



2011

HEALTH AND ENVIRONMENTAL IMPACT FOCUS GROUP REPORT

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Research Participants: NTV2,
College Height & College Park
residents

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**HEALTH AND ENVIRONMENTAL IMPACT
FOCUS GROUP REPORT
ALBANY GA TOOLS FOR CHANGE, INC
NEW TOOLS, NEW VISION 2 (NTNV2)
AUGUST 2011**

Purpose

To further explore the environmental and health concerns discovered in previous research and the key quality of life issues raised by College Heights/Park residents from previous dialogues in order to craft successful strategies.

Number of Focus Groups (2)

College Park-Focus Group I:
N=7

College Park residents who participated in this focus group have lived in this neighborhood for an average of approximately 20 years.

College Heights-Focus Group II:
N=6

College Heights' residents who participated in this focus group have lived in this neighborhood an average of 30+years.

Focus Groups Moderated and Reported by:

Mark Miller, M.S., Focus Group Consultant

Requested by

Jacqueline Jenkins, board member, Albany GA Tools For Change

I. Introduction

A. Purpose/Objectives of Research

This qualitative research is part of the extensive work conducted by Albany Tools For Change, Inc., and made possible by a grant from the Kellogg Foundation. The grant's purpose centers on developing neighborhood capacity and mitigate documented major health issues that may be related to long-standing environmental factors located in the College Heights and College Park neighborhood.

College Heights/College Park is a geographically defined neighborhood located in southeast Albany/Dougherty County sitting on land previously used for pecan and cotton farming. Owned by one family and sold in 1936 to another family, development on the land began for College Heights in 1962. In 1979, development ensued across the main perimeter road and the area became known as College Park. In this middle class neighborhood, there are approximately 200 homes with the majority of the population being African-American (83%). The two neighborhoods are separated by highly trafficked Holly Drive.

B. Methodology

Albany Tools for Change selected participants for two focus groups. The target audience was the NTN2 committee members from these two subdivisions. The executive committee expected differences between the groups, and therefore opted to conduct two focus groups. In each group, members wondered why the other group was not represented.

Statement of Limitation

In qualitative research, the focus group approach seeks to develop insight and direction rather than quantitatively precise or absolute measures. Because of the limited number of respondents and the limitation of recruitment, this research must be considered in a qualitative frame of reference.

The reader may find some information that seems inconsistent in character upon first reading this report. When such data appears in the context of findings, it should be considered as valid data from the participant's point of view. That is, the participant may be misinformed or simply wrong in his/her

judgment and the reader should interpret that as useful information.

This study cannot be considered reliable in the statistical sense since the recruiting of participants cannot be replicated. Identical questions cannot be asked in each group, nor can the result of one group be compared precisely with other groups; they can only be added to the body of knowledge on this topic. This type of research is intended to provide a first step in determining knowledge, awareness, attitudes and opinions about services, concepts or products.

This report cannot detail the wealth of non-verbal information, such as body language (posture, sleepiness, wiggling in the chair, etc.) or the amount of time elapsed between questions from the moderator and actual responses from the group. It also cannot report on the subtle areas of peer pressure, such as willingness to avoid making a particular response for fear of what others will think or quickly changing a response when others appear to oppose a particular position.

The reader is reminded that this report is intended to clarify unclear issues and to point toward further research. In addition, the findings presented here cannot confidently be statistically projected to a universe of similar respondents without quantitative support. However, the strength of qualitative research lies in its ability to provide insights and flush out data that can be used to help decision makers make informed decisions. At the neighborhood level, the richness of language and the intensity of opinion provide information that a survey clearly does not capture.

II. Executive Summary: *Key Findings*

ISSUE I: HEALTH RELATED ISSUES

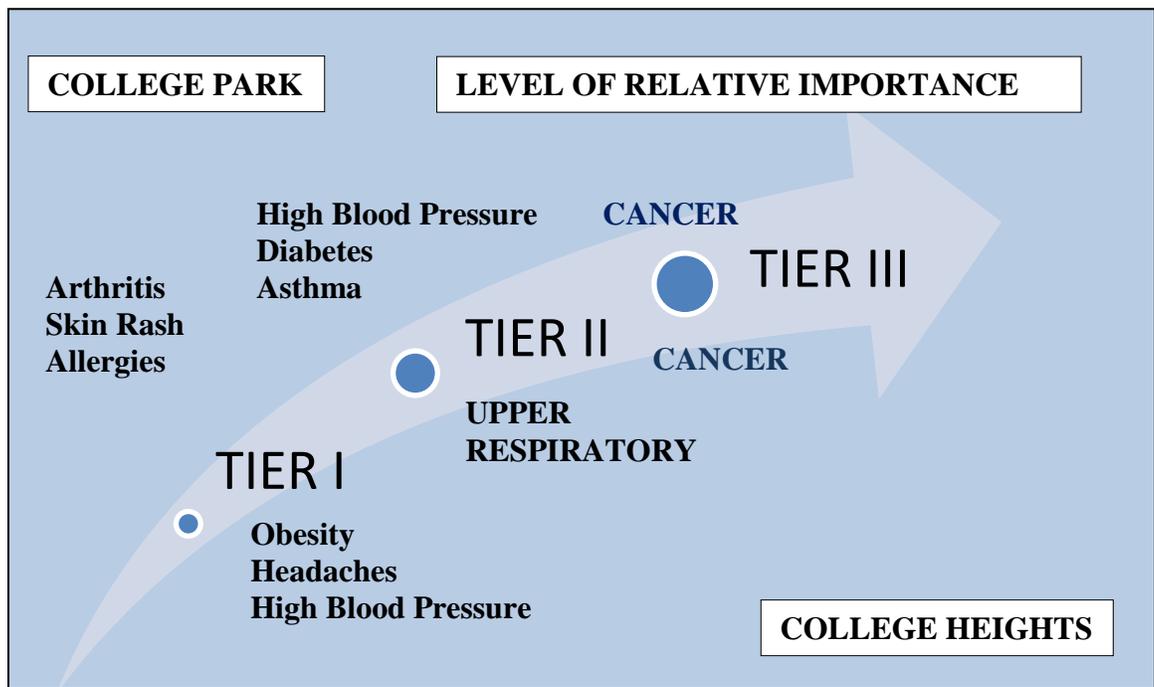
1. The major issue facing College Park and College Heights can be summed in one word, "cancer." Long-time residents of these two neighborhoods have gone from "talking about cancer" to "having cancer."

- Many of the residents suspect environmental antecedents to the unusual number of cancer cases in their neighborhood. The residents' proximity to Proctor and

Gamble, the marine canal, and various holding ponds near farm land treated with fertilizer and pesticides were offered as plausible explanations to the inordinate number of cases.

- Anecdotes from residents convey stories of cancer clusters on a single block of one street with breast and prostate the most prevalent.
- While some of their neighbors have died from cancer, others have contracted the disease at a fairly early age (early 50's) further suggesting environmental factors with water contamination as one likely source.

2. Though cancer was the most important, other chronic disease-states concerned residents, and were linked to possible environmental factors (see diagram).



- Only a few differences were noted between groups regarding the relative ranking of health concerns. Several chronic disease-states (high blood pressure, upper respiratory or allergies) were flipped between Tier I and Tier II among the two focus groups. No matter the tier, all health issues listed are important to the residents of each neighborhood.
- There was speculation that allergies, asthma and upper respiratory symptoms were caused by smog/pollutants emitted from nearby industry and somewhat related to obesity as people are less likely to walk in the evening with noxious smells.

“.....what concerns me is the amount of people in our neighborhood that have cancer. You just don’t know if it is an environmental type thing but we have a lot of people with it, different types.”

College Park

“We are all at risk [of cancer], whether it is in our family history or not we are all at risk simply because of the environmental issues.”

College Park

“Test the soil and water to make sure it is not causing [cancer] from what we grow or breathe from or drink.”

College Heights

“Maybe some of this is due to industrialization. We were concerned about the proximity of the Proctor and Gamble plant to the neighborhood. It is closer to College Heights than it is to College Park. There are some concerns about water, contamination of water as run-off from Proctor and Gamble or the plant itself.”

College Park

ISSUE II: ENVIRONMENTAL RELATED ISSUES

1. Four environmental issues dominated the conversation with water contamination the most important due to its possible cancer link. Highway noise, daily smog from nearby industry, and the abundance of ant colonies were causes for concern. The discussion provided a pathway to community engagement, advocacy, and neighborhood barriers.

- College Park and College Heights were built on farmland. A thirty year old belief exists that chemicals are seeping through the soil making the water taste badly and is directly linked to illnesses that appear to be higher than other neighborhoods in Albany.
- According to residents, water contamination results from a fertilized field off Honeysuckle Drive. When it rains heavily, water floods Notre Dame Drive. At the last flood, dead birds and frogs were found.
- In 2004 and 2008, the marine canal [near a former hazmat site] spilled into the neighborhood.
- Several respondents had their water tested by a private firm, Hydro Distributors, and currently use a filtration system to purify their water. The water tested high in phosphates.

- The majority of participants in each group use a filtration system or drink bottled water.
- 2. The noise level from Highway 19 is a major problem in certain blocks of College Park/College Heights due to a Convenience Store/Truck Stop built about five years ago. To build the convenience store, land was cleared, which included many trees serving as a buffer to the highway.**
- The neighborhood fought re-zoning for almost twenty years. According to participants, city commissioners finally caved since seeing the potential tax revenue as too good to pass up and there was little the small group of neighborhood advocates could do to prevent it. A sense exists amongst the neighbors that a more advantaged neighborhood would have been able to block the re-zoning approval.
 - On Betty Drive, the noise is particularly acute and sounds as if one lives on Highway 19.
 - In College Park, nine or ten households can hear constant noise of semi cargo trucks braking or idling.
 - One remedy to the noise issue is to build barriers such as those along Interstate 75/85 near Atlanta.
- 3. Residents complained of smog, fumes and a gaseous smell in their neighborhood. It was described as a "settlement" or "yellowish-orange" haze prevalent in the evenings.**
- The origin is unknown but there is speculation that Proctor and Gamble is a source.
 - Residents believe that fewer people walk the neighborhood for exercise due to evening smells.
- 4. Due to deforestation to make room for the convenience store/truck stop, residents have noticed a decline in wildlife and particularly, squirrels.**
- College Park and College Heights complained about the lack of mosquito control and numerous ant mound infestations. It is necessary that they call the county offices to have their area sprayed for mosquitoes.

"It is a water issue. When it rains, the field fills up with water and it over spills in several of our backyards on Notre Dame."

"The last time it flooded when the water sunk down there was a lot of dead birds, crows in my backyard."

"One thing that I notice when I walk there is a field, fertilizer-an open field. It's coming off of Honeysuckle."

College Park

"The testing-that is something I have heard as a child, and there is something about the water. Now 30 years later we are going to find out if there is actually something about the water."

"One of the things is that the stream runs around the community. When we have large amounts of water we get flooded. Where the canal overflows, it flooded in 2004 and 2008."

College Heights

"There is another issue. Late in the evening, the smog smells and it affects me. I'm out in the evenings especially if I have to get out of my car. It is like a settlement of fumes and I start to cough, that kind of thing. It is a respiratory hindrance. It doesn't come around during the day. I detect it in the evenings."

College Park

"You hear everything. It is like I live on Highway 19 instead of Betty Drive-the noise from the highway."

"We complained about the store being put up on the corner. We went to downtown meetings."

College Park

"Clearing up the environmental concerns would be first."

College Heights

ISSUE 3: ROLE OF THE NEWTOOLSNEW VISION 2 COMMITTEE

- 1. The sponsors of this research wanted to know the relevance and role of the committee and its impact on the quality of life issues facing the residents of College Park and College Heights.** The discussion ranged from healthy skepticism, to frustration and evolved to signs of positive things for the future. Committee role and relevance was a bigger issue for College Park than College Heights.

2. One woman in the College Park focus group opened up, which led to 15 minutes of uninterrupted piggy-back conversation that struck a chord with participants.

- She offered that African-Americans were tired of being the object of research when the researchers had no other interest but to collect data for use with other grant opportunities that lead to more data collecting. According to the participant, this has been going on for years and the neighborhood is exhausted.
- Another participant offered this could be one reason for the lack of participation in this effort and created missed opportunities and lack of follow through.
- Another offered that the residents should not give up but be relentless in their pursuit of seeking answers to salient issues that affect everyone.

3. The project began in 2006, lost steam for some unknown reason and disappeared. Two years ago, Danielle Blackwell took an interest and re-energized the group that became NewToolsNewVision2 (NTNV2).

- The lack of sustained continuity has led to a credibility gap according to some residents. If committee members were not following through, why should residents participate?
- Current committee members wondered whether it was a leadership issue or simply residents not having time or inclination to participate. What is preventing the neighbors from taking an active role?
- Other members were disappointed that the water and soil had not been tested earlier and those factors could answer key concerns.
- This is not the first time health and environmental issues have been discussed. In fact, one participant who grew up in College Heights and recently moved back said these same issues were important to her parents and friends for 30 years.
- Neither College Heights nor College Park wishes to be teased again by the system. Rather, they want action.

4. There is some tempered but growing enthusiasm that NTV2 will generate answers and provide the neighborhood a catalyst for change.

- Residents were excited to hear from one of the Albany Georgia Tools for Change, Inc. board members that soil and water testing will begin soon. There was relief that

now they may be able to determine if a link exists between potential environmental toxins and cancer.

- While there was some disagreement, participants generally gave the committee credit for the sump pump installation.
- Because of the door to door survey, several community meetings, and an upcoming final report to College Park/College Heights, there is renewed but fragile energy.

"I think this is probably why we don't have as many people here. We are exhausted. We have said the same thing, the same surveys and we are not getting anywhere."

"We have to follow through. If I don't have enough enthusiasm and initiative on my own with what is going on in the neighborhood then I can't blame anyone else."

*"We are a people that believe in action and doing, and we have not seen one thing change."
College Park*

*"One thing I've learned is that when people get together united with one cause, they can get a lot of ideas to do things that make a difference."
College Heights*

ISSUE 4: NEIGHBORHOOD ENGAGEMENT

1. To a certain extent, College Park neighbors feel like the "red headed step child" to College Heights. Though College Park is a well established neighborhood, College Heights has a longer history and is perceived as being able to get things done such as the refurbished Radium Springs Casino.

- One College Park resident felt they were a lost neighborhood and no one challenged the comment. When they look at services delivered by city officials and departments, they perceive more affluent areas get better services than they receive.
- With a neighborhood watch program and an annual Labor Day picnic at College Heights, College Park feels a little left out. However, during each session, both groups wondered why the other group was not present. There was mutual agreement that they need each other and would make greater progress if they worked together.

2. Engaging the neighborhood is a necessarily messy and frustrating process especially in College Park.

- The lack of perceived success in College Park leads to a lack of involvement when it is most needed. The inability of College Park to stop semi-trucks from parking in their neighborhood was but one example.
- As a working population, many of the residents are too tired or too busy with other activities to muster enough energy for neighborhood projects.
- Unlike other African-American neighborhoods, College Park does not have a large representation at commission meetings.

3. While one could iterate other frustrations and barriers to neighborhood engagement, residents did offer alternatives.

- We need to encourage men to take an active role in committee and project work; however;
- As people lead their busy lives, another offered the idea of a community farmer's market as a way to show an immediate result.
- While bringing together College Park and College Heights, it is necessary, one resident suggested, we look to other neighborhoods in Albany that faced similar barriers and learn from them.

".....we have to come together as a neighborhood. Until we get from their side to our side we can't fight. We can't do anything."

"There are people who are walking zombies. They have programmed themselves to get up, get themselves ready for work, get the kids ready for school and come back home and get some food and watch TV and go to bed."

"Whatever affects College Heights subdivision affects College Park. The only thing that separates us is a highway."

College Park

ISSUE 5: NEIGHBORHOOD IMPROVEMENT

1. If they possessed the power to make one change in the neighborhood to make a big difference, what would it be?

- Though it was not a major discussion point during the focus group, College Park and College Heights each suggested that adding street lights would make a big difference in their neighborhoods to improve the quality of life.
- More important to College Heights than College Park, adding sidewalks would improve curb appeal of the neighborhood and encourage more people to walk.
- Mentioned by College Park, build a barrier to lessen the noise created by the convenient store/truck stop, similar to those on I-75 in Atlanta.
- While it was a huge discussion during the focus group, only one person mentioned water testing and another suggested the water flow be re-routed away from her home.
- To keep the integrity of our neighborhoods intact, one person recommended written rules and standards for the neighborhood [a covenant for example].
- Due to the lack of resources, another suggested a resource center while another wanted to see an increase of neighborhood participation.