

## **Sugarcreek Township Citizens' Lifestyle Perceptions Focus Group Session Results**

On February 4<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup>, 2010, two different groups of citizens from Sugarcreek Township participated in a focus group session to discuss their perceptions of their community and how the community affects their way of life. About fifteen citizens attended both sessions, for a total of 30. 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 Township residents. Two other focus group sessions were held with residents of the City of Bellbrook. 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**

By far, Sugarcreek Township residents live and remain in the Township because of the physical and natural environment. Example comments include: “the rural character, beauty of the land, and people keep their places up”; “the open space, the ability to move around, the space between neighbors, and the personal liberty of the space”; “being able to watch nature, deer, bobcats, and hawks.” “I want the darkness—not so many lights around me.” Others are lifelong citizens and one was a third generation citizen. It should be noted that the Township has a range of citizens from those who own 100 acres and more to those who live in a subdivision with less than 1 acre lots.

Township residents also appreciate the fact that “we can get anywhere fast like the airport or shopping in a matter of minutes; we have great accessibility.”

Residents describe the lifestyle of their community as “country living like hunting and target shooting”; “having friends over and having a bonfire”; farm fences, the ability to wake up to chickens, seeing my neighbors' horses or cows”; “you can do anything and your neighbor won't see;” “privacy, solitude, spread out, flexible, not imposing on other people, can basically do whatever you want.”

## **Cultural and Social Wellbeing**

Sugarcreek Township residents also appreciate manmade assets in the City and the Township such as the schools, the downtown and its little shops, the houses, the post office, and the library. “Fantastic school system combined with rural character, unbeatable. It’s not easy to find both.” One person noted that there is great parental involvement in the schools. People in the Township and the City take pride in their schools. “This isn’t true in every community.” One person speaking for many said it is great to “have the downtown in our reach, close to everything, but with a very rural feel. We have the benefit of both—downtown and open space.”

These residents also like the freedom of a township, where there are fewer rules and restrictions. Quotes include: “I don’t have people telling me what I can drive, what not to do, what animals I can have”; “the rules are different, people can park on my lawn and I wouldn’t be able to do that in the city.”

Government services are perceived as being excellent in the Township. There is a perception that there is less crime in the Township than the City, due to density. Police in the Township know who is supposed to be around and who is not.

Several participants at the second focus group session stated that they have little faith in the leadership in either jurisdiction. “We would need a better political system if we merged.” (Participants provided the example of a 200 page document of new regulations developed by the Township, wherein the length of the document precludes citizen comprehension.) Another participant insisted that at least in the township form of government, major decisions have to go through a public hearing process. “It takes months for changes to happen and they have to be done in the open.”

## **Development and Cost of Living**

The most pressing comments, as the focus group discussion moved from what we like about living in the Township to how can we preserve our lifestyle, were like this—“We want to protect our lifestyle, preserve what we have here; we want to protect our land and property value, preserve our investment and quality of life, protect our community.” In the second Sugarcreek focus group session, one person said that Sugarcreek could take better charge of preserving its land if government leaders would meet with major land owners and treat them as important customers, and doing what they can to ensure that they are satisfied customers. In this person’s view, that action would discourage landowners from seeking annexation to other cities.

Several participants in the second focus group mentioned that there is a lot of burden on the property tax since there is no income tax. They stated that the burden is getting to be so great that “it is becoming difficult to afford to live where I raised my kids.”

Others said, the “tax base is continuing to climb but it doesn’t need to (spoken in the context of development on Feedwire Road). We are losing the quality of life that was our

reason for living here.” “There is continual approval for development on less than 5 acre lots. Our quality of life is going downhill already and we don’t see it stopping.”

### **Viewpoints on a Merged Community and its affect on Lifestyles**

Participants of the focus groups provided one quote after the other in response to the question, “Would a merged community influence the quality of your community and your lifestyle?” “How can we protect our community from being annexed?” “How can we let cities be cities and country be country?”

“A merger is basically an annexation.” “A merged community will give Bellbrook the right to develop the land.” “The land would not stay rural; it would slowly be developed.” “The land would be used for the community good but not for an individual’s good.” “The purpose of a city is to grow. If a city has a lot of land then they will use that land for anything.”

“I’m not trusting what people tell me because it won’t be that way. They will say we have certain rules and then they will come back and say well actually you don’t have this right and they’ll take them away from us.” Basically, “we cannot preserve the township lifestyle if we merge.”

“We have a lot of Greene County services and we would lose those under a merger.” “Government services would decline because there will be no money to pay for it.” Or “we will pay a lot more for our services.”

Most participants felt that Bellbrook had everything to gain in a merger. “They will no longer be land-locked; they would have lots of land and they would use that land; they’ll be able to increase their tax base.” Housing values in the City are lower and taxes are higher. “In a merger, they’ll be sucking my money into that area.”

A couple of participants in each township focus group said, “If we have to merge with anyone, I want it to be Bellbrook.” Probing into that perception, the thought behind it is that Bellbrook is more proximate to the land than other cities’ downtowns would be and therefore would be more vested. “We know the people, they are our neighbors and friends, and our children go to the same schools.” “Bellbrook is a small town like us.”

“Bellbrook is our community too. Township and City impact each other. We have to be a community where we talk to each other; work together. This will keep the quality of our lives up.”

### **Perceptions of Substantial Lifestyle Differences between the Two Communities**

Bellbrook “is ordinance driven—can’t burn trash in open areas, no bonfires, two pets.” “Bellbrook residents want neighbors and kids to have playmates close by, they want a community with young families.” They want police and proximity; they want safety and security.” “They want street lights, sidewalks, and want to walk to everything.” “They

too have a casual lifestyle.” “Bellbrook [resident] sees that they have the best of both worlds – rural atmosphere and city lifestyle. Bellbrook residents see themselves as living in the country but they don’t have to support the lifestyle with higher property taxes.” Some Township residents used to live in Bellbrook. They “enjoyed their time in Bellbrook, had open fires with permission from the fire department.”

Sugarcreek residents believe that there are major differences between township and city living. “If you like to be close to residents then Bellbrook is for you. If you want space between neighbors, then the Township is for you.” “Bellbrook has more of a community feel.” “If you live in Sugarcreek Township, then you have some plats that can give you that same lifestyle as Bellbrook.” “Sugarcreek has something for everyone, while Bellbrook has one lifestyle option.”

### **Summary**

By the end of the first focus group session, participants were brainstorming amongst themselves how to preserve their land but not have to be annexed. “Can we incorporate ourselves? Can we purchase property?” were the questions being asked. Basically, neither focus group saw anything to be gained by them, only to be lost, in a merger. Some participants’ voices rose as they expressed what they had to lose in terms of the lifestyle they love. The only open question asked was, “Where is the value proposition? No one has articulated the value proposition to us.”