Regional Vision & Values

Where Do We Want To Go?

Community Congress Meeting #1
February 2, 2013, 2:00pm – 4:00pm
Niagara Falls Conference and Event Center, Niagara Falls, NY

This Meeting

This summary provides an overview of the first meeting of the One Region Forward Community Congress, where participants were introduced to the project and asked where we want to go as a region.

The Community Congress

Because no plan for sustainable development can succeed without the creative contribution and informed support of our region’s citizens, the Community Congress has been created as a regular forum for all citizens in our region to guide and shape the One Region Forward process.

One Region Forward

One Region Forward is supported by a broad-based collaborative effort of local elected officials, businesses, community groups, and citizens at-large – all working together to move our region towards a more prosperous and sustainable future.

Who Participated?

72 in attendance
Representatives from 25 ZIP Codes and 49 different community or civic organizations

Attendees were asked to identify themselves with a local community organization if they choose. The following organizations were represented:

AFSCME Local
American Planning Association
Arts Services Initiative of WNY
BHSC
Binatural Niagara Greenway Marathon Event
Buffalo & Erie County Botanical Gardens
Buffalo Municipal Housing Authority
Buffalo Harbor Sailing Club
Castellani Art Museum of Niagara University
CCE Niagara
City of Niagara Falls – Office of Planning, City of Niagara Falls
Cornell Cooperative Extension of Niagara County
Greater Buffalo Niagara Regional Transportation Council
Greg Pro Consulting
Highland Community Revitalization Committee, Inc
Hyde Park Business & Professional Association
IBEW Local 97
Leadership Niagara
Lewiston Council on the Arts
Niagara Falls City Planning Board
NAACP
NACCC
Niagara Falls Block Club Council
Niagara Arts and Cultural Center
Niagara Community Forum
Niagara County Department of Economic Development
Niagara County IDA
Niagara County Legislature
Niagara Falls Housing Authority
Niagara Falls Memorial Medical Center
Niagara Orleans Central Labor Council
Niagara Region State Parks
Niagara Tourism & Convention Corporation
Niagara University
Village of Williamsville School Board
ReNU Niagara
Senator Kirsten Gillibrand’s Office
Sierra Club
Street Synergy
SUCB
The John R. Oishei Foundation
Town of Lockport
University at Buffalo
WNY Environmental Alliance
WNY Land Conservancy
YWCA of Niagara.

What was the gender make-up of our meeting?
- Female: 44.3%
- Male: 52.5%
- Other or Prefer not to answer: 3.3%

How old were the participants of our congress meeting?
- 75 years and above: 3.3%
- 65-74 years: 13.3%
- 55-64 years: 25%
- 45-54 years: 21.7%
- 30-44 years: 16.7%
- 18-29 years: 20%

What best describes our attendee’s role in their community?
- Concerned citizen: 44.3%
- Business owner/rep: 1.6%
- Observer: 9.8%
- Other: 9.8%
- Community-based Organization or Nonprofit Representative: 18.0%
- Public official: 9.8%
- Student: 11.5%

How did our participants describe the community they represent?
- City or urban area: 49.2%
- First ring suburb: 22%
- Outer ring suburb: 11.9%
- Village: 15.3%
- Rural area: 1.7%
What Did They Say?

Our audience was presented a series of “regional value statements” culled from an analysis of 160+ neighborhood-based, municipal, county-level, and regional plans. Organized around ten themes, these interrelated statements were presented to the audience. To gauge whether or not each statement reflects where we want to go as a region, each participant was provided an electronic device that allowed her/him to evaluate the ten statements.

This is what the Community Congress told us:

**Theme:** Economic Development

**Regional Vision/Value Statement:**
Create a more competitive and prosperous 21st century regional economy

**Discussion/Feedback from Audience:**
- What is meant here by the term “sustainability”? Where is the sustainability in the value statement?
- How do you define regional economy? Free market people would say it is about individuals choosing how to spend their money rather than regional governments planning our lives for us.
- We need more information about the quantity and quality of jobs and the journey to work.
- The municipal plan for my town didn’t involve real citizen participation.
- In Forsyth County, GA, they had an on-going engagement with citizens, including a web-site, not just a few events.
- We need to find the common denominator issues that diagonalize across all the 160+ plans.
- For whom? Add wording to include all, especially working families.
- We need markers for success to tell us how we are going to reach our goals.
- Are these slides being catalogued? How are they going to be used in the future presentations?

These questions are so vague but may be used in the future to promote acceptance of the program.
**Theme:**
Smart Growth

**Regional Vision/Value Statement:**
Build on existing infrastructure and invest in developed areas to lower costs, improve efficiency and enhance quality of life.

**Discussion/Feedback from Audience:**
- It should say sustainable smart growth.
- We’re going to get an artificial development rather than something natural with smart growth. The answers on the clickers were “channeled.” Does everyone want to go forward with Agenda 21? They want the cars off the road and they want the single family houses gone.
- Focus development on already developed areas – but also on others.
- In Niagara Falls we have infrastructure we want removed, not built upon. This includes the Robert Moses Parkway and the nuclear waste dump in Lewiston.
- We need home rule preservation and not social engineering. Keep our sovereignty.
- Add “if voted on by the public at-large” to all statements.
- Add communitarianism.
- This should only be applied to public property, not private.

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**Theme:**
Transportation

**Regional Vision/Value Statement:**
Provide broader transportation options to improve access to jobs and services and promote energy efficiency and safety.

**Discussion/Feedback from Audience:**
- If you asked people if they want to get rid of their cars you would get a different result (on the
• Include “under-served populations.” Not everyone has access to a car but still needs transportation options.
• We want unencumbered transportation, especially rural roads and on the farms.
• It’s important to have efficient transportation but jobs in the city aren’t as important as issues like having a living wage.
• This is based on the perception that climate change is real. Let’s reset and address scientists that have come to other conclusions.

Theme:
Housing and Neighborhoods

Regional Vision/Value Statement:
Preserve our housing stock and foster neighborhoods that are great places – safe, well-served and distinctive.

Discussion/Feedback from Audience:
• Preserve but don’t protect housing at all costs. Rehab maybe. Retro-fit. Conserve.
• Do the cost-benefit analysis on housing preservation.
• We need to have strong code-enforcement – it’s crucial for neighborhood quality of life.
• Is this like in China where people live in a high-rise, work for the company downstairs, and when people get stressed out they jump off?
• Add “preserve individual property rights” to the statement.
• Lend only to people that can afford to pay.
• Housing is now driven by developers. We need a strategic plan for housing.
• Look at integration of neighborhoods, jobs and transportation. Think about it all at once.
Theme: Agriculture and Food

Regional Vision/Value Statement:
Protect farmland, support farmers, connect farms to local markets and ensure access to healthy food.

Discussion/Feedback from Audience:
- Difference between rural and urban agriculture. We want to do both, but they are not the same.
- Whether someone is trying to sell farmland they can’t afford to keep or someone is trying to buy land to start a farm, the effort to control land use will violate individuals’ private property rights.
- The way the questions are being asked guarantees that the responses will be favorable. You are being indoctrinated. Think for yourself.
- Buy organic but keep government out of agriculture. Defend farmers’ rights but don’t subsidize them.
- We need a ratio analysis for towns and counties....
- We should consider farmland as land zoned for agriculture.
- Subsidies have had a huge impact on the cost of land and grains for farmers. Be cautious.
- Ban genetically modified species of food and plant life.
- Will I be criminalized for having my own garden in my yard?
- Add “support farming at various levels.”

Theme: Energy and Climate

Regional Vision/Value Statement:
Use less energy, generate green energy, and reduce greenhouse gas emissions.

Discussion/Feedback from Audience:
- Providers of electricity need to improve their management practices. We need to stop profiteering. We’re paying more than we should.
- Fracking will lead to increased greenhouse gas emissions and endanger our water supply. Climate change is happening and we need to do everything we can to slow it down.
- Every community should demand fair pricing. Florida shouldn’t have cheaper electricity than we do.
- If there is to be a conversation from a consumption economy to a conservation economy the public needs to be involved in the process.
- Invest in geothermal energy.
- We have vast reserved of natural gas and could be energy independent. Cars could all run on natural gas and we can eliminate the need for petrol.
- These statements are too abstract. They are targeted to the goals and strategies.
- Redefine greenhouse gases. Carbon dioxide is not a greenhouse gas, but an indicator. Water vapor is a greenhouse gas.
- Green energy has to be cost effective. We need a cost benefit analysis.
- Need to reduce smart RF meter readers.

**Theme:**
Protect Natural Resources

**Regional Vision/Value Statement:**
Protect our water and other natural resources to promote a healthy ecology, economy and community.

**Discussion/Feedback from Audience:**
- Our greatest natural resource here is Niagara Falls itself. But how natural is it surrounded by skyscrapers, shopping districts, and concerts. We need to restore the natural beauty of the falls. There are some things missing under “protect, enhance, and restore” natural resources. Fish and wildlife habitat and unique ecologies are some of those things.
- Rainwater, runoff, ponds are not government property.
- Our water resources are endangered by Nestle and other companies bottling local water and selling it to China.
- We’re giving our resources to the world – jobs, military forces. Our prosperity has declined since World War II because of the policies that have come down from on high.
- We want to preserve the falls and the water. But we also want to promote it. Our friends go there for entertainment.
- Repairing the destruction of our resources has a lot of potential for providing new jobs and funding from the federal government.
- Protecting water could lead to restrictions on access to water. Who is “our” in the statement, is it...
Radioactive waste storage needs to be directly addressed in natural resources.

Worded too vague to pick out the economic versus health issue. How are those issues balanced?

Every community should decide what its resources are and how to use them, and then we can move on.

Respect our water and don’t sell to Arizona. Address our environment to protect our water.

Niagara River generates green energy and promotes economic growth. Protecting our water should harness the benefit of the falls.

Theme:
Culture and Heritage

Regional Vision/Value Statement:
Protect and develop culture, heritage, and waterfront resources for economy and quality of life

Discussion/Feedback from Audience:

- I live in a wonderful neighborhood. We have a goldmine here in Niagara Falls. Our history — natural, Native American, colonial, and American — is something that can keep tourists here.
- This should be the Orlando of the north. When summer temperatures down south are in the summer here in the 100s, people will want to visit here. We should promote it.
- Add “diversity” to the statement, stress quality of life and creating strong public places.
- Should waterfront be in the section? Probably belongs in the Parks and Recreation section.
- Add protect/develop “personal liberty.”
Theme: Parks and Recreation

Regional Vision/Value Statement:
Maintain, improve, and connect our parks, recreation, and open space.

Discussion/Feedback from Audience:
- What does it mean to connect parks?
- Maybe we should be talking about how to “right-size” parks rather than expand them.
- Maybe eliminate the reference to connecting parks. It scares people.
- If we’re going after money from HUD it needs to be with no strings attached. There are usually a lot of strings attached.
- Put in the justification under the U.S. Constitution for whatever you do and exempt us from the application of international law.
- Think of new ways to generate revenue and prevent parkland from being sold off.
- Maybe we can define “connect” better and stay away from eminent domain. But it’s important that people can ride their bike or walk from lake to lake and from one place to another.
- The park at the falls is a reserve and the second largest in NYS after central park. We go there to get away, not to hear rock concerts.
- Add “reclaim” to the statement
- Better integrate parks into our communities.
- Use parks to their full potential, but in the right way.
- “Integrate” instead of “connect.”

![Bar Chart]

- Right on the mark
- Mostly on the mark
- Partly right, partly wrong
- Mostly missing the mark
- Totally missing the mark
- Some other opinion
- Not sure
Theme: Planning Together

Regional Vision/Value Statement: Foster collaboration, coordination, and strong implementation, and plan with an engaged public

Discussion/Feedback from Audience:

- Thanks for doing this. I liked hearing different views and I learned a lot.
- Strong implementation sounds like government coercion. We need to protect private property rights.
- I don’t think 60 people here is planning with an engage public. We need a much broader process. We need to have referenda so that everyone gets to vote on what gets proposed.
- Voters don’t want to delegate their powers. Sessions like these don’t balance out the influence that the Business Council has.
- Where does education fall into this process? It’s so important to the future of our region.
- Plan with an “engaged and diverse public.”
- Minority opinions create tension and the atmosphere is unfortunate at a meeting like this.
- Michael Silver from APA (American Planning Association) said “planners, show your value.” Planners need to educate the public. It’s important to have collaboration and the government needs to help. APA needs to get the word out.
- City council members aren’t educated about issues when they take their seat. They just come in and act on their own agendas.
An open invitation to tell us what’s working, what is not working, and what we need to do to become more sustainable...

Our audience was presented the opportunity to write about three basic reflections on the region – Here's what they had to say:

To me, the single thing I like the most about my community/region is...
- Friendly people, majestic falls.
- Educational institutions and opportunities they offer. They are a source of new ideas, of global ideas and culturally diverse populations. They offer the community free and affordable entertainment and education. They are a source of our future, because they hold new thinkers, dreamers, and innovators.
- We have so much to offer: good weather, good healthcare, easy to get around, arts, people, etc.
- The potential it has due to its waterfront. The falls and tourism potential allows Niagara Falls the possibility to rise again despite the struggles other Northeast cities face.
- The falls.
- Our history, both natural and human.
- We have the resources to be whatever we choose.
- The potential to get things done when everyone is working together.
- No limit on what we can accomplish by working together. Beautiful area we need to protect.
- Hydro geographic topography.

To me, the single thing I like the least about my community/region is...
- Many things but mostly the blood suckers that will not get out of the way of development.
- No taxpayer representation.
- Provincialism.
- Ignoring Niagara Falls and the rebuilding of the center of the city.
- No mass transit, light rail between Niagara and Erie.
- Not working together. People with their own agenda and not the overall good of the community.
- The greenway commission. Ignorance (happy to go ahead without information, without balance of self and others)
- Too much government, they don’t know everything.
- Stop the animosity.
- Include more input from residents and appoint more of us on boards.
- Need for a regionally coherent economic development sustainability project prioritization.
- Lack of support from elected officials.
- Have the resources but lack the political will to be what we choose.

The most important thing for us to do to become more sustainable is...
- Inaugurate a Niagara greenway marathon 26 week appreciation 2013 event.
- Stop making excuses and get real.
- Climate, energy, land use, and transportation.
- Find a way to make use of the best waterfront in NYS (outside of NYC) and figure out how to be tourism based economy.
- To work together and cooperate.
- Mass transit, better “wayfinding”, more connection to the waterways, cleaner waterways.
- Celebrate our history properly.
- Start rebuilding the Pine Ave. Niagara St. area and stop ignoring it for other projects.
- Jobs, Jobs, Jobs.
- Reconnect the residents to the waterfront.
- Climate change is the number one issue facing the entire planet, including the US. We need to do all we can NOW. Alternative energy through clean FIT would be a good start.

Additional Comments:
- The format of this meeting is called the Delphi Method. It’s designed to give you an illusion of participation. But the questions are too vague. There are no references for the data presented. The process is funded by $2 million in taxpayers’ dollars in deficit spending with accrued interest. The decisions the process seeks to make should be given to individuals. Think for yourself.
- “Eminent Domain” wasn’t recorded enough on the sheets. Preventing land being taken has been mentioned several times and it should show up more in the notes.