Montgomery County Convening Community Input Brief May 3, 2019

Overview

The Greater Houston Community Foundation is in the midst of building **Understanding Houston**—a collaborative regional indicators initiative that is an outgrowth of the Greater Houston Community Foundation's most recent strategic plan. With the Kinder Institute for Urban Research at Rice University as our strategic research partner, Understanding Houston will result in a new, highly interactive web platform that will be a central resource for data, trends, and tracking progress on eight quality of life issues affecting residents in Harris, Fort Bend, and Montgomery counties. The Foundation will engage its donors as well as a broad range of stakeholders in using these tools to learn and think together about how we can address issues that need attention to help build a more vibrant Houston for everyone.

The Greater Houston Community Foundation's Understanding Houston initiative cannot effectively serve the community without the input of local leaders and residents along the way.

To inform the Understanding Houston website and tools, the Foundation began a series of convenings. The first was held in Montgomery County, in partnership with the Montgomery County Community Foundation, on May 3, 2019 with over 75 individuals who are engaged in the nonprofit sector, philanthropy, government, schools, business and more in their community.

"Knowledge without action is useless."

- Montgomery Focus Group

This brief summarizes the input we received from the community through four engagement activities, including:

- Real-Time Polling:
 Response by text message to strengths and challenges in the county.
- Dotmocracy: Vote by dots for topic issues of importance and interest, as well as those worthy of highlighting and where knowledge gaps exist for the community.



Real-Time Polling In one word, describe a great <u>strength</u> in your community.

- Focus Groups: Groups of about six individuals discussing a series of questions.
- Indicator Surveys: Individuals reviewing the full indicators list and noting priorities, as well as any notes for missing data.

Each activity was designed to obtain participants' feedback on the Understanding Houston initiative, the large set of data indicators, and their sense of issues that need to be emphasized in their community.



Results

Dotmocracy

In order to understand what topics and issues are most relevant to Montgomery County residents, individuals were asked to select three of the nine issue areas (listed to the right) that they are most knowledgeable about and/or interested in. From there they were given fifteen dots which were *color coded* according to the list below

- Most Important (6 red dots)
- Most Interesting (3 blue dots)
- Most In Need of Knowing More About (3 yellow dots)
- Most Worthy of Highlight (3 green dots)

With these fifteen dots, participants were asked to place five dots (2 red, 1 blue, 1 yellow, 1 green) on topics in each of their three issue areas using the color scheme above. Each of the nine issue areas has three to eight topics within them for a total of forty-six topics. For example, in the picture to the right, the main issue area is Economic Opportunity with the topics being Economic Activities & Jobs, Unemployment & Underemployment, Inequality, and so forth.



Issue Areas

Education

Health

Housing

Arts & Culture

Civic Engagement

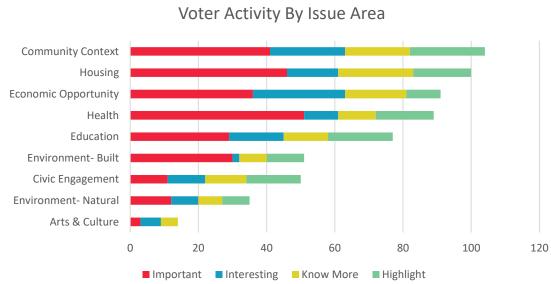
Community Context

Environment – Built

Economic Opportunity

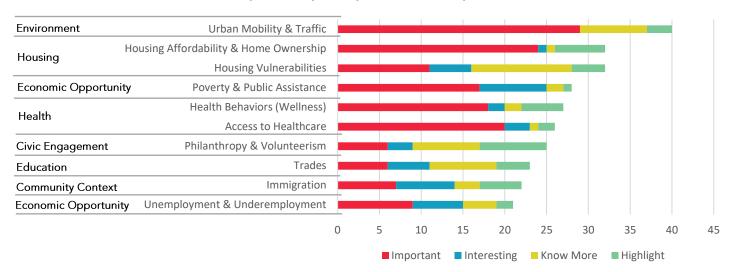
Environment – Natural

The data given in the bar graph to the right presents the nine issue areas by both total number of dots as well as the color distribution for each issue area. The chart presented gives a broad sense of participants' engagement with issues areas, with community context, housing, and economic opportunity reflecting the greatest activity overall.



GREATER HOUSTON COMMUNITY FOUNDATION www.ghcf.org Below are the top ten topics that received the most dots overall. Attendees were very clear that Urban Mobility & Traffic was a topic of importance to the community, with transportation issues mentioned in focus groups as well. Housing Affordability & Home Ownership and Housing Vulnerabilities were also of key interest to the attendees, with housing affordability being an issue worth highlighting for the community and housing vulnerabilities being a particular knowledge gap.

Top Ten Topics By Voter Activity



"Important that the data addresses the county issues. Transportation! Transportation!"

- Montgomery Focus Group

Topics that did not make the top 10, but ranked highly in other ways include:

<u>Social Connectedness</u>: In the top three of topics participants categorized as "most interesting to you."

<u>Demographic Change</u>: In the top three of topics participants categorized as "most worthy of highlighting for the community" as well as "most should know more about."

<u>Commute Time & Mode</u>: In the top three of topics participants categorized as "most worthy of highlighting for the community."

Focus Groups

Nine groups of roughly six to seven individuals were led, by a facilitator, in a thought-provoking conversation about the Understanding Houston initiative. They were also invited to consider and discuss how the data driven platform could be best utilized by their organizations and which issues were most important to keep in mind when considering their community.





What do you think about the initiative?

Multiple individuals expressed a high level of excitement and were pleased to be included in the process. One person remarked, "[It's] very exciting, I think it's much needed, and [I'm] really happy to hear that Montgomery County will be separate." Another participant stated, "I'm glad Houston is asking us for what we see and know about data."

Additionally, participants were glad that there would be **one** "hub" for data. Attendees described currently having to hunt down data, vocalizing that Understanding Houston will "help seasoned professionals and newcomers to understand the community" and that every level of organization can make sound decisions with this shared data.

Furthermore, participants see Understanding Houston as a source of education and awareness for the area—"a way to tell our story."

"Having the content very specific to Montgomery County will be very good."

- Montgomery Focus Group

How will you use the data?

Participants shared that individuals can learn from the data and take it back to other groups, making Understanding Houston an education tool. Understanding Houston is also seen as a "great way to identify service projects, see needs and trends, and create awareness" through communicating to audiences.

It was said that Understanding Houston is also a **great tool for grant writing and strategic planning**, with one attendee noting that "[networking will] help us link together stronger and strong data helps communicate to the donor," and another commenting "...we will utilize data regularly to determine if needed to phase out or add [programs]."

Participants noted that the tool will also be "great for **advocacy**; we have to be able to paint a pretty accurate picture..." Montgomery County users of Understanding Houston will use the data for homelessness, mental health care, immigration, statistics of population, and infrastructure.

Knowing the source and reliability of the data in Understanding Houston, Montgomery County nonprofit stakeholders could see correlations, discern conflicting data, and possibly find duplication in services. This could help ensure "we are producing unique work."



Who else could use the data and how?

"If it's what I'm envisioning, everyone. It's beneficial for school districts, nonprofits, schools looking at growth, and local government. Things we all need to be aware of, more people wanting to make a difference... We are all wanting to make a difference, and we feel like it's a drop in the bucket. It will be nice to see if we're more than a drop in the bucket." Other possible users include politicians, government entities, private companies, donors, and business leaders.



What do you see as the greatest opportunity related to the project?

Participants' answers to this question include the **revelation of gaps in service** (especially in transportation), more available and accessible data for grant writing, and learning and knowing how to access data in order to **inform decision-making**.

Understanding Houston could also be used for strategic planning, opportunities for collaboration, and raising awareness for new nonprofits and donors. "It helps with the five-year plan." "Better planning, everyone is in the same boat—foster same dialogue; spotlight issues that have been under the surface, collaborating together/action groups."

Participants spoke about how "...this is a collaboration, we're all doing our part. To have the same data, it's going to hold us together as a common thread and add some clout. It's not just one lone voice. It's a common language for common issues."

"We have need for one space to bring all the communities together so they can partner together to solve problems." - Montgomery Focus Group

What risks/concerns should be avoided?

There are concerns that Understanding Houston "turns into an exercise and doesn't have end results and is not sustainable." Other concerns include things such as inconsistent and aging data, accessibility of Understanding Houston to everyone, silo thinking, ensuring the data is utilized to take action, and ensuring the interpretation of the data by users is accurate.

What's important to keep in mind about Montgomery County?

Many respondents emphasized that Montgomery County is not Harris County nor is it just The Woodlands.

"The metropolitan area is moving into the rural area. We have changed so much over the years in positive and negative ways. We change more rapidly than other counties."

There aren't as many nonprofit organizations in Montgomery County as there are in Harris County. "It's about starting and supporting organizations with development rather than serving as a convening; it's more hands on. There are limited sources here." Many table

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food equity
transportation

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Real-Time Polling
In one word, describe a pressing <u>challenge</u> in your community



participants noted the vast differences in socioeconomic status and that while there is a lot of diversity in Montgomery County it is also very conservative.

Homelessness is a real issue in Montgomery County. "There are whole groups of forgotten, lost people. There is a group of homeless veterans, about one thousand, living in The Woodlands, but don't want to be located. The problem is that the school district and organizations operate under different accounting of what constitutes homelessness. It depends on what you look at." One group also mentioned that individuals experiencing homelessness often come to Montgomery County from Harris County.



Focus Group Response
What issues do you think are important
to shed a light on for your community?

Indicator Surveys

Participants were given a list of over two hundred indicators that could be a part of the Understanding Houston website.

Through marking on the list, individuals were given the opportunity to vocalize which indicators should be prioritized, add any additional comments about each indicator, and suggest adding indicators.

Five individuals utilized this list to mark indicators they personally believed should be prioritized. The information they shared will be used to further inform the Understanding Houston initiative and personalize it to the Montgomery County area. Things of note from the indicator surveys were suggested indicator write-ins; a **mental health topic** as well as a measurement of the number of students with learning disabilities being served. The indicators that received the most prioritization by the participants were civic and social organization, volunteerism, and underemployment.

Conclusion

"We are all trying to leave the community better than we found it." - Montgomery Focus Group

Some big takeaways that the Understanding Houston team received from the convening are that Montgomery County is a very diverse and fast growing county that is different from the counties around it and cannot be simply defined by looking at just one of the towns within that county. As was vocalized during the focus groups discussions and can be seen through the dotmocracy activity, transportation is an issue that is in need of attention and being addressed, as is housing affordability and vulnerabilities.

We are excited to use the information we've gathered to help refine the indicator list and content for the Understanding Houston website, as well as have an ongoing conversation with the leaders and residents of Montgomery County to help us all learn, engage, and act to make our region a more vibrant one.

Special thanks to Julie Martineau, Executive Director of the Montgomery County Community Foundation and her Board for their support of this important beginning conversation and Understanding Houston.

Visit www.understandinghouston.org & follow us on social media!

