

Summary Memo
Round 1 of Public Engagement
June 4, 2021

This document summarizes the first round of public engagement input for Clinton County 2040 gathered between April 26 and June 1, 2021. Input was gathered in the following ways:

- Two virtual workshops (April 28 at 7 p.m. and April 30 at 12 p.m. via Zoom)
- Three in-person workshops facilitated by the Planning Team (May 13 from 3:30-5 p.m. and 7-8:30 p.m. at the Denver Park Shelters in Wilmington, and May 20 from 7-8:30 p.m. at the Cowan Lake Park Shelters)
- Several in-person, small group workshops facilitated by volunteers and/or Steering Committee members (Meeting-in-a-Box materials provided by Planning Team)
- Online activities.

The online engagement materials will be made available into early June and several additional small, in-person meetings may also be held in early summer, to provide additional opportunities for feedback.

The memo includes the following:

1. Purpose
2. Outreach and Publicity
3. Approach
4. Results
 - Open Ended Questions
 - Strong / Weak Places
5. Participation and Satisfaction

“I love Clinton County and believe there is tremendous energy and resources here. People really care in these communities.”

workshop participant

1. Purpose

The Clinton County Regional Planning Commission launched a process to update its comprehensive plan in January 2021. The process was named Clinton County 2040. The County's existing comprehensive plan was adopted in 2004 and needs to be updated to reflect current trends and priorities.

One of the key inputs to the process is insight from the community. Through the first round of public engagement, multiple opportunities were designed for anyone who cares about the future of Clinton County to help inform the plan. The input collected in this round of engagement will lay the groundwork for development of the plan's preliminary Goals, Objectives and Actions.

2. Outreach and Publicity

Outreach was conducted throughout the County to spread the word about the opportunity to participate in Round 1 of the public engagement. Outreach and publicity included the following:

- The Team capitalized on numerous, existing networks for outreach, including the Port Authority, the Chamber of Commerce, Wilmington and Village government offices, and the Visitor's Bureau, while also distributing project information via the County's existing email listserv.
- A press release was distributed to local media outlets, resulting in coverage Wilmington News Journal.
- 7,500 rack cards were distributed throughout the County.
- Social media collateral was created and CCRPC Staff, Steering Committee members and other helped to disseminate it.
- CCRPC Staff participated in numerous meetings, including with township trustees throughout the County, to share information about the planning process and Round 1 public engagement.

3. Approach

Clinton County 2040's first round of public engagement included both virtual and in-person workshops, as well as a series of interactive online activities meant to mimic the opportunities offered at both virtual and in-person workshops.

Breakout rooms on the virtual meeting platform Zoom were limited to 10 people during the virtual workshops small group activity (April 28 and April 30). At the in-person workshops (May 13 and May 20), activities were conducted in small groups of 6-8 people at a table, with a Planning Team member serving as a recorder and documenting input. Online engagement activities mimicked the workshop activities through a web-based survey that included an interactive mapping tool and an optional, but encouraged, Exit Questionnaire.

Activities at the in-person workshops and online included two main exercises: group discussion of two open-ended questions and a strong / weak places mapping exercise. During the open-ended questions

exercise, participants were asked to answer the following questions, “*How do you envision the ideal Clinton County of the future?*” and “*Over generations, Clinton County has changed physically in many ways. What kind of change would you like to see or not like to see in the future?*”

The strong / weak places mapping exercise asked participants to identify strong and weak specific places in the County on a map and to explain why these places were considered strong or weak. Strong places were defined as places that are working well, reflect well on the community and should be protected/maintained, or places that represent good precedents that could be replicated elsewhere. Weak places were defined as places that need to be improved or changed, places at risk or are threatened and need attention, or places that have significant, untapped opportunity.

An exit questionnaire was also provided at the close of both the in-person workshops and in the online engagement materials, to collect demographics information on those who participated in this first round of public engagement. The data collected will be used to inform the Planning Team’s outreach strategy for the second and final round of public engagement.

4. Results

This section summarizes the input that was collected. It draws from a database of every comment recorded (in participants’ own words) and is organized around themes and sub-topics.

Open-Ended Questions

During the open-ended questions exercise, participants were asked to answer two key questions that reflect their thoughts on the County’s historical and future development/changes. The following notes summarize themes that emerged from each of the questions, respectively. Percentages in parentheses indicate what proportion of comments collected related to the topic. (Note: Total percentages will equal more than 100% because some comments pertain to more than one topic.)

“How do you envision the ideal Clinton County of the future?”

1. Amenities and Services (12.34% of total comments for this question)

- Many participants wanted to see more businesses, including retail (both small and larger, chain retail stores like Target and Kohls) and restaurants (both local and chain, like Panera and Chipotle), available throughout the County.
- Participants expressed a strong desire to remain in the County for all of their shopping needs, something that many participants indicated was not possible with the current options/selections.
- Additional amenities and services that participants indicated include more arts and entertainment venues, a community recreation center, and activities/amenities for young people, including children in school.

2. Attracting and Retaining Residents (9.3% of total comments for this question)

- Attracting young professionals, recent high school and college graduates and encouraging them to stay in the County was a repeated theme among participants.
- Participants also wanted to see the County's existing population of young people, including their children and grandchildren, to stay in the County, as well.
- Several participants wanted to see the County encourage students (both undergraduate and graduate/professional) of Wilmington College to engage with the surrounding community more and to provide services/incentives to retain these students in industries after graduation in a "strategic fashion."
- Participants wanted to see sufficient and a more diverse spectrum of housing options provided for prospective Wilmington College graduate students/faculty, as well as prospective employees/business owners with families.
- Participants wanted to ensure that facilities, infrastructure, and opportunities were made available to the County's aging population.

3. Economic Development (9.3% of total comments for this question)

- Participants wanted to see "vibrant downtowns" and an attention to local businesses in the economic make-up of the County.
- Participants expressed a strong desire to diversify the County's economic/business offerings, so as to not "put all the eggs in one basket," so to speak.
- Several participants wanted to see more County investment in the outlying villages, but there was not a consensus on which ones to invest in and how exactly those monies would be spent.
- Other participants expressed a desire for the County to become a "weekend getaway" or destination spot for residents of larger, nearby city centers like Cincinnati.

4. Parks & Recreation (9.1% of total comments for this question)

- Many participants expressed a strong desire to retain existing recreational/park offerings and enhance the County's overall recreational opportunities.
- Expanding the County's trail network was a common, repeated theme.
- Several participants tied the County's recreational opportunities with the County's overall ideal and/or identity ("a vibrant and active community where citizens enjoy many parks and recreational opportunities").

- Making parks and recreational opportunities walkable and bikeable to County destinations/landmarks within the County was an idea expressed by several participants.

5. Public Health, Safety, and Social Services (8.8% of total comments for this question)

- Issues concerning substance abuse (drug and alcohol related) were repeatedly mentioned by participants, and they wanted to see these issues addressed by the County.
- Participants would like to see healthier communities throughout the County, with more of an emphasis on public health and overall well-being.
- Public safety (in general and in specific locations like parks and neighborhoods) was a concern for some participants.
- Some participants identified the expansion of mental health services as one potential way to address issues of substance abuse/public health needs in the community overall.
- Some participants commented on the lack of specialty health care providers/services in the County and expressed a strong desire for these providers to be located in-County for greater accessibility/level of care for the aging population.

6. Other

In addition to the themes listed above, participants identified a number of additional themes that are important to them, including education (7.7%), infrastructure and transportation (6.4%), and housing (3.9%), among others. Some of the comments that emerged from these other themes include the following:

- Many participants wanted to see a stronger countywide school system and thought that greater collaboration among schools/neighboring school districts might encourage greater collaboration among County leaders/businesses, as well.
- Stronger educational districts/schools would also encourage more families/prospective employees to move into and/or remain in the County (instead of living outside the County and commuting in for work).
- Some participants cited the lack of public transportation in off-peak times (such as “after hours”) as an option that could be improved for all residents, including seniors without access to private automobiles.
- Additional infrastructure/funding for Internet access was cited as a crucial need for the County, especially given work from home trends.
- Housing options need to be available for all incomes and ages if the County is to serve all its current and future residents.

“Over generations, Clinton County has changed physically in many ways. What kind of change would you like to see or not like to see in the future?”

1. Economic Development (15.3% of total comments for this question)

- As in response to the first question, participants expressed a strong desire for more retail, including local and chain shopping options, restaurants, and diverse employers/businesses in the County to attract and retain residents.
- Some participants cited the lack of available/accessible hours for non-chain retail stores/local businesses in the County and wanted to see this accessibility improve (“I would prefer to spend my money here but by the time I get home only the chain stores are open.”).
- Some participants wanted to see more collaboration/joint economic efforts in the outlying villages connected with Wilmington, the County seat (“Rising tide lifts all boats.”).
- Some residents wanted to see a more diverse range of jobs/employment opportunities in the County, especially for higher wage jobs like management and office jobs.

2. Sense of Place/Community (8.8% of total comments for this question)

- Instilling a better sense of connection/connectivity among villages in the County, whether that be through physical trails or other entertainment/recreational opportunities, was a recurring theme among participants.
- Maintaining the rural lifestyle/identity of the County was an important theme for many participants.
- Strengthening local farms and local businesses were repeated desires among participants.
- Emphasizing regional partnerships with city centers in Cincinnati and Columbus, to some participants, would strengthen the County’s identity and its sense of place within the region and the State.

3. Outdoor Recreation (7.8% of total comments for this question)

- Participants’ connection with existing natural resources, outdoor parks, and recreational opportunities like kayaking and sailing on the County lakes was strong; these assets are a core part of the County’s identity.
- As with responses to the previous question, many participants wanted to see the County’s recreational offerings maintained and expanded through County funding/investment.

- Adding and expanding youth recreational opportunities was also a repeated theme.
- A county-wide trail system was a repeated request, along with a recreational center and a more accessible community/County pool.

4. Transportation (7.8% of total comments for this question)

- Transportation improvements for cyclists, such as bike lanes, and those for walking/running pedestrians, such as more accessible and wider sidewalks, were repeated themes in this category.
- Trails/paths that would also connect the equestrian community with the surrounding trails/parks were connections made by some participants in this category.
- Improving congestion along busy, potentially dangerous roadways, such as roads that wind/cut through villages, was mentioned by several participants.

5. Amenities and Services (7.0% of total comments for this question)

- As with the “economic development” theme for this question, participants mentioned they would like to see more entertainment activities and more places for community members to gather throughout the County.
- More art-related (such as music lessons) and youth sport opportunities would attract and retain residents throughout the County and could be seen as a popular amenity in the County for younger people.
- Many participants cited the need for more variety of shopping and local attractions (“Even college kids don’t go to downtown Wilmington.”).
- Participants wanted to see all amenities/services provided by the County be accessible and appealing to all ages in the County.

6. Other

In addition to the themes listed above, participants identified a number of additional themes that are important to them, including managed growth (7.0%), rural land preservation (5.9%), and infrastructure-related improvements (5.6%), among others. Some of the comments that emerged from these other themes include the following:

- Several participants mentioned their desire for more “planned” development and the importance of maintaining/preserving natural resources and rural farmland in the process of development.
- Participants wanted to see the County enforce its zoning code more.
- Participants wanted to see more condemning of blighted/unused properties.
- Connecting to the County’s rich history and uplifting the surrounding villages were

also repeated themes for this question.

- Internet access as a basic utility/service provided throughout the County was a much needed, repeated theme for participants in this open-ended question section.

Strong / Weak Places

Below is the summary of the strong / weak places exercise performed at the workshops and in the online survey. Strong places were defined as places that have a look and feel that makes you want to spend time there, places you would like to see replicated elsewhere in the County, and places that reflect well on the community (places you would be proud to show visitors). Weak places were defined as places that are in an undesirable condition and/or need improvement, places you would not like to see replicated elsewhere in the County, and places that reflect poorly on the community (places you would not be proud to show visitors).

The summary includes overarching themes that emerged through the exercise as well as the top five strong and weak places that were identified, including the most prevalent comments about each. (See Appendix A, strong / weak places summary map for all strong and weak places that were identified.)

Key Themes

The following themes emerged from the strong / weak places exercise:

- Recreational opportunities were a high priority, including the County's access to State Parks and its bike/recreational trails.
- The highest concentration of map dots clustered around Wilmington, including specific sites in Wilmington like Wilmington College and the General Denver restaurant, as well as comments about Wilmington in general.
- Many of the County's entrances/exits into communities, including Wilmington, were seen as weaker and in need of improvements.
- Many of the weak dots clustered around outlying Villages.
- Several dots focused on specific intersections. Some were seen as strong (380/71 interchange) while others were seen as weak (73/380 intersection).

Top Strong Places

Following are the five most identified strong places.

- **Cowan Lake State Park**
 - Cowan Lake was one of the highest rated "strong places" on the map data collected, and labeled repeatedly as an asset in the mapping activity and the open-ended questions portion of the engagement.
 - The lake is renowned for its access to recreational opportunities, such as kayaking, sailing, hiking, and fishing. Some participants also stated it is a great destination for birding.

- The campgrounds were also touted as being accessible and a great destination for families.
- **Downtown Wilmington**
 - Many participants appreciated the investment/renovations made to downtown Wilmington in the last 10 years or so.
 - Several participants called out specific locations in downtown Wilmington, including the General Denver, the Murphy Theatre, and the Wilmington Public Library, as community assets.
 - Some participants see downtown Wilmington as a central “hub” for countywide activities and entertainment.
- **Bike Trail**
 - The Clinton County bike trail is a well-liked community asset that many participants appreciate and enjoy its access.
 - Several participants touted the family-friendly accessibility of the bike trail and how it’s a useful connector in the County for potentially all ages.
 - Some participants wanted to see continued extension and continuation of the trail. This desire is reflected in the “outdoor recreation” theme in the questions portion above.
- **Wilmington College**
 - Many participants recognized the asset of having a college in the community and thought that its potential to attract/retain additional residents was an asset.
 - Participants felt positively about having a higher education institution in the County.
 - Several participants appreciated the various entertainment opportunities the college provides that community members can access/attend.
 - Some participants wanted to see students spend more time in Wilmington.
- **Caesar Creek State Park**
 - Like Cowan Lake, Caesar Creek was identified as a popular recreational spot in the County, touted for its fishing, camping, and kayaking opportunities, among other outdoor activities.
 - Participants also acknowledged the park’s accessibility and ability to attract visitors from other parts of the State; the park could serve as a potential gateway into the rest of the County.

Top Weak Places

Following are the five most identified weak places.

- **Blanchester**
- **Clarksville**
- **Martinsville**
- **Midland**
- **Sabina**

Overall, these five most identified “weak places” had incredibly similar and connected justifications for why they might be considered weaker locations in the County. The recurring themes had some consensus between those who live outside the listed Villages, and those who live in or are from these communities. The following comments were made in regard to the five Villages listed above:

- The presence of poverty, blighted properties, homelessness, and substance abuse were repeated themes and reasons for most of the Villages being named “weaker.”
- Participants had a strong desire to see more retail and restaurant offerings in all of the Villages.
- Some participants cited the lack of character/identity as inhibiting development and growth in the Villages.
- Other participants mentioned the “combative” and uncooperative nature of some Village leaders, including those in the local school systems, as factors that make the Villages weaker places.
- Many of the downtowns in these Villages were cited as needing revitalization.

5. Participation and Satisfaction

Participation in the workshops and online met high expectations for the process, with approximately 150 people participating in the first round of engagement. Participants who attended the in-person workshops were asked to fill out an Exit Questionnaire about their experience and themselves. Additionally, online participants were asked to answer a series of demographic questions in an accompanying Exit Questionnaire. Of those who participated in both the in-person workshops and online activities, 109 people completed the Exit Questionnaire. The following insight is based on these responses.

Key Takeaways regarding participation and satisfaction

- Word of Mouth/Personal Invitation (35.6%) was by far the most common way people learned about the engagement opportunities, followed by an Email from the County (14.4%).
- Nearly 1,000 unique comments were collected from the workshops and online input (including the open-ended questions, strong / weak places mapping exercise and general comments).
- There was age diversity among participants, with over half of the participants aged 45 and older. Notably, the under 24 age cohort was similar to the proportion the County’s population, a rare

result in this kind of engagement.

- Those with a higher education and higher annual household income were overrepresented relative to the County’s population.
- Participants varied in the amount of time they lived in the County, ranging from long-time to recently moved residents.
- Workshop satisfaction rates were very high; over 98% of participants in the workshop said they felt comfortable working within the small groups, and 100% felt that their input was heard and recorded accurately.
- 94% of participants said they will stay involved with the planning process.

“So glad you are doing this! I know it's a huge undertaking – but future residents will be so grateful.”

workshop participant