

Making An Investment In WW's Social Capital

Areas where a high number of people hold bachelor's degrees and make more than \$75,000 a year in income, as is the case in West Windsor, usually see higher numbers of community involvement.

But data recently collected by the Princeton Area Community Foundation shows that despite area residents' educational and income levels, the levels of their participation in volunteerism and civic engagement are only at average or below-average levels when compared with numbers on a national level.

And a critical part of getting people more involved is to increase social capital, or develop a "sense of place." And that could be done with redevelopment, if planned and done properly, says Nancy Kieling, president and director of the Princeton Area Community Foundation, and a 30-year West Windsor resident.

In her presentation to the West Windsor Township Council during its October 14 meeting, Kieling said that social capital — which is defined as the social networks and the trust and connections between people that solve problems, and that measures attitudes and behaviors between people — is created by everyone in a community through their daily activities, whether big or small, like going to the grocery store or attending council meetings.

"The notion that place is important is a core piece of social capital because if you think about it, connections and networks and

relationships are built in places," she said, in places like parks, coffee and ice cream shops, schools, offices, farmers' markets, and anywhere people come together.

It is important because "in places where social capital is high and connection is good, neighborhoods are actually safer, schools are better, local economy is stronger, there is less crime and violence, and people actually report to be happier and healthier and living longer," Kieling said.

Kieling's organization, in connection with the Princeton Regional Chamber of Commerce Foundation, surveyed all 13 municipalities in Mercer County, as well as the bordering areas in Somerset and Middlesex counties with a (609) area code because "we wanted to understand the importance of connection among people, to understand this region better, and to encourage the building of more and better social capital, if that's what we found, in fact, needed to be done," Kieling said.

In the spring of 2007, the organization conducted 870 telephone surveys, which had a 35 percent response rate — which is high for a telephone survey, Kieling said. The same survey developed by professor Robert Putnam, of the John F. Kennedy School of Government at Harvard University, was used with some minor tweaking for the group's own uses, and the data, for the most part, was comparable to a national study conducted in 2006.

"It showed, for the most part, we are pretty well-connected with our neighbors," she said, explaining that 56 percent of the respondents reported being so, compared with 46 percent nationally. The survey also found that 84 percent of residents polled said they

trusted people in their neighborhood, compared with 81 percent nationally. And 85 percent of people in this area trust the local police, compared with 82 nationally. Of the respondents, 88 percent said they trust those of different races, compared with 84 percent nationally.

Of the respondents, 90 percent said they had a white friend, compared with 91 percent nationally, 61 percent said they had a Spanish or Latino friend, compared with 58 percent nationally, 51 percent said they had an Asian friend, compared with 36 percent nationally, and 70 percent said they had a black

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friend, compared with 63 percent nationally.

When it comes to reading a daily newspaper, 40 percent of the people in this area said they did, compared with 28 percent nationally. "It's an important element of social capital and connection to community because if you don't know what's going on, it's very difficult to be involved," Kieling said.

Of the respondents, 54 percent reported incomes of over \$75,000, compared with 27 percent nationally, and 51 percent said they hold bachelor's degrees, compared with 28 percent nationally.

Still, despite all of these advantages, the levels of volunteerism and civic engagement remained at average to low levels, even though people with college degrees volunteer 45 percent more than those without, Kieling said.

Kieling said that 29 percent of the respondents said they did not volunteer or engage in civic activities because of work and family obligations, while 17 percent said they lacked information. Twelve percent said they thought they could not make a difference, 10 percent said they felt unwelcome, 9 percent said they were concerned for their safety, and 6 percent said they had no transportation.

So, "if we want more community, we should design it so that we can have it," Kieling said. "We should have public space that encourages informal socialization." This way, people can spend less time traveling and more time connecting with others.

She said places like strip malls "don't do the same kind of connecting that town squares do," so officials should be mindful of this when they plan for the future.

Councilwoman Linda Geevers asked Kieling whether redevelopment would be a good opportunity to increase social capital, and Kieling said she thought it would. "The notion of social capital is core to redevelopment, and I think it challenges us to do the planning for it very well so that we create the kinds of places that foster this kind of community, and that we don't create the kinds of spaces that work against it," she said.

Kieling said that people want a sense of place. "What this data does is shows us that it's not just a nice thing that is pleasant if we have and OK if we don't," she added. "It actually matters."

She said that the community already has a functional government and a vibrant economy, "but all of that can be maintained and improved" with a plan, like redevelopment, that brings people together.