

City of Bellbrook Citizens' Lifestyle Perceptions Focus Group Session Results

On February 2nd and 20th, 2010, two different groups of citizens from the City of Bellbrook participated in a focus group session to discuss their perceptions of their community and how the community affects their way of life. Five citizens attended on February 2nd and 15 individuals attended on February 20th. An effort was made to attract citizens who had different lengths of tenure in the community, represented equally each gender, represented different marital status, and either had children living in their home under the age of 18 or not. Phone numbers were selected from the voter registry with data augmented by other databases used by the Wright State University research team.

The topic of the focus group sessions pertained to the lifestyle choices, preferences, and experiences of City residents. Two other focus group sessions were held with residents of Sugarcreek Township. The ultimate objective is to summarize results of each communities' focus group sessions, and then to identify where there are overlaps and differences in lifestyle.

Discussions about lifestyle resulted in three major themes, which will be discussed next, followed by viewpoints regarding how a merger may affect the lifestyles in the community, perceptions of differences in lifestyles between the two communities, and a brief summary. The three themes are:

1. Physical and natural environment
2. Cultural and social wellbeing
3. Development and cost of living

Physical and Natural Environment

Perhaps not surprisingly (given the beauty in this area), physical and natural environments are the attributes that residents like the most about living in Bellbrook and which compel residents to remain residents of the community. People treasure the small town atmosphere and convenience thereof, its quaint downtown and walkability, its proximity to major cities like Cincinnati and Columbus, its access to major arteries, its openness, mature trees, large lot sizes, and its quiet setting. Natural assets described by residents include the Sugarcreek Reserve, green open space, and sighting deer in the back yard.

Cultural and Social Wellbeing

Such attributes engender a sense of community and safety—a place where children can play in the front yard and where neighbors know and watch out for each other. The number one asset impacting wellbeing is the schools. There is truly a sense of community ownership and pride regarding the schools. Residents were supportive of the schools whether they had school age children or not. Residents noted the excellence of the school system, and how important that is to property values.

Neighborhoods are also important to residents who like the uniqueness, quality, and diversity of homes that are not of the “cookie cutter” variety. Residents recognized that Bellbrook offers levels of housing for everyone. The full continuum of housing choice is perceived as available in Bellbrook, and everything from affordable to upscale housing is within walking distance of downtown. These residents perceive that Bellbrook has done a good job of creating a housing mix, where there is a balance of high end and affordable housing.

Perhaps as a result of a good housing mix, several members in the second focus group mentioned the “working class” culture in Bellbrook, wherein all types of mechanics, electricians, and other sole proprietors are present. And the community makes an effort to support these local businesses.

Bellbrook residents describe their community’s lifestyle this way:

In the summer months, neighbors are outside most of the time in their front yards. Neighbors visit with each other and watch the kids play in the cul-de-sac. But there’s enough space between houses that you don’t have to socialize if you don’t want to. We know each other by first name, have cookouts, are concerned about one another, and help each other. Garage doors are open all the time.

Cost of Living and Development

When residents were asked, what drew you to Bellbrook in the first place, many of the themes already described above were restated. However, another theme was made concrete. The type of home, value of home, the land you could purchase, the lot size—each of these was available in a lower price range than comparable communities. One person said they had looked in Washington Township, Kettering, Sugarcreek, Dayton, Huber Heights, Fairborn, Miamisburg and Germantown (around the year 2001). This resident could not find the house, price, lot, conveniences, and trees in any of these places compared to the value of what he could purchase in Bellbrook. Other residents concurred. Several of the focus group participants mentioned the value they could obtain while at the same time having excellent schools in a small rural community. This combination just couldn’t be beat elsewhere in the greater Dayton region, especially given the absence of a city income tax.

Residents also discussed the good government services they receive, especially roads, fire and police protection. Residents in the first focus group session remarked on the City’s choice over the years to live within its means, to manage its budget well and remain frugal. Bellbrook is considered by participants in the first focus group to have grown in a controlled, regulated, and planned way. They also mentioned that City government there has a low profile and has had stable leadership so that things are not constantly in a state of flux.

This cost of living discussion spurred concerns about what will be in the future. Residents in the first focus group session were concerned that new housing developments are lowering the value of existing homes. Most of the participants in the first focus group were also concerned that if a merger were to occur, that they would lose their great city services, which would have to cover a much larger territory. There is a perception by some that Sugarcreek has not been as frugal, has not lived as well within its means, and that they don't take care of their roads as well (a participant in the focus group session stated that the county is responsible for taking care of township roads). If development continues, Bellbrook residents in the first focus group perceive that their own city services will be stretched ever thinner, as the City would have to respond to police reports and emergency calls to Wilmington Pike. "Police may not be able to respond to a problem in the city because something is going on in the Wal Mart parking lot. We are used to getting very good service in the 3 square miles." And a big concern is development on Wilmington Pike – "putting in traffic lights, widening roads" – changing the character of the community.

Viewpoints on a Merged Community and its affect on Lifestyles

Residents in the first focus group session were concerned that "increasing the [geographic] area by 10 times and doubling the population" will result in lowered quality of government services. Many residents in this first session perceived that Sugarcreek would be the "winner" in this sense; obtaining better services in a merged community than they have now (they cited snow removal on roads as an example).

On the other hand, a couple of residents in the first session could not envision any other alternative to protecting the open space surrounding Bellbrook. Their view was that Sugarcreek land would be on the fringe of Centerville, Kettering, or Xenia, and so would be less important to those cities and they would develop while not caring about the land. These residents believed that the natural environment in Sugarcreek would be more important to residents of Bellbrook, that the two communities have been intertwined for some time, and have a more similar lifestyle than Sugarcreek would have with those other listed cities. One thought shared by these Bellbrook residents was that perhaps a compromise could be sought and just merge land close to the City of Bellbrook so as to protect the open space most proximate to the City.

The counterpoint to this point is the belief by some that using the "chipping away" at the land argument is just to instill fear. And that so far, the Merger Commission has not made clear what the costs and benefits of a merger would be.

Another point of view was raised at the February 20th focus group session, and that was made by a couple of participants who argued that Bellbrook cannot survive as an island. They pointed out that a community cannot continue to provide great services, great homes, great schools, and at comparably lower prices if the City stagnates. Soon into this discussion, all participants in this second group articulated a consensus on these views. Participants of the second focus group pointed out that to remain viable in the long term, the City would need to diversify its tax base or else residents, with only a few

commercial properties contributing to the tax base, couldn't sustain the quality in the community looking 5 to 10 years out.

There was also a view shared in this second focus group session of the appearance of a lack of government leadership or a lack of clout inherent in Township government that caused the Dille property owners to seek out Centerville. "Quiet little towns have to get more powerful." This group believes that proactive discussions should be held with land owners, and more flexibility should be considered. Furthermore, this group believes that the quality of life in both of these communities hinges on a strong governing body, one that has and wants to hear new ideas. This momentum will be important to commercial development. And the group is not convinced that the Bellbrook governing body is suited for the task given the lack of vision and investment in Bellbrook's downtown.

Perceptions of Substantial Lifestyle Differences between the Two Communities

Two participants at the first focus group didn't see differences between the two communities that could not be overcome. In fact, they said that residents in some newer plats in Sugarcreek may not even know that they aren't Bellbrook residents. The other three residents in the first session basically could see no pluses in merging and left it at that.

Participants at the second focus group do not believe their lifestyles would change much if they were to merge with Sugarcreek Township. They recognize that Sugarcreek residents will have issues with "zoning, lot size, animals, and open burn laws." The two communities will have to discern "where they do and don't marry up well." But overall, the sense is that residents in the two communities treasure many of the same natural and physical assets.

The fears about merging, according to this group, are due to the lack of information. This is becoming an older community, and people on fixed incomes are nervous about fiscal impacts. Participants believe that the initial costs may be substantial, but that this is a long term view, and therefore, we have to know the short and long-term costs and revenues. There was also a sense of urgency in this focus group that the land grab is underway and development pressures are continuing on Feedwire Road. There's a belief that there will be greater control over that development if the two jurisdictions join together.

Summary

From the first focus group session—three of the five participants in the first focus group felt that they only had something to lose in a merged community. They expect that the cost of providing government services will go up while the quality of those services will go down as services are stretched to meet a much larger geography. The two other first session participants want to see data before they decide. Their views were that, in terms of lifestyle, Bellbrook is in a better position than any other municipality to protect the physical and natural assets that are important to both communities.

At the end of the first focus group, one member suggested and then all agreed, that one of the reasons they came to Bellbrook was the schools. A merger would prevent “chipping away” which would decrease the school base which in turn would decrease revenues.

From the second focus group session and from two participants at the first session—this merger study is a viable opportunity for Bellbrook to move past stagnation and to be proactive about how growth happens to maximize the tax base and sustain the quality of life. The second focus group has no qualms about losing quality of life under a merged scenario. And they believe that they have similar views on animals, the burn rule, etc., that they can meld together with Sugarcreek Township.