

Forging Constructive Community Discourse Task Force Report

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Overview

The Task Force on Forging Constructive Community Discourse decided to use key goals identified by the Scoping Group on Forging Constructive Community Discourse. Those goals were:

1. To improve public exchange of information
2. To strengthen and support democratic processes for town decision-making
3. To foster a sense of community

Central themes that emerged from discussion of these goals were that communication must be decentralized so that more citizens become more involved, and that communication must be improved in terms of both content and tone. We emphasize the critical importance of the manner of communication with each other in the success of any of these efforts. (We address this issue in detail beginning on page 15.) Structural mechanisms to improve the quantity and availability of information and mechanisms to improve the quality of discourse were identified. Each mechanism was discussed in terms of a rationale (how it would improve the dissemination of information and/or improve discourse); resources needed to implement the mechanism; a time frame; dependencies on other programs or groups of people; and recommended action steps.

This report provides detailed information on each of the structural mechanisms identified as well as narrative describing the relevance and applicability of each mechanism. Some of the mechanisms can be immediately implemented; others will take some time to accomplish. Some of the mechanisms require no additional expenditure of monies; others will require considerable outlay of monies. Some of the mechanisms can be implemented by a small number of individuals; others will require coordinated effort among many individuals or groups. The mechanisms, taken together, should result in a community with more information more readily available to all citizens; better tone of conversation between and among citizens; and an enhanced and improved sense of connection among citizens.

The suggested improvements we deem most important, and those to which we believe priority should be given, are: **training** for committee and board chairs and members (to address the problem of culture and style of communication); development of an improved town **website** (to address dissemination of accurate and up-to-date information); and creation of a **Gathering Place** (to help build an improved and more inclusive sense of community).

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Issues and Questions

The goals of the taskforce on Forging Constructive Community Discourse were to:

1. Identify reasons why communication and discourse among citizens and between town and citizens appears to be problematic.
2. Create an action plan for improving communication and discourse.
 - a. Identify structural mechanisms that can be used to improve communication (the “what”).
 - b. Identify mechanisms for encouraging the appropriate forms of discourse (the “how”).

Barriers to effective and appropriate communication and discourse fall into two categories: absence of information or data, and culture. To address the former problem we recommend specific mechanisms to improve dissemination of information. It is our expectation that the more informed people are, the less emotionally attached they will be to their discourse and the more constructive their discourse will be. To address the latter problem we recommend specific mechanisms to improve the nature and quality of discourse. Constructive discourse will be better achieved if we identify the goals of our communications; take personal responsibility for discourse; and focus on how we converse with one another, including the tone we use.

The problems we cite are not unique to Lexington. They are a function of human nature, of the heterogeneity of our society, and of the general tensions among peoples throughout the world. We cannot change human nature, but we can change the atmosphere associated with our interactions. We can learn to listen better. We cannot, and should not, try to encourage homogeneity. It is our heterogeneity that makes for a richer, albeit more contentious, society. Our heterogeneity should be recognized and respected. We cannot lessen tensions throughout the world, but we can lessen tensions within our small part of the world. The solutions to our problems lie in tolerance and respect and civility.

A number of suggestions for improvement in this report are not new; indeed, several previous groups have noted them. Members of this task force questioned why these suggested steps have not already been taken. We suspect that lack of resources, coordination, and knowledge of where to begin lie at the heart of the problem. Therefore, in addition to proposing ideas, we have proposed ways of implementing them. Failure to implement previous suggestions was seen as a great source of frustration, and as an impediment to constructive community discourse in itself. The lack of progress with respect to some previous suggestions has, indeed, increased the emotional tone associated with discourse for many of our citizens. Our most serious proposal is that at least some of the actions mentioned in this report be implemented as soon as possible – if for no other reason than as a good-faith effort. Citizens need to be able to view their leaders as responsive. This will engender trust and will aid the process of communication. When citizens see their leaders working to make improvements, they will respond positively and will support the effort.

We recognize that barriers to improved discourse do not lie in previous failures of implementation alone. Money is a key factor; with tight budgets there is little left for other than the necessities. Fortunately, several of the proposed mechanisms in this report can be implemented without additional expense to the town. We will need to rely on volunteer efforts, however. While volunteer efforts are always fraught with uncertainty and unevenness, Lexington has a history of volunteerism. We believe that talented and committed people will come forward. Other obstacles may be harder to overcome. The evolution of our community sometimes pits newcomers and longtime residents against one another. The history of friction among citizens around certain issues (such as PAYT, the construction of Depot Square, and placement of a crèche), has resulted in poor communication and polarization. The desire for more services by some and unwillingness to pay for those services by others have caused tensions around taxes and overrides.

Although we cannot eliminate these latter problems, members of the Task Force believe that we can institute measures to diffuse or soften them. This report offers specific mechanisms for improvement of communication. Each of the mechanisms included in this report will be discussed in terms of: the rationale for inclusion of the mechanism; resources and/or funding deemed necessary to implement the mechanism; a suggested time frame for implementation of the mechanism; items upon which the mechanism may depend; and specific action steps to be taken.

Goal I: Identify structural mechanisms that can be used to improve communication

Key problems identified by this Task Force centered on the dissemination of information and opportunities for discourse. The Task Force proposes several mechanisms for addressing these problems. A summary matrix of these mechanisms, including actions to be taken, suggested participants for each action, and proposed measures of success for each action, follows discussion of each of the suggested items.

Gathering Place

It is becoming increasingly recognized that people of all ages need a central place where they can come together, in a casual manner, for discussion, informal learning, or just ‘hanging out’. We have a number of places in town where some of these things already take place (e.g., the libraries, coffee shops and restaurants, schools, the Senior Center, houses of worship), but we do not have a location where all of these things can occur. We envision a community center where people can talk, eat and drink, and interact, thereby enhancing their social, physical, and emotional well-being.

Rationale: Our culture is increasingly moving toward one of isolation of people from one another. We separate ourselves by culture, economics, religious beliefs, age, and stages in life. Due, in part, to time constraints, we come together primarily for functional reasons – to attend religious services, to participate in athletic events, to take courses, to serve on committees, and so on. An environment in which people can feel free to drop in briefly or stay for longer periods of time would help identify our common interests and strengthen the bonds of those common interests.

Resources/funding: A centrally located space would be needed. This would require using available town owned property or acquiring some current commercial space or building a new facility. Funds would be needed to build a facility or alter existing space; to maintain the physical aspects of the space; and to pay for supplies and, possibly, staff.

Time frame: A committee to plan for the Gathering Place could be formed in spring 2005 with a kick-off event to introduce the idea and garner support in fall 2005. Starting small (with the goal of growing to a more comprehensive and large facility) might permit implementation of this mechanism as early as spring 2006.

Dependencies: Success of this mechanism will depend upon the availability of space, available funds, and the creativity of the planning committee. We believe that there will be sufficient interest on the part of citizens to sustain this mechanism once it is adequately established. We recognize that this mechanism is one of our most ambitious proposals and one most dependent upon sufficient resources (primarily those of space and money). However, as indicated at the beginning of this report, the Task Force has identified this mechanism as one of our top priorities.

Action steps: Since it is important (for purposes of design and sense of ownership) to involve as much of the community in the development of the Gathering Place as possible, we recommend that the next book used in the Lexington Reads program be one that

addresses this concept. (*The Great Good Place* by Ray Oldenburg is a suggested reading.) The speaker at the beginning of this program should be someone who has worked in the area of community building. After reading the book, citizens would attend one of several Study Circles. A task force (of participants in the Study Circles, town staff, and any other interested parties) would then be created to plan and organize the Gathering Place. One of its first tasks would be to look into space and funding options. We also recommend that members of this committee read about similar places already in existence around the country and the world. It is recommended that, in the course of designing this center, meetings be held with various constituencies to identify their needs and plan for appropriate uses of space and activities.

Last Night

A celebration of the outgoing old year and incoming new year would be a mechanism for bringing people together in a joyful manner. Such an event occurred a few years ago and was well received. We envision a small scale event, with a single activity. (Should this be successful, the celebration could be expanded in subsequent years to include multiple events.) Activities that could be considered for Last Night include a concert, dance performance, comedy night, children's activities, and fireworks. The event could take place, for example, at Cary Hall, in religious organizations, LHS, the cinema. To accommodate the younger members of our community we recommend that festivities commence fairly early in the evening. We could begin the evening with a ringing of the bell in the Old Belfry.

Rationale: This event, occurring once a year, at a time when people may be celebrating their own, separate, holidays, would serve to remind us that we live in the same community and we share an identity as Lexingtonians. We could put aside whatever differences we have and enjoy one another's company.

Resources/funding: A planning group would be needed for this event. Organizers might coordinate with Cary Memorial Lecture organizers to include tickets to this event in the mailing of tickets to other events sponsored by the Lecture group. Funding would be required from financial sponsors in order to make the event free, or low cost, to town residents.

Time frame: The goal would be to hold this event on December 31, 2005. Once established, and successful, this should become an annual event.

Dependencies: Success would depend upon support from various organizations in town. Permits might be required for some events.

Action steps: These include identifying a chair (and members) for the event committee, venues for events, and performers.

Neighborhood Associations

Task Force members are aware of several existing neighborhood associations (e.g., Meriam Hill, East Lexington, South Lexington) and that some of these associations are more active than others. We recommend that successful and active existing associations serve as models for the development or improvement of other associations so that relatively small pockets of citizens throughout Lexington have contact with other citizens in their local areas.

Rationale: These associations can serve multiple functions, from sharing of information to advocacy for issues relevant and important for their area to work on local community improvement to developing social connections.

Resources/funding: These would vary from one association to another and from one time to another. The primary resource would be community volunteers.

Time frame: Activities within this mechanism could be implemented immediately.

Dependencies: Success would depend upon interest among citizens and willingness of a few volunteers to serve as leaders. As time goes on and the associations develop, it is hoped that additional people would become interested in serving in leadership roles.

Action steps: Initial action steps include identifying the need and interest for expansion of such associations. Initiators of new associations (or developers of existing associations) should talk with leaders of the more active associations for advice on stimulating interest, promoting the association, etc. This could be accomplished through cross-association meetings. Each individual association should identify its nature and focus.

Newcomers' Welcome Packet

To help familiarize newcomers, the Task Force recommends development of a Newcomers' Welcome Packet. This packet would be made available in libraries and Town Hall and distributed to new residents by real estate agencies. We recommend that *The Minuteman* and other local newspapers run a Special Newcomers' Edition or Citizens' Guide (as a supplemental edition or an insert in a regular edition) once a year and that this supplement be made available in Town Hall and the libraries. In addition, the information in the packet should be posted on the town website. Having this packet available on the website would permit the most up-to-date information to be posted.

Rationale: This packet would help newcomers learn about Lexington and its resources. This would help them get involved in the life of the town more quickly and more easily. Town information would be supplemented with practical information in one, easy-to-use, packet. Town employees would be saved from repeatedly answering basic questions.

Resources/funding: These would include staff time for reference and fact checking; volunteers; and participation by the Newcomers' Club, real estate agents, *The Minuteman* and other local newspapers. Funding for printing the packet could come from contributions from citizens; real estate agencies and other organizations and businesses in town (e.g., in the form of advertising); and from town monies. Funding may also be needed for posting the packet on the town website.

Time frame: The goal would be to have a first printing or posting on the town website within 6 months. A proposed deadline would be the start of school in September 2005.

Dependencies: Success would depend upon coordination of effort among several groups including: the Newcomers' Club, real estate agencies, newspapers, town staff, and volunteers.

Action steps: A first step would be to establish a committee composed of members of the Newcomers' Club, real estate agents, and town staff. The role of this committee would be to gather information for the packet and to contact other relevant resources in town. These resources could include student interns or student volunteers in exchange for community service credit. It would be important that real estate agencies provide their support and assistance. The Newcomers' Club might be asked to adopt this undertaking as a community service project. Town staff would need to agree to provide needed information.

Newsletters (and mailing inserts)

Several organizations in town already publish newsletters – some directed to a general readership and some directed toward specific groups. (For example, schools, the Senior Center, religious organizations, and the League of Women Voters publish newsletters targeted to their constituents.)

We propose suggested current and pertinent topic additions to these newsletters that identifies and discusses town issues. In addition, we recommend that the current town practice of including inserts along with quarterly tax bills be continued and expanded to provide timely information on issues before citizens. We suggest that a topic be identified for each mailing and that each of these organizations address the topic in their regular mailing. This would provide consistency of information and focus for citizens regardless of their source of information. We recommend that any information published in the newsletters also be included on the town website.

Rationale: This mechanism would help increase dissemination of information and thereby increase communication. It could also serve to enable and reinforce civil discourse.

Resources/funding: These would come from the current publishers of existing newsletters.

Time frame: This mechanism could be implemented immediately.

Dependencies: Success of this mechanism would depend upon coordination among the writers/editors/publishers of the various newsletters. Senior staff in town departments would need to be involved so as to provide up-to-date and accurate factual information. (For example, the DPW might wish to provide information on seasonal issues such as leaf collection, holiday tree collection, etc.)

Action steps: It would be necessary to contact the various publishers and the webmaster to secure their cooperation and to coordinate efforts. Representatives of the various organizations and town staff would need to form a committee to discuss themes for each mailing.

Politics in the Park

Many of our discussions about politics and politically charged issues take place in coffee houses or restaurants in town, on the street, at the supermarket, and so on. The Task Force felt it would be constructive to designate a central and regular location for such conversations that would be open to all interested parties. We therefore recommend establishing a regular meeting for discussion for town-wide issues. Sundays afternoons from 3:30 – 5:00 P.M., once a month, seem an appropriate time for such meetings. Since it would be important to hold these meetings in a central location, we recommend using Cary Library. In pleasant weather, meetings might be held on the Lexington Green.

Rationale: It is important to provide citizens with as many opportunities for discussion of town-wide issues as possible. The organized forums and debates, held before elections and override votes, are seen by some as too formal and too limited. While they provide information, they do not necessarily allow for discussion. Politics in the Park would offer people a chance to come together to share information, explore positions, and argue points in a more informal setting. It would encourage respect for different opinions. We recommend that each meeting have a focal issue for discussion and that there be a moderator or facilitator to guide the meeting. Since this meeting would take place during the day and be open to all, we see this as an opportunity to involve young people. Teenagers and young adults, newly able to vote or approaching voting age, could use Politics in the Park to learn about civics, government, politics, and political issues.

Resources/funding: Space in Cary Library would need to be available.

Time frame: This mechanism could be implemented immediately.

Dependencies: The success of this mechanism would depend upon securing a location for meetings. As of now, the Library could provide space on Sundays in 2005 (except for May 15, 2005). An organizing committee and moderators/facilitators would need to be identified. Promotion of the mechanism, through advertising in local newspapers, newsletters, and the town website, would be necessary.

Action steps: We recommend that a committee be formed with representatives from the Board of Selectmen, Chamber of Commerce, School Committee, and League of Women

Voters. This committee would then be charged with identifying relevant issues and promoting the meetings.

Precinct Meetings and TMMA Communications Group

Discussion with Hank Manz, current Chair of TMMA, and Deb Strod, member of the TMMA Communications Group, revealed that the goal of the Communications Group is to increase the dissemination of information through two primary means: holding two Town Meeting representative-led precinct meetings each year and making minutes of meetings available to all citizens. In the case of the former, the intention is to make these meetings available to all members of each precinct and to invite the neighborhood associations. In the case of the latter, volunteers would attend board and committee meetings and provide 'unofficial' minutes. Mr. Manz and Ms. Strod noted that the website for Stand for Children already includes such minutes.

This task force recommends support for the efforts of the Communications Group and encouragement of additional precinct meetings to be held whenever neighborhood issues arise.

Rationale: This mechanism would provide the opportunity for more people to gain more access to more information. These precinct meetings (and neighborhood association meetings) would provide a means by which those not comfortable using the town website or those who wish more information than a newsletter might provide can receive information and participate in town discussions.

Resources/funding: These would include volunteers willing to be responsible for organizing meetings and serving as minutes-takers. Funds might be needed for items such as refreshments at meetings or advertising of meetings. Meetings should be advertised in *The Minuteman* and other local newspapers.

Time frame: This could be implemented immediately.

Dependencies: Success would depend upon coordination with the Communications Group and interest among volunteers in precincts.

Action steps: These would include contacting the TMMA Communications Group to determine their actions and progress thus far, and to discuss coordination efforts in precincts.

Town Day

Lexington Town Day would be an event that combines a street fair, Discovery Day activities, town department Open Houses, and Lexfest. Activities might include merchant and food sales, political/government information booths, a craft show and sale, and celebrations of different cultures. We recommend closing traffic in the center of town from the Waltham Street/Mass Ave. intersection through the Battle Green area.

This event could be held on the Saturday of the Memorial Day weekend and a weekend day in October.

Rationale: A large-scale event, in the center of town, would bring many elements of the community together to take part in interesting and diverse activities. It would highlight the variety of interests and talents among our citizens and the things in which people and organizations in town participate. It would provide an opportunity for people to share pleasant experiences.

Resources/funding: These could be the combination of what is already being spent on the separate events of Discovery Day and Lexfest. Combining resources/funding would likely save money and a combined event might yield even greater organizational participation. Sponsorship might come from town merchants and organizations as they would be “repaid” through sales and advertisement during the event.

Time frame: This event could be held as early as October 2005.

Dependencies: Success might depend, in part, upon consultation with other communities hosting similar events to learn about the issues they face and their procedures for success. It would be necessary to find someone to lead the coordination effort and chair an organizing committee.

Action steps: A first, and critical step, would be to have all parties involved in this event agree to the combined effort. It would be important to emphasize that a single large event would draw greater attention to and would increase the number of participants at each separate program. Secondly, a planning committee would need to be established, with an identified chair of the committee.

Website

An accurate and up-to-date town website would provide the town and its citizens with two-way communication. After reviewing websites from other towns in Massachusetts, this Task Force identified several key elements of a ‘good’ website.

We recognize that a successful and useful website cannot be developed and implemented in a brief period of time. Therefore, we have grouped the key elements according to their priority.

Priority 1 should be given to:

- ❖ FAQs (Frequently Asked Questions)
- ❖ Links to committee chairs/members
- ❖ Information regarding structure of town government
- ❖ An organizational chart, with hyperlinks
- ❖ A calendar of events, with hyperlinks
- ❖ A list of volunteer opportunities and contacts

Priority 2 should be given to:

- ❖ Forms and the ability to fill them out and send them electronically

Priority 3 should be given to:

- ❖ Search function
- ❖ Street maps, using GIS

Priority 4 should be given to:

- ❖ Newcomers' page
- ❖ Targeted group information (e.g., seniors, disabled, youth)
- ❖ Links to community organizations

Priority 5 should be given to:

- ❖ A history/community profile
- ❖ Laws and regulations, with links to appropriate departments for interpretation
- ❖ Emotion-neutral background and factual information about current issues
- ❖ Voting information, including sample ballots

Rationale: The website would increase access to information about the town for all citizens. It is a more or less self-service mechanism that can be used by anyone with access to a computer and the Internet, at any time of day or night. It would increase the connections between citizens and the town with an economy of effort and time on each part. It would also serve to reduce the frustration expressed by some citizens with their perceived inability to get needed information.

Resources/funding: These include a committee of those with interest in and/or knowledge of website design and a webmaster, or someone able and willing to maintain the site. We recommend that this person be a town employee. Town employees would have more ready access to information and would more reliably be able to update the site, providing the continuity needed to maintain the integrity of the site. In addition, some fundraising may be necessary, and we suggest that private companies, especially those focused on web development and maintenance, be contacted for support.

Time frame: It should be possible to develop a fully, or nearly, functional website within one year. This would include establishing the initial planning committee, setting a time frame for meetings, and implementing ideas.

Dependencies: The success of the website would depend upon the expertise and time of those involved in planning and development. It would also depend upon some financial resources being devoted to it. This could include paying for the services of a town employee.

Action steps: The recommended action steps include: forming the planning and development committee (to be constituted of town employees and town members, in consultation with town boards and committees to ensure the accuracy of information); securing needed funding; hiring (or designating) a webmaster; establishing a regular meeting schedule; and committing staff time from each town department.

Summary Matrix Goal I: To identify structural mechanisms that would be used to enhance quality and quantity of information disseminated.

GOALS	ACTIONS	SUGGESTED PARTICIPANTS	MEASURES OF SUCCESS
Identify structural mechanisms that can improve communication	Gathering Place [priority]	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Organizing committee ▪ Financial sponsors 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ planning group formed ▪ project plan completed (should include measures of success including: attendance; average cost/revenue; number of programs; participant satisfaction) ▪ opening of Gathering Place
	Last Night	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Planning committee ▪ Financial sponsors 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ planning group formed ▪ project plan developed ▪ event held ▪ # of participants ▪ % of cost recovered through sale of buttons, etc. ▪ % rating event positive on various dimensions (e.g., informative, well-run, fun)
	Neighborhood Associations	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Leaders of the various associations 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ guidelines drafted ▪ # of associations adopting guidelines
	Newcomers' Welcome Packet	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Leaders of Newcomers' Club ▪ Real estate community ▪ <i>Minuteman</i> ▪ Town Hall ▪ Volunteers 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ packet designed and produced ▪ distribution plan/mechanisms developed ▪ # of packets distributed ▪ cost per packet ▪ % of positive feedback

GOALS	ACTIONS	SUGGESTED PARTICIPANTS	MEASURES OF SUCCESS
	Newsletters (and mailing inserts)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Town Hall (members of senior staff in every department) ▪ Groups that publish newsletters (e.g., school groups, Senior Center, religious organizations, League of Women Voters) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ # of mailings containing community information ▪ # of residents reached per mailing ▪ cost per mailing ▪ # of responses to requests for feedback (e.g., evaluations, surveys)
	Politics in the Park	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Representatives from ▪ BOS ▪ Chamber of Commerce ▪ School Committee ▪ League of Women Voters 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ planning group formed ▪ project plan completed ▪ operating group created ▪ first event held ▪ schedule developed for future ▪ participation rate charted ▪ % of participants rating events positively
	Precinct Meetings	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Members of precincts 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ schedule developed ▪ # of precincts holding at least one meeting each year ▪ # of people attending meetings ▪ % of participants rating meeting useful

GOALS	ACTIONS	SUGGESTED PARTICIPANTS	MEASURES OF SUCCESS
	TMMA	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Members of precincts 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Schedule developed ▪ # of precincts holding at least one meeting each year ▪ # of people attending meetings ▪ % of participants rating meeting useful
	Town Day	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Lexfest participants ▪ Discovery Day participants 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ planning group formed ▪ project plan developed ▪ event held ▪ % rating event positive on various dimensions (e.g., informative, well-run, fun)
	Town Website [priority]	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Webmaster ▪ Volunteer committee of those with interest in and/or knowledge of website design 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Improvement plan developed ▪ % of plan implemented ▪ # of website hits pre- and post-implementation

Summary of Time Frames

Some of the recommended mechanisms for dissemination of information can be implemented immediately; others will take more time.

Mechanisms that can be implemented immediately include:

- Inserts in newsletters and tax bills
- Development or improvement of neighborhood associations
- TMMA Communications Group and precinct meetings
- Newcomers' Welcome Packet
- Politics in the Park
- Initial work on the Gathering Place

Mechanisms that will take more time include:

- Full implementation of the town website
- Full implementation of the Gathering Place
- Town Day
- Last Night

Goal II: Identify mechanisms for encouraging the appropriate forms of discourse

Community discourse involves several aspects, chief of which is communication. Communication, like most human activities, comprises two primary parts which can be summed up as “what” and “how”. “What” refers to information. “How” refers to the manner in which information is sent and received.

Much of the work of this Task Force focused on the “what” and discussion of mechanisms for communication appears above. Identifying the “how” proved to be more complex and difficult than identifying the “what”. It is, likewise, more difficult to evaluate the effectiveness of the suggestions we have for improving the “how” on an objective level.

First, though, it is important to describe that to which we are referring. There was agreement among many of those Task Force members who have been in town for more than a few years that there has been a marked deterioration in civility. While we recognize that this is not a phenomenon unique to Lexington, we experience the unpleasantness here. The willingness to ascribe ulterior motives to actions by elected officials, the unwillingness to recognize that a difference of opinion does not automatically mean that one party is right and the other wrong, and the difficulty in developing a sense of the needs of the community as a whole are examples of what we are trying to define. Each of us has had some experiences in which we were observers or participants in unpleasant, if not downright nasty, situations that left us feeling hurt, angry, confused, sad, or some combination of these.

Here is a hypothetical example of such a conversation between neighbors. The issue being discussed was a real and controversial one. We are using it simply as an example of how people can deal with each other, not with any intention of raising it for further debate. Despite its being hypothetical, this kind of conversation occurs too often in Lexington.

John: How are you planning to vote on the PAYT referendum?

Bob: That Board of Selectmen! Who do they think they are? They think they can get one over on us. They didn't even let us comment about it. I expect free trash pickup, and that's what I'm going to get.

John: I never see you put out any recycling, and you're making my taxes stay high because we have to pay so much to the trash disposal. If you'd recycle, the fees wouldn't keep going up, and we wouldn't have to keep raising taxes to pay for other services.

Bob: Why should I recycle? I've lived here for 40 years and we never did it before. It's too much of a problem for me. Besides, it's the schools that

are making the taxes so high. Why should I vote for overrides? My kids are all through with school.

John: You can't complain about taxes going up if you don't make any effort to keep them down. You're really not being much of a community supporter.

Depending on your perspective, it is easy to see one or the other of these neighbors as the bad guy. Looking at the conversation, though, it is not difficult to see that each of them helped to make it become increasingly unpleasant. The following is an example of how the conversation could have gone if each party had assumed that the other had the good of the community at heart, or could simply see the situation from the point of view of the other.

John: How are you planning to vote on the PAYT referendum?

Bob: Even though there were meetings about it, I didn't feel like I got enough information, and it was hard to understand it all, so I'm voting against it.

John: The impact on our taxes would be pretty dramatic, since the costs for solid waste disposal are so high. We could sell excess tonnage to other communities and make money rather than spending it.

Bob: I still feel trash pickup should be free. That's what the bylaws say. The schools take up too much of the taxes. We should take a look at how effectively the money is being spent. I'd like to see whether our taxes are being spent properly before you ask me to support PAYT. I'll bet there's some money that we could save in other departments. If we do that and prove that there's no waste, I'll consider supporting PAYT, but I don't believe it now.

John: No one has done an audit, but I don't think there's much money being wasted. I support raising taxes when I think they're needed, but I agree that we should look at how we're spending money more carefully.

The outcome is the same. John will vote to support PAYT and Bob will vote against it, but the tone of the interaction is different. In the second example, a personal attack and an assumption that some group is trying to trick the citizenry have been replaced with an acceptance of personal responsibility for obtaining information. It is easier to take responsibility and speak respectfully when thinking before speaking. There is a difference between free speech and appropriate speech, and we need to remind ourselves and others about that difference.

Why does it feel as though the sense of community has diminished recently? We realize that Lexington has become an increasingly diverse town in recent years. Assumptions that everyone felt similarly about issues, if they were ever true, are less likely to be true now than before. People may be less willing to sit quietly when they are upset than they once were, although some fear speaking because they believe they may be recipients of personal attacks. A stressful economic situation, on personal and public levels, contributes to entrenchment in one's beliefs and a reluctance to accept that there is more than one way to view an issue.

There are overt and subtle ways in which people make communication difficult. Labeling ourselves verbally or by other means, such as wearing political buttons, is subtle. [We are not advocating that people avoid wearing buttons, or that they cease placing bumper stickers on their cars, or putting signs on their lawns. We are trying to point out that there are ramifications of our speech or actions that may not be obvious at first glance.] Immediately introducing oneself to a new acquaintance as liberal, conservative, progressive, mainstream, middle-of-the-road, Democrat, Republican, Green, can leave the other on the defensive. Using terms that are racist, homophobic, sexist, or prejudicial about another's religion is overt. Hateful speech can make others reluctant to speak out, and when they do, it may be difficult for them not to speak with anger or hurt directed toward others. Both overt and subtle forms of communication, when they are perceived as distancing, can leave the other person feeling left out. Getting to know one another without labels takes time, but taking the time may avoid some of the sense of the need for defensiveness.

How can we go about changing the level of discourse? There are some efforts that can only be made by individuals, but there are several that we can make as a community.

- Make sure that people are informed about issues. The more informed people are, the more likely it is that they will communicate on an objective, civil level. The mechanisms for dissemination of information discussed above under Goal I will contribute to an informed citizenry.
- Focus on the objective of the conversation. Consider how the manner of our speech or writing will further our ability to get what we want.
- Insist upon civil behavior at all public meetings. Meetings should be run so that acceptable behaviors are understood by all present. At the beginning of each meeting, the chair should confirm that every member agrees to abide by the guidelines for civil discourse, and that audience members will be expected to do so as well.
- Avoid identifying guidelines with "No Place for Hate". Regrettably, the name itself seems to inspire some anger. Instead, incorporate and support the guidelines for civil discourse. The comments made by Town Moderator at the beginning of Town Meeting are an excellent source for guidelines.
- As individuals, encourage civil discourse by modeling it to others and by letting others know that we are uncomfortable with comments that belittle or denigrate others, whether they are overtly hostile or subtly condescending.

As mentioned at the beginning of this report, we recognize that dealing with how we relate to one another is arguably the most difficult of the tasks at hand. Nonetheless, we see it as critical to developing the ability to see ourselves as one community and the ability to collaborate to make sure that we address the needs of the whole community.

To achieve the goals just identified, we propose two specific mechanisms. A summary matrix of these mechanisms, including actions to be taken, suggested participants for each action, and proposed measures of success for each action, follows discussion of each of the suggested items.

How-to Manual

We propose that a manual outlining how to run meetings and detailing rules for civil discourse be written and distributed to all committee, commission, and board chairs and members. Much of the information to be contained in said manual already exists in other documents (e.g., the booklet from town for new committee members).

Rationale: While we have all participated in meetings and have a sense of how meetings run, we don't necessarily know how to run meetings efficiently and effectively. The manual should outline tasks and goals and provide practical suggestions for successful leadership. In addition, by providing rules for civil discourse, the manual would help ensure that those serving in public roles follow and model appropriate behavior and would offer support for the chair in his/her exercise of control and maintenance of civility.

Resources/funding: A committee should be formed to review existing documents and write a new manual. There would be costs associated with printing the manuals.

Time frame: Commencement of this task should begin immediately. There is an urgent need for this manual.

Dependencies: Successful use of this manual will depend upon the importance and value attached to it by members of the Board of Selectmen and School Committee. As the two primary groups of leaders in town, the attitudes and behaviors of members of these groups will be critical.

Action steps: The first step would be the formation of the above-mentioned committee.

Training

The Task Force recommends that a training program be established to supplement the manual. This training could serve to reinforce and/or explain information contained in the manual. At first, this training should be made available on an annual basis, but the goal would be to offer the training on a semi-annual basis.

Rationale: Written information, in the form of the manual, is important, but it is not sufficient. People need an opportunity to discuss information, ask questions, and practice techniques.

Resources/funding: Hiring a trainer can be an expensive proposition. (Grant money may be available for this as it was for diversity training for town employees.) Fortunately, we already have trainers, or people trained as facilitators. Those who have

performed as facilitators in Study Circles could serve as initial trainers and teach others to become trainers for future sessions. We are also fortunate to have residents in Lexington with backgrounds as negotiators and with expertise in issues such as cultural differences, individualism vs. collectivism, and forms of communication.

Time frame: The training, along with the manual, should be implemented immediately. The sooner we begin to focus on the “how” of civil discourse, the sooner we can, as a community, begin to behave with civility toward one another.

Dependencies: The success of the training, as with the success of the manual, will depend upon the support of key leaders in town.

Action steps: Contact Study Circle facilitators to obtain their support and agreement to participate in this endeavor. Establish a committee to identify the content of training sessions and organize the sessions. It would be beneficial to have the manual ready, and read by affected parties, prior to training.

Summary Matrix Goal II: Identify mechanisms for encouraging the appropriate forms of discourse.

GOALS	ACTIONS	SUGGESTED PARTICIPANTS	MEASURES OF SUCCESS
Identify mechanisms for encouraging appropriate forms of discourse	How-to manual (should include information on how to run a meeting and how to follow/enforce guidelines for civil discourse)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Volunteer committee of <ol style="list-style-type: none"> a) those interested in and/or knowledgeable about relevant information b) those with writing skills ▪ Members of No Place for Hate campaign 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ organizational group formed ▪ manual written ▪ manual distribution ▪ cost/manual ▪ % evaluating manual positively
	Training sessions [priority]	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Chairs of committees, boards ▪ Members of committees, boards ▪ Facilitators from Study Circles to provide training to participants and to train other facilitators 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ program prepared ▪ first training held ▪ # of participants trained ▪ cost/participant ▪ % evaluating training positively ▪ development of mechanism for ongoing training

Summary of Time Frames

Mechanisms that can be implemented immediately include:

- Preparation of the manual
- Training of committee and board chairs

Mechanisms that will take more time include:

- Training of committee and board members

We recognize that we cannot expect that suggested mechanisms for encouraging appropriate forms of discourse will necessarily alter behaviors to the degree desired. As William Graham Sumner said, “stateways do not make folkways”. In other words, it is not useful to try to legislate appropriate behaviors because folkways (group habits common to a culture) are impervious to such legislation. However, we believe that a manual that refers to appropriate behaviors and training of individuals who serve on town committees and boards can lead to modeling of appropriate behaviors by members of those committees and boards that may, ultimately, alter the culture of discourse among citizens generally.

Conclusion

We are fortunate to live in a community rich in heritage and diversity. Sometimes, however, that heritage and diversity get the better of us and we become a community of dissension. The many and varied talents of our residents should serve to bring us together and make us better. Too often, however, they tear us apart and make us less than we want to be, or can be. Members of this Task Force believe that there are mechanisms that can be put in place that would, while not eliminating the dissent and tensions entirely, serve to reduce them. The suggested improvements we deem most important, and those to which we believe priority should be given are training for committee and board chairs and members; development of an improved town website; and creation of a Gathering Place.

The two key elements of constructive community discourse, as identified by this Task Force, are the “what” (dissemination of information) and “how” (forms of discourse) of communication. As indicated in the narrative above, the “what” turned out to be easier to address than the “how”. Elements of the “what” are more concrete and tangible. We can specify mechanisms that aid in the dissemination of information. We can specify what should be included in that information to enhance its content and usefulness. The ability to objectively specify “how” we communicate with one another (critical to constructive discourse) is more elusive. Clearly, certain components are necessary for productive conversation and these include an ability to listen to the other, an open mind, and an inclination toward respect for and tolerance of the position of the other. While we cannot legislate these, we can identify mechanisms that will aid in the development of these fundamental qualities.

Members of the Task Force believe we have drafted a workable plan for forging constructive community discourse. For the desired outcome to be attained, commitment on the part of the three Boards to which the 2020 Committee reports will be required.