

West Hartford Public Library Community Conversations

One of the most engaging and reenergizing portions of our research process was our Community Conversations. The goal of these conversations was to gain greater insight into the thoughts, concerns, and suggestions we received from the West Hartford community, and to give us a chance to ask patrons to tell us in greater detail how we could best serve the needs of our community.

Over the course of July, August, and September of 2016, we hosted a series of five Community Conversations, held in each of our three locations. The meetings were scheduled at different times of day (some morning, some afternoon, some evening) and on different days of the week (including weekends) in order to make the meetings available to the greatest number of people. In order to eliminate our own bias, we strove to follow the same patterns during each of the meetings: each lasted for one and a half hours, followed a specific agenda and rules, and was conducted using the same nine questions. We also trained several facilitators and note-takers to guide the conversation without responding, allowing the patrons to share their thoughts without commentary and encouraging the patrons to express even negative opinions without hesitation.

The questions we used were created based on “best practices” of other libraries and research organizations, staff suggestions, and the information goals of the Strategic Planning Committee. In order to encourage conversation and “big thinking,” we asked patrons to first think about the town in general, then to focus on their library, specifically. Based on our research, we included questions that were general questions (“What words describe an ideal community?”) and specific questions (“What have you seen in other libraries that you wish we had in West Hartford?”), allowing people to both think creatively and to refer back to their unique experiences when providing answers.

In total, sixty-four patrons participated in our Community Conversations, representing a range of ages, socio-economic statuses, races, and home neighborhoods. The participants were all volunteer, recruited via the online survey, a call to participate on our newsletter/website, and in-person at the library. Every participant had an opportunity to speak, and every one contributed to the conversations.

Some overall themes and comments about the Town of West Hartford from the Community Conversations:

- West Hartford is proud of its cultural diversity, but many citizens feel more could be done to celebrate that diversity and educate people as to what communities exist within our town and to support diverse communities within our schools
- Affordability is an issue town-wide - West Hartford is an expensive place to live
- The police, schools, social services, and library are some of the town's greatest assets
- The town has lost its identity in recent years, leaning more toward being a small city (rather than a large town) in the last few decades, and that means some of the town's "connectedness" is being lost, some of the neighborhoods are evolving, some of the town's demographics have changed, and some of the changes in the town's "feel" are upsetting to long-time residents
- Parking is an issue, particularly in the center of town, and public transportation isn't sufficient to support a less car-focused community
- The town as a whole could do a better job of engaging the community

Some overall themes and comments about the West Hartford Library from the Community Conversations:

What do the West Hartford Libraries do well?

- Strong book and downloadable book collections
- Excellent Children's programs and children's spaces (at all three locations)
- Library is a trustworthy neutral source of information
- The library is willing to listen to patron/community suggestions and complaints
- Interesting programs for people over fifty years old
- Technology — patrons have access to the computer lab, Tech Therapy, online databases, and online classes
- The museum pass program

How could the West Hartford Libraries help to improve our community?

- Provide Sunday hours year-round
- Close later on Fridays and Saturdays
- Provide ways for people to connect
- Work with schools more
- Use other town buildings for library programs (especially Elmwood CC for Faxon) — and share town resources more effectively, in general
- Better communication about programs; shorten the e-newsletter or enable a person to jump to areas of interest
- More programs for 50+

What have you seen at other libraries that you wish we had in West Hartford?

- Easier, more, free parking
- Hours more consistent across all locations

