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## Boosting the Local Economy of Ashland Ohio

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# Boosting the Local Economy of Ashland Ohio

## **Abstract**

This article summarizes an initiative to engage citizens in issues of building and supporting a local economy. It includes reasons for engaging the public; steps that were taken; and results of deliberative efforts.

## **Keywords**

Deliberation, local economy, National Issues Forum, study circle

The community said that there was too little trust between people to make progress that stuck, that endless turf battles inevitably cripple efforts, and that there weren't enough credible leaders and organizations to move forward. The community, they said, was tired of initiatives starting one day and fading away the next; this undermined people's confidence [in] accomplishing anything significant. They asserted that the prevailing way of doing business was to do things to people rather than with people. (Harwood, 2014, p. 1)

Ashland, Ohio is a small community in which many decisions correspond to the sentiment provided in the epigraph above. The city's population is roughly around 22,000; the county's is about 55,000. Organizations for economic development generally work singularly on issues that align with their mission. In the case of boosting the local economy, the Chamber, the Ashland Main Street group, the city, the Convention and Visitors Bureau (CVB), and the Ashland Area Council for Economic Development are working towards increasing economic growth. These organizations do a good job, but citizens do not feel invested. Although Main Street requests citizen participation, the other organizations do not, leaving people feeling apathetic and fatalistic. In interviews most people indicated that Ashland's economy will never improve.

The Center for Civic Life at Ashland University (CCL), whose aim is to involve citizens in deliberating issues and initiating solutions, identified a critical need to involve citizens in issues of boosting the local economy. The situation, as we reframed it, was that economic groups of professionals were working to boost the economy, but that the citizens were not part of the process. Citizens were the recipients of whatever the economic groups did. With the exception of the Main Street organization, no one had asked citizens what they wanted and what they could do. If citizens are not invested in something as critical to the future of Ashland, the likelihood of a prosperous economy is diminished. For example, citizens clamor for businesses downtown but do not support the ones that are already there. However no one asks them what sort of businesses they would support.

Believing that in a healthy community results must come from the people (The Charles F. Kettering Foundation, 2013 a), CCL launched an initiative to involve citizens in boosting the local economy of Ashland. We believed that ordinary citizens possess intelligence and skills that, brought to bear on an issue, can be powerful. Instead of the usual model of the professionals making the decisions and later informing the public, we envisioned a network of citizen groups, communicating together, and working on various associated issues. These groups would not be made up of experts, but rather of citizens interested in the well-being of their community and willing to take responsibility to be part of building solutions to benefit the public. These citizens would form "public relationships," (The Charles F. Kettering Foundation, 2013 b, p. 1), based on solving common

problems, learning together and empowering themselves to make a difference. Rather than everyone depending on the work of the economic professionals, the community would be “leaderful” (The Charles F. Kettering Foundation, 2013 a, p. 1); that is many citizens would work together in groups of equal partners. Citizens would work independently and in cooperation with the economic groups.

### **The Current Situation**

In order to understand where we are heading, we need to understand the situation as it is currently. Ashland Ohio has various local businesses on Main Street. Several of these businesses are professional, such as architectural. Others are retail – antiques stores, a True-Value Hardware store, an office supply store, a bicycle shop, a children’s clothing store, a photo shop, a clothing store for (mainly) young women, a coffee shop and gift shop, and a new bar/restaurant called the Happy Grape. The coffee shop, gift shop, hardware store, and the Happy Grape appear to be thriving. But several businesses have come and gone in the last few years. What happened to them? We, the Center for Civic Life, believed it is at least partly because citizens are not invested in making Ashland a thriving economy.

Over the last twenty years, Ashland has lost many of its largest industries, leaving a large number of people unemployed. Although there are people with well-paying jobs and money, poverty pervades the city. Driving in from Interstate 71, one is struck by the abundance of parking lots and the hodgepodge of development. Driving from the east, the first businesses a visitor encounters are a Goasis service plaza next to an old elementary school (that will be closing) and across from Denny’s in a run-down parking lot, a motel, a McDonald’s and a Holiday Inn. Next is a Wendy’s and another motel. Continuing on, the visitor observes some newer plazas, filled with Wal-Mart, Verizon, dollar stores, a few local businesses, and other national chains. A little farther down is a large grocery store, Buehler’s, and a Home Depot. Continuing toward downtown, one drives past the justice complex and another plaza. On the right are KFC, UPS, a bright yellow Mexican Restaurant, a tire store, and a Bob Evans. Continuing toward downtown are more parking lots and plazas and then run-down houses, a BP station and a Dairy Queen.

When the driver arrives in the in downtown area, she/he is greeted by sidewalks and on-street parking on both sides; buildings are lovely old architecture but most of them are not being maintained properly. Many buildings are unoccupied. There are some businesses, both old and new, that seem to be thriving, but many of the spaces are filled by professional offices. Ashland’s downtown discourages walking. Although it is possible for a person to park for free a block away, most people prefer to park in front of wherever they are going. Walking is not pleasant – a constant stream of trucks and cars roar through. It is loud and smelly. One business owner wondered where all the traffic is coming from and where it is going. “It’s not stopping here,” he stated.

## A Different Model

When the public is involved in the decision-making process, alternative solutions can be uncovered. The Center's challenge was how to attract citizens and involve them in the public work of boosting the local economy. We decided to begin with a deliberative forum, based on the model of National Issues Forums (NIF). NIF has been successfully employed by various communities facilitating citizen centered discussions in an effort to generate better decisions (Downing, 1996). As a team we brainstormed whose voices we needed to hear and then set out to interview as many people from as diverse backgrounds as possible. We interviewed low-income people, business employees and business owners, people involved in economic development, and others who were interested in the topic. We also researched and incorporated the many successes in Ashland. We came together to "frame" the issue, looking for themes in our interviewees' ideas. We grouped interview comments under the following themes, which we labeled options: *Focus on Attracting both Large and Small Businesses*, *Include All Citizens*, and *Make Downtown Ashland a Destination*. We held a forum, in cooperation with the Ashland Center for Nonviolence, on November 7, 2013. We had 40 attendees, representing business owners, social service professionals, economic development professionals, City Council, Ashland University, and other interested people. A reporter from the *Ashland Times-Gazette* attended also. At the end of the forum, the actions that were agreed on were the following: to improve job skills and provide workforce training; to find ways for people to feel valued, especially in their jobs; to focus on making Ashland physically attractive; to develop reasons for Ashland University students to go downtown; to design a streetscape that is beautiful and safe; to leverage resources for start-up businesses; and to communicate the resources that are already available, such as the Ashland Area Chamber of Commerce.

We believed that the issue of boosting the economy needed follow-up citizens' groups. We had read about study circles (Clark & Teachout, 2012) – now called Dialogue to Change – (Everyday Democracy, 2014) and felt that many study circle initiatives matched our situation. We liked the term study circles better than the new name, dialogue circles, because the phrase, *study circles* conveys the expectation of digging into an issue. That is what we wanted to invite people to do. We wanted them to know that we expected not just dialogue but researching, building understanding, and developing solutions based on what they found.

Four of the CCL Advisory Committee volunteered to learn about study circles, to train facilitators, and to coordinate meetings of groups. Because of the holidays and because we thought we might be receiving a grant to fund our study circle work, we started the study circles January 27, which turned out to be the coldest night of the winter. We invited all the forum participants to be part of a planning committee for the study circles, and we also publicized it widely. We had planned to begin with the actions agreed on by the forum attendees and to turn these

actions into study circles. Seven people came, five of whom had attended the original forum. We explained our process and discussed both the forum issue guide and the forum results, and then we invited the attendees to continue the brainstorming. The group came out with two ideas they could support: *Beautifying Ashland* and *Promoting the Arts in Ashland*. One of the topics had been a recommendation of the forum, but the other was added that night.

We invited the planning meeting attendees (as well as the people who had attended the forum) to an all-day facilitator training in two weeks, which we then cancelled because no one could attend. Our study circle kick-off took place on February 11 with thirteen people in attendance. Publicity for the event included announcing the meeting in the newspaper and sending out materials via the CCL email list. Although we had also sent personalized letters to approximately 40 business owners, the Convention and Visitors Bureau, people involved in the Main Street organization, and other interested parties, few came as a result. Several people attended from the arts community, pleased that anyone wanted to promote the arts. The room was set up in two circles: *Beautifying Ashland* and *Promoting the Arts in Ashland*. In one circle, one of the CCL Advisory Committee members and an attendee co-facilitated; in the other, another of the CCL Advisory Committee members facilitated. Their task was to figure out people's personal stake in the topic. If there was time, they were to discuss three approaches – based on the forum results and the planning meeting discussion – that we had developed for each topic.

We invited these people to our facilitator training, which we had rescheduled for an evening. Six people attended. It was a push to accomplish training in such a short time frame, but the attendees rose to the challenge. Each study circle set its own dates and met four times, beginning in February and ending in March. Attendance at meetings varied. The *Beautifying Ashland* study circle started with six members and ended with four. *Promoting the Arts in Ashland* started with eight members and ended with 15. Someone from the study circle team attended each meeting. The last meeting of study circles was April 1, the Study Circle Action Forum. Once again, we publicized this widely, inviting the entire CCL email list and the public. Members from each study circle, as well as community members, attended, for a total of 12. Each study circle reported on their work and recommended next steps. Actions were listed and both groups said that they would continue working on their initiative. People volunteered to work on specific tasks in each committee.

Because its goals closely matched those of Main Street, *Beautifying Ashland* asked to be absorbed into that organization, and they met with the executive directors of Main Street and the Convention and Visitors Bureau. One study circle member brought forward an idea for a fair on South Street, the block behind Main Street. He wanted to highlight its potential as a community space. Meetings continued all summer, and *Serenade on South Street* was held September 27. South Street was blocked off and music groups performed. The barbershop hired

a barbershop quartet who sang at various places along the street, and other musicians performed in adjacent Appleseed Park. Music genres included jazz, popular songs sung by an a cappella student group from nearby Ashland University, Urban Folk, and rock. Food was available from a mobile vendor and two businesses on the street. Coupons were distributed, encouraging shopping on Main Street.

The fair was not well-publicized and nor well-attended. However, comments from the public were positive. One citizen wrote a letter to the editor about how good the music was and how disappointed she was that more people hadn't attended. Committee members are already planning to have a similar event next year and talking about what to change.

Ashland Arts is continuing to meet. Their mission is, *To build awareness and support of the arts in and of Ashland County*. To that end, they are building collaborative relationships among artists and art groups in the county. This summer, in response to discussion in the study circle, one co-chair offered four open-mic nights at the bandshell in Ashland. These exceeded expectations by bringing together large audiences and a diversity of performers that included high school students. The committee has established a Facebook page and is developing a Google calendar of all arts events in the county. They have met with the editor of the *Ashland Times-Gazette* and have a tentative commitment to a weekly arts page.

### **Implications**

We believe that pairing the NIF deliberative structure with study circles offer: a) breadth and depth, b) multivocality and focused dialogue, and c) talk and action. Both structures are well-organized and provide community members with a framework to follow in deliberating, making decisions together, and implementing action plans. We believe that beginning with an NIF forum invites the community to be a part of deliberating an issue. Following up with study circles provides a structure to investigate and act on it.

First, NIF offers breadth, whereas study circles emphasize depth. NIF forums are well-positioned to guide people into broader thinking about and understanding of an issue. Study circles cause people to think deeply about parts of the issue and to research resources that may aid in solutions. Both study circles in Ashland spent time researching and discussing their findings. Beautifying Ashland obtained a copy of the Main Street plan which has not been disseminated to the public. They also invited the city planner to a meeting to ask his response to their ideas. Promoting the Arts in Ashland identified organizations - such as the Ashland University Theater and Performance Studies, the Kroc Center, and the Ashland Arts League - and other people interested in endorsing their initiatives. They also invited the editor of the *Ashland Times-Gazette* to a meeting at which they probed his willingness to devote weekly space to an arts column and asked for his

suggestions. People from the group researched other arts pages and brought them to a meeting for discussion.

Second, NIF carves out a space for limitless possibilities, which we refer to as multivocality, whereas study circles underscore focused dialogue. The intent of an NIF forum is to bring together a broad cross-section of citizens and to have them consider many ideas. One of the goals of the forum is to encourage people to listen nonjudgmentally and to question their own beliefs. Using interviews to inform the issue guide and inviting a wide audience bring a diversity of people who may or may not ordinarily be interested in political or economic issues. Study circles also strive for diversity and listening nonjudgmentally. Yet they go a step further in providing the platform for researching together, having dialogue about options, selecting solutions, and carrying them out; these processes add a layer of citizenship that is missing, following a public forum.

Third, talk is a primary goal for NIF, whereas study circles aim to bring about action. For example, looking at an NIF questionnaire administered following a forum, we find questions about actions that should be taken and about personal attitudes, but nothing asks people to come back together and act as a group. Attending an NIF forum and sharing ideas and values can be life-altering, but, as we saw after our forum, most people did not intend to continue working on the issue. Looking at the result of the forum in Ashland – actions people agreed on, trade-offs they were willing to accept, and next steps – shows that deep thinking was occurring. If people had begun acting on those suggestions, Ashland's economy would be growing already. Of the forum attendees, only one, in addition to the Center for Civic Life Advisory Committee, participated in the study circles.

The Study Circles Step-by-Step Guide is entitled, *Organizing Community-wide Dialogue for Action and Change* (Study Circles, 2001). The title clearly states that the goal of study circles is action. Additionally, the last tab in the section on organizing a study circle program addresses sustainability and expansion. The strength of study circles is their action focus, and they attract people who want to act. The forum attendee who came to the study circle kickoff was disappointed at the study circle topics. Yet, because he wanted to make a difference, he joined a study circle, attended most of the meetings, met with Main Street, and became the lead organizer of Serenade on South Street. Promoting the Arts in Ashland gained participants while they investigated other artists and art groups to network with. Those people came because they love the arts and felt as if something finally was being done to promote them.

### **Conclusion and Recommendation**

The Center for Civic Life at Ashland University is two years old. We are still in the process of establishing ourselves as a group that can be trusted. We are also trying to lay foundations for reviving the credibility of democracy and affirming the need for citizen involvement. This is a much slower process than we originally



thought it would be, but we are convinced that, in order to be viewed as a collaborator, we need to integrate our work with the community's work. The director of CCL has continued to work on both initiatives derived from the study circles, and the CCL Advisory Committee is discussing how to proceed related to boosting the local economy.

We are heartened by the possibilities of combining NIF forums with study circles in considering future issues. We also recommend this combination of dialogue and deliberative formats to other centers. We hope to have a greater turnout when using this combination in the future, and we believe this will happen as we become more known and trusted.

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