Community Conversations Summary

Staff acted as facilitators for over two dozen Community Conversations conducted in May, June, July and August 2018. Using methodology developed by The Harwood Institute for Public Innovation, we asked small groups of participants to talk about their concerns, hopes and aspirations about their communities. These were not *library* focus groups; rather we used these conversations as a way to learn more about ways SCLSNJ can make a difference in the community that may not already be reflected in our core services. In some of our conversations, participants expressed feelings ranging from disappointment to anger that we were not asking them about what they want from the Library, in spite of our attempts to clearly communicate our intent.

This report summarizes the themes and ideas that emerged from the conversations as a whole. In addition, we created a one-page report to make available to the municipalities where we conducted conversations in order to share what we learned specifically about that community.

People's Shared Aspirations
People want to live in a place that has a sense of community. This was expressed in terms of connectedness, feeling welcomed, and being engaged with community activities. These broad themes are consistent with the language used in responses to the first question in our Community Survey, "What kind of community do you want to live in?"

Main Concerns
- Lack of involvement/engagement from community members
- Access to the community and services: pedestrian safety, transportation obstacles, lack of a defined downtown or town center (particularly for member townships)
- Changes that come with growth: traffic pressures, perceived issues with low-income housing, declining public safety, losing a community "feel"
- Not knowing what's going on in the community

Actions and Groups
There were two broad categories of action suggested by participants that would help alleviate concerns and make progress toward aspirations:

Create opportunities for community engagement
This category includes actions such as developing a community center that caters to people from across the community, making it easier for people to participate in local government and civic activities, and giving people meaningful opportunities for volunteering.

<u>Improve communication and outreach</u>
This category includes actions such as providing a wider array of information channels coming from local government, making sure that messaging about community activities and events are placed where the entire community can find them, and working more cohesively among community organizations to streamline communication.

A number of other suggested actions revealed the tension around change. For instance, in the same conversation where people talked about wanting openness and diversity, they also talked about feeling less safe than they used to in their community as a result of changing demographics, and that stronger policing was needed. Conversations in areas of the County that are experiencing growth often acknowledged the benefits of development in terms of providing more convenient access to services, but also suggested that action be taken by local government to preserve green space and the rural character of the community.

When asked what groups participants trusted to take these actions, the response was mixed. There was broad concern that although local government is key to making large-scale action happen, bureaucracy and political structures often pose obstacles that seem unsurmountable. In several communities, there was also concern that local officials are not aware of the needs and concerns among their constituents. People were more likely to express trust in other organizations, including civic and community groups, local nonprofits, and schools and libraries.

What does this mean for the Library?
While a number of the concerns, aspirations and actions suggested by participants fall well outside of the Library's sphere of activity, we learned a great deal from our conversations that will inform our strategic planning process.

- <u>People are looking for engagement and connection</u>. SCLSNJ is a natural platform for facilitating community connectedness. We can develop meaningful opportunities for community members to connect with each other, not just with the Library.
- <u>People want spaces for community interaction</u>. SCLSNJ branches are public resources open to everyone. We can strive to continue improving access to our branch spaces.
- <u>People want information</u>. SCLSNJ can continue to act as a clearinghouse for information about community activities, events, issues and policies.