

Belmont Cragin Quality-of-Life Planning First Community Meeting, June 17, 2015

More than 200 community residents, business owners, students, CPS parents, elected officials and other stakeholders in Belmont Cragin came out on Wednesday June 17 for the first community meeting for the neighborhood's quality-of-life planning process.

They learned about how the plan is being created. They heard about issues and opportunities for the future of the neighborhood. Most importantly, they gave their ideas about how to make Belmont Cragin stronger—from relief from rising property taxes to better information about local doctors, from early childhood programs to clean up on the neighborhood's commercial corridors.

“What do you want to see changed in this community? What do you want for our community?” asked James Rudyk, Jr., executive director of the Northwest Side Housing Center (NWSHC), to kick off the introductory session. As with all the conversations for the meeting, his words were immediately translated into Spanish, to allow for everyone to participate—especially important because of the diversity of the crowd, both ethnically and in age, with a community-wide mix of young parents with their kids, seniors, teens and more.

The meeting also attracted a number of local elected officials and their representatives. Special guests included Ald. Gilbert Villegas (36th ward), Ald. Chris Taliaferro (29th Ward), and representatives from the offices of Cook County Commissioner Luis Arroyo, Jr., State Representative Luis Arroyo and State Representative Will Guzzardi.

Assets and Challenges

When participants first arrived at Steinmetz High School for the evening meeting, volunteers guided them to a set of “vision boards,” each with a half dozen local institutions that had been identified by one of the five planning taskforce's issue groups: health and seniors, economic development, affordable housing, youth development, and education.

At the start of the meeting, residents could put down stickers on the vision boards that represented a vote for the item—ranging from a supermarket on Fullerton Avenue to ESL classes at Erie Neighborhood House—as an asset to the community or a challenge. They also were able to write in comments or nominate other local assets or ideas (a summary of key ideas is in the issue area section, below).

Residents then filled the school's performing auditorium to standing-room only for a presentation by NWSHC, which is convening the planning process, and

representatives from Teska Associates, the consulting firm assisting with the quality-of-life plan. They explained about the planning process and gave some statistics and facts to provide the big picture on where Belmont Cragin is today. For example, the community's population rose by 1,000 people from 2000 to 2010 (1 percent), while the city as a whole lost 7 percent of its population. That has driven up demand for housing, and made it more difficult to find local affordable housing.

The team talked about Belmont Cragin's strong assets: There are more than 12,000 jobs in the community, and it is served by more than 20 public and private schools, many of which are highly rated by CPS. And it is also facing challenges: 27 percent of residents were uninsured in 2012, for instance, and the number of households in poverty increased from 8 percent in 1990 to 21 percent in 2010.

"We've got some great resources here. There are great parks, an engaging Chicago Public Library branch," said Vanessa Valentin, the director of community organizing at NWSHC, as she discussed youth development. "Belmont Cragin is full of youth, though, and we need to be sure we can provide enough resources for them."

Big Ideas, Issue by Issue

After the welcoming presentation, the crowd split into three smaller groups and set up in the school's small auditorium and cafeteria for three break-out sessions. Pairs of volunteers led bi-lingual discussions on economic development and housing, education and youth, and health and seniors, rotating from group to group, so that in the end, every participant could hear and give input on all of the issues.

"It's very important to our process for us to hear all your thoughts," explained Gracelia Guzman with PrimeCare Community Health, who was co-facilitator for the health and senior presentations. "There is plenty of time in the planning process for your ideas to be incorporated."

Each discussion started with a presentation from the group of dedicated stakeholders who have been brainstorming key goals around each issue and ideas for strategies to reach these goals. Participants gave their opinions on what worked and what was missing—everything from big picture changes across the community to day-to-day concerns.

The vast majority of the participants stayed through the entire evening, wanting to continue the conversation. At the end, presenters in each of the break-out sessions discussed next steps.

First, residents and stakeholders were encouraged to join one of the issue area working groups for the plan—the organizers circulated sign-in sheets, or residents can contact Vanessa Valentin to get involved. Second, each participant was given a survey to provide feedback to the plan. Third, a bilingual web site has been created at www.belmontcragin.org where residents can find out what is going on and "share

an idea” through the site. Finally, all residents will be notified of the next community meeting, which will take place in late Summer or early Fall.

“Stay involved,” Valentin urged. “We want to see you and want you to be part of the change.”

Affordable Housing

Goals: Increase availability of affordable housing, continue to reduce foreclosure rate, and increase awareness of available housing programs and services.

Strategies: Leverage resources of community banks and financial institutions to provide financing, provide education to renters and landlords, develop relationships with local aldermen for zoning approval of new developments, and collaborate with block clubs to address concerns about safety and to build community.

Input: To address affordability, participants suggested homeowner grants, strategies to fight investors flipping homes, and relief from rising property taxes. The also asked for help with basic issues like parking troubles in the neighborhood and clogged sewers that lead to flooding.

The most popular neighborhood assets were Senior Suites of Kelvyn Park and the George Street and Cicero Avenue Elderly Apartments, with comments about how important it is for seniors to be able to stay in the community.

Economic Development

Goals: Attract new businesses to commercial corridors, provide services to local businesses and improve public safety and the perception of public safety.

Strategies: Reach out to businesses on current available services such as business workshops the Special Service Area, expand services such as access to loans and facade improvements, and market the commercial corridors with signage, beautification, materials and online marketing.

Input: Ald. Villegas, Rep. Luis Arroyo and the chambers of commerce were noted as important resources for improvement, and participants called for programs like clean-up on commercial corridors and incentives for new owners.

Participants rated several local stores as strong assets, with the most votes for the Brickyard Mall. The local shops on Belmont near Laramie got votes both as an asset and a challenge, with comments on how there are currently too many vacant storefronts.

Healthcare & Seniors

Goals: Expand access to healthcare resources to residents and improve education on key healthcare issues.

Strategies: Expand access to healthcare resources, improve financial literacy around health expenses, increase community education on key prevention issues, increase referrals and access to mental health, build on the partnership with Community First Medical and PrimeCare, recruit more specialists for Medicaid, and encourage more doctors to accept Medicaid.

Input: There was interest in and ideas for how to help educate residents around medical issues, including about proper nutrition, mental health care, dental and finding doctors that accept your insurance. Participants also said they'd like more resources for mental health care, in-school medical care, and practitioners who take Medicare.

PCC Salud Family Center and Community First Medical Center both received a number of votes as community assets, and Metropolitan Family Services on Central Avenue received the most votes for healthcare. "Always willing to open doors to the community and events," one participant wrote.

Education

Goals: Strengthen relationships between community institutions and local schools, improve involvement of parents in schools, and expand access to adult education for GED and higher education.

Strategies: Increase parent advocacy and involvement, improve schools' image to attract students within and outside of Belmont Cragin, and offer resources to parents through partnerships between schools and local organizations.

Input: There was a lot of discussion about schools. Participants noted that some schools are overcrowded and they talked about the importance of treating students fairly and motivating them, as well as improving institutions like libraries and parks. Among the many small-scale ideas for changes in the schools were nutritious food in school lunches and providing high school credit while students work.

Many education assets received a high number of votes, including After School Matters, GED classes, ESL classes at Erie Neighborhood House, Becoming a Man at Foreman High School, and Early Childhood at Belmont Cragin.

Youth Development

Goals: Improve youth and police relations, improve safety in schools, and improve access to recreational activities for youth.

Strategies: Improve relations between police and youth/students through organized interactions, improve park facilities by improving safety, overcrowding and activities, and create a more positive narrative about youth in Belmont Cragin.

Input: Communication was a big issue for youth development—between residents and youth and to get youth information about options in the community. Participants also noted the need for training for parents, early childhood opportunities, and concerns about using charter schools as a solution.

The Peace Rally with Safe Haven, Riis Park, and a back-to-school party all received many positive votes. But the most votes as an asset for any topic was the Portage Cragin Chicago Public Library branch, with many positive comments too.