructure (33) and rural/scenic beauty (33), attractive communities (25), quality housing options (20) and other (6).
- Participants named the County’s wineries, Bridge Street, Geneva on the Lake, the Beach/Lake/Harbor and covered bridges as some of the places they most often take visitors in the County.
- Participants engaged in small-group discussion in response to the prompt “As you look out ten to twenty years from now, what do you believe are the greatest opportunities for Ashtabula County?” Following are some of the common themes that emerged through the discussion.
 - The unique agricultural opportunities presented by the specific climatic and natural features in the County, especially wine growing, are a strong asset that should be protected.
 - There is a desire for better improved internet access throughout the County.
 - The rural lifestyle of the County while still having access to metro areas was considered a strong advantage.

- Intentional efforts to promote sustainability and a “green economy” (cleaner industry, alternative energy, etc.) should be pursued.
- There is untapped potential for additional tourism, including improving and promoting trailways and lake/lakefront recreation.
- The County has phenomenal natural and recreational resources, which should be preserved, enhanced and promoted.
- Support for entrepreneurship is growing with some successful programs in the County but should be further advanced.
- There is a mismatch between jobs and education / training.
- Vacant and deteriorating buildings in certain parts of the County should be addressed.
- The County should embrace diversity and be welcoming to all people regardless of race, ethnicity, sexual orientation or background.
- Support for older adults, including housing opportunities, is needed.
- Strategies to retain and attract younger people should be pursued.
- Small farms should be supported and there may be a way in which they can help address local food insecurity and the popularity of farm-to-table concepts.
- Good jobs are critical to the County’s economy in the long term.
- Ashtabula County has a good quality of life in many ways, including a small town feel and affordable lifestyle; this should be promoted.
- Focusing development around existing infrastructure and already developed areas will help to preserve farmland and open space.
- There is concern about rising drug abuse.
- A focused approach to economic development should be taken that takes advantage of assets (such as the airport).

5. Participation and Satisfaction

Participation in the workshops and online met high expectations for the process, with over 300 people participating in the first round of engagement. Participants who completed the online engagement activities were asked to fill out an exit questionnaire about their experience and themselves. Of those who visited the website to contribute their input, 135 people completed the exit questionnaire. The following insight is based on these responses.

Key Takeaways regarding participation and satisfaction

- Approximately 1,700 unique individuals have visited the project website since its launch in November 2020, which served as the ‘hub’ for all of the engagement activities and provides accompanying information on the entire planning process.
- Over 700 unique comments were collected from the online engagement activities (including comments submitted in the Open-Ended Questions, the Strong / Weak Places mapping exercise, and general comments received by planning staff via email).
- Most of the survey respondents were referred to the engagement activities via Social Media (41.5%) and/or were referred directly by a friend or colleague (38.5% word of mouth/personal invitation).
- Based on the exit questionnaire results, a diverse range of ages participated in the online engagement, with the most representation from those who are 35-44 years.

- Every income bracket was represented on the survey, but over half (54.8%) of self-reported survey respondents earn more than \$55,000 a year in annual household income. This is 8 percentage points above the latest ACS data for the County (46.8%).
- Twenty-two ZIP codes were recorded for the survey, with 74.1% of survey respondents reporting that they own property within the County. There was an underrepresentation in participants from the southern part of the County and fewer comments on the interactive map from the area.
- Participants were asked in one of the survey questions how long they have lived in the County (if they do). There was representation from both longtime and newer residents, and the highest category for years lived in County was 20-29, accounting 22.2% of respondents.
- The educational attainment of survey respondents skewed high for this round of engagement. A self-reported 59.3% of respondents have earned a bachelor's degree or higher, compared to 14.3% of the County, based on the latest available ACS data.
- 88.9% of respondents said they would continue in the planning process. For those who answered "No," some of the reasons stated were that participants did not have enough time, lived too far away, or believed they were too old to continue participating.

In consultation with County staff and the Steering Committee, an effort will be made to address other demographic, geographic or other groups that were underrepresented in this first phase of engagement as the process moves forward.

"I love Ashtabula, and I want to see good things for this community!"

survey participant