

Provincetown
Civil Discourse Initiative
Final Report

Massachusetts Office of Public Collaboration
McCormack Graduate School
University of Massachusetts Boston

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Introduction

In the fall of 2018, the Massachusetts Office of Public Collaboration (MOPC) was engaged by the Town of Provincetown to design and run a civil discourse initiative with the purpose of facilitating community dialogue and gathering community input regarding how the town can address the issue of incivility and create a more inclusive community. Although launched in response to the uncivil environment online, particularly on the Town's Facebook Group called Town Talk, the initiative purposely remained broader than just the online environment. The Town Manager at the time, David Panagore, had applied for and was granted a Community Compact grant from the State for this initiative on behalf of the town.

Promoting civil discourse means finding ways for the community to talk with one another where all voices can be heard and decisions can be made together. Ideally, civil discourse allows everyone to discuss, on equal footing, how they wish to govern themselves as a group and decide what kind of community it wants to be and find solutions together for how to get there.

To get a better sense of the issues at hand, the MOPC facilitation team conducted a series of interviews and distributed a community-wide survey. The input gathered was used to develop a deliberative dialogue framework for the community to discuss how to create a more inclusive and engaged Provincetown. A series of dialogues were offered in April of 2019 over the course of a week, and a complementary post-dialogue survey was also launched to encourage broader participation from the community.

The themes captured in this report reflect the concerns raised in the initial phase of the project, as well as the potential actions to addressing incivility brought forth by the community and discussed in the second phase. Each data set is discussed separately. Based on the input received, the MOPC facilitation team has also created recommendations to the Town at large for possible actions to addressing the concerns of the community.

The Massachusetts Office of Public Collaboration (MOPC) is a neutral forum and applied research center of the McCormack Graduate School at the University of Massachusetts Boston that assists public agencies and communities in accessing services, programs, and national networks for dispute resolution, consensus-building, and public engagement. The civil discourse initiative in Provincetown was conducted through MOPC's Public Deliberation Program, which helps communities use public dialogue to address important and difficult issues affecting their community and move toward collective action.

Civil Discourse Initiative Process

I. Interviews

The MOPC team contacted 30 individuals for an interview who had been identified by town staff and other members of the community as having varied viewpoints on civility and engagement in town affairs. Of those identified, interviews were held with 24 individuals in January and February of 2019.

The interviews sought individual reflections and input into the nature of discourse in the town overall and the online environment, including Town Talk, as well as ideas for how to address issues with discourse, and who in the community should be involved in these efforts.

II. Initial Survey

Following the interviews, the MOPC team developed a community-wide survey that sought broader input on the nature and impact of community discourse and ideas for how to address concerns. The survey was launched online via SurveyMonkey and posted on the Town website and on Town Talk. The survey was open from late February into early March 2019 and 171 community members responded. The results of the survey and interviews were shared in a summary report released in April 2019 and posted on the Town website. See [Appendix A](#) for a copy of this report.

III. Dialogues

Building upon the input received in the interviews and survey as well as the insights of Town staff, the MOPC team designed a deliberative dialogue guide to address the question: *What should be done to create a more inclusive and engaged Provincetown?* The guide framed three potential approaches the community could choose to take to address inclusivity and engagement:

1. Create a civil space online to share information and exchange ideas
2. Increase participation in town affairs and decision making
3. Foster community connection to reduce divisiveness

The three approaches were not meant to be mutually exclusive but offered different ways of addressing the issues. Each approach was also designed to ask community members to consider the benefits, drawbacks, and tradeoffs of any potential action in order to give the community a full examination of the options and what it might take to enact them. See [Appendix B](#) for a copy of the dialogue issue guide.

A series of eleven dialogues were scheduled over the week of April 24-30, 2019 at a variety of times and locations in town. Unfortunately, the dialogues had a very low turnout with only five community members participating. This was likely due to several factors, including the sudden resignation of the Town Manager, the timing coinciding with the beginning of the tourist season, and the weather (see more below).

IV. Secondary Survey

As a result of the lack of participation in the dialogues, the MOPC team decided to offer a second survey which mirrored the dialogue guide content so that additional community members could consider the three approaches and weigh in on what the community might do. The survey was open May 2-22, 2019. In total, 72 community members responded to the survey. The results of this survey are detailed below.

V. Final Report

This final report is intended to be a foundation for the community and the town government to use in continuing conversations and deliberations on potential avenues for advancing civil discourse in Provincetown.

Events of Potential Influence in the Community

It is important to note that several transitions occurred during this initiative. In the weeks leading up to the dialogue series, Town Manager David Panagore resigned from his position. As the initiator, he appeared to be the champion of this effort to many and the designated lead for the town to carry out any actions emerging from the process. His departure and this perception, MOPC believes, were likely a large contributor of the low turnout for the dialogues.

Furthermore, at the time of the Town Manager's resignation the ability to post comments on Town Talk was shut off. The comments were the source of the noted online incivility in town. While turning off comments was an option being discussed by community members in the civil discourse initiative, it came as a surprise to many to see it implemented prior to the issuing of a report and recommendations based on community input. It is MOPC's impression that this too impacted turnout at the dialogues. Further impact beyond this is unknown.

Themes from Interviews and Initial Survey

Many interviewees and survey respondents said they go to Town Talk to browse for information and read the latest political gossip. More people read other people's posts than post themselves. Bullying, name-calling and conversations being dominated by a small group of individuals are among the top reasons people shy away from engaging fully on Town Talk.

Views on how Town Talk should deal with uncivil discourse are split into two camps: those who wish to see increased moderation and rules established with enforced consequences versus those who want it solely to be a place for town officials to post information without allowing commentary.

It was brought to light during the initial survey that a sizeable portion of the community (64% of survey respondents) feel as though they do not have a voice or their voice is not valued in their community. Some full-time residents state that they felt some members of town government (including staff, officials, boards and committees) cater to an inner circle, leaving many on the outskirts. Part-time residents note that they are heavily taxed and unrepresented by government. A portion of part-time residents express desire to participate more fully in town committees or boards. Statements about the public nature of the voting procedure itself (raised hands for vote in town meeting) indicate that some residents are uncomfortable and fear being potential targets for retaliation and/or ridicule.

Divisiveness is frequently mentioned and many express concern for the "us vs them" mentality they observe within the town across several groups, including "haves" and "have nots", men and

women, full-time and part-time residents, LGBTQ and straight, lifelong residents and “wash-ashores”, and between those of different races and ethnicities.

Themes from Dialogues and Second Survey

From the second survey, responses overall support most potential actions outlined in the survey (see [Appendix D](#)). The following paragraphs reflect insights included in the open-ended survey responses.

Responses surrounding the use of social media, on the second survey, mirror those from the first. Many responders urge more Town Talk moderators trained in neutrality, development of community guidelines or rules of engagement, stricter rules for usage and enforcement of the rules. Social media is also viewed as the wave of the future and providing a medium for people to express opinions and to feel engaged with both town leadership and other community members. The desire is also expressed for social media to be a place for officials to share information with residents. Another group wishes to move away from social media entirely believing it hinders in-person attendance at meetings and requests town officials do more to increase participation at in-person meetings.

Select Quotes:

“I believe the Facebook page should be used to deliver info, no deliberation or comments allowed. There are so many other groups to discuss the issues.”

“Perhaps Rotating volunteers, with some TRAINING in Neutrality. Also, with special FB names not their own, like Town Moderator 1,2, 3 etc. so they can be strong but not personally known and sneered at.”

“Monitor the site for breach of social media policy. Suspend accounts after the first and/or second offense. Ban permanently those with 3 or more offenses. I've been told offenders tend to be a small group of the same people. Eliminating repeat offenders will help.”

Part-time residents also feel viewed as rich and only looking to gain more financial advantage through their properties. This might be true for some, but many live in town for extended periods of time and express love for the town and a desire to be respected and seen as contributing elements of the community. Replies from some full-time residents explain that they struggle with making ends meet and face housing insecurity and that this is something part-time residents do not understand and so should not be allowed to vote on town issues that greatly impact full-time residents.

Select Quotes:

“Part time residents are valuable members of the community and should not be marginalized.”

“Second homeowners are treated like evil, money loving second class citizens. Allowing us involvement would make us more invested in the community without the fear of the locals attacking us.”

“I think second homeowners being involved will only be more divisive. If they want to be more involved, then they should make Provincetown their primary residence and actually join the community.”

“Absolutely no to second homeowner participation. We already have a select board that has no clue what it's like for the average year round resident to survive here...We do not need people who vacation here dictating any more than they already do, how we live here when they are gone...WE are not refusing to go to meetings because of inertia or disinterest. It's because of a need to make a living.”

Overall themes from Provincetown's Civil Discourse Initiative

Throughout interviews, conversations and surveys several common themes emerged:

Opportunities and limitations of online interactions. While many subscribe to the belief that social media is the wave of the future, the role it plays in increasing divisiveness is frequently mentioned by participants. The duality of the Internet, which allows users to be closely connected to information, have easy access to communicating with other users and feel involved, simultaneously allows for name calling and bullying behaviors that rarely occur in face-to-face interactions. Some voice that the Internet can foster an atmosphere of extremes, further placing a wedge between what is viewed as “us” and “them.” While many feel as though participating on this type of forum is an efficient and simple way to discuss topics with others in the community, in-person attendance is still critical for official town business.

Select Quotes:

“We should embrace the technology as another medium for gathering information and feedback-- not discount an opinion because it is expressed online... Social media allows us to cast our net wide and reach everyone (including those who feel disenfranchised within our community.)”

“It is a slippery slope between moderating fairness and free speech. However, you can't have a room of cussing, biting, nastiness. There must be rules for civil discourse.”

“Our differences define us. We should embrace those differences by identifying ways to build community, consensus, and collaboration versus restricting communication forums. That takes us in the opposite direction. The Town should reach out to Diversity and Inclusion professionals who know how to build these kinds of strategies well.”

Desire for improved leadership. Survey participants share feelings of being brushed-off, unheard and disregarded by town officials, who are described as inaccessible and sometimes hostile. It is also observed that those who serve on town boards seem to be unable to collaborate with each other to the extent it hinders progress on projects. It is repeatedly mentioned that the often-hostile nature surrounding public service on some boards is a major reason more people do not run for office or volunteer.

It is repeatedly mentioned that town leaders should be publicly modeling ideal behavior both in person and in their online interactions. Not only could they spend the time in conflict in better ways, it also sends a signal to others that combative behavior is acceptable.

Select Quotes:

“Unfortunately our elected officials are not leaders they just have time to serve. We need people to serve that are experienced in leading.”

“The leadership and staff have displayed extremely inappropriate behaviors, from leaking inappropriate actions, behaviors, have been practicing selective enforcement and often engage in witch-hunts and blaming the community.”

“Blaming the community for poor communication skills is offensive and inappropriate, and shows poor leadership, having town staff as gatekeepers again makes for poor decision-making process.”

Call for constructive discourse. While examples of negative discourse were frequently shared throughout this initiative, many shared what they believe could have a positive impact on the nature of communication in town. In addition to silencing bullies and those who strictly troll social media to get emotionally fueled replies, there are those who wish for the attitude of working towards reaching consensus instead of polarization on issues. There are also calls for opportunities to have constructive conversations on town matters, both online and in-person. Many request in-person facilitated discussions and workshops on important topics in order to invoke positive change and create a more engaged community.

Select Quotes:

“Have informational meetings and discussions during non-business hours on important issues, like climate change, etc., during nights and weekends.”

“Most town projects are very poor managed and flawed - and this discourages participation because people feel it's too much work and frankly, useless.”

“Community Meetings: Will more be helpful? Probably not, or perhaps, first try to make the existing meetings better, more efficient, more productive, more accessible.”

See [Appendices C and D](#) for the comprehensive themed survey responses for both surveys.

Limitations of the Second Survey

Although the survey offers some insights into what kinds of actions the community may support to address inclusivity and engagement, it should be noted that they are somewhat limited. First, despite 72 respondents, only approximately 30 filled out a majority of the survey (about one percent of the town population using 2010 census data).

Second, it should be noted that this survey does not reflect the kinds of responses garnered after deliberation has taken place. As a result of the low turnout for the dialogues, the dialogue materials were adapted into this survey in order to collect further input from the community. However, this is not an adequate replacement for the community participating in deliberative dialogue together. Through the process of the dialogue, participants must weigh their options by looking at the benefits, costs, and tradeoffs for any action they would like to take. By weighing these options together and deliberating with others they can start to find common ground for action. This usually takes the form of a more defined set of actions people feel offer the most benefit and have tradeoffs they are willing to accept. Although the survey was written using materials which include benefits, costs and tradeoffs, it does not allow for the interpersonal engagement which helps refine people's perspectives. Thus, there was a lot of support for many of the actions included in the issue guide, likely because the costs and tradeoffs were not examined in a survey format as thoroughly as they would have been in a deliberative dialogue format.

There was some diversity within the limited number of survey respondents. Of the 39 people who responded to the final demographic question, a majority of responses were from both full-time and part-time residents, and there was representation in all categories except local business employees. Regarding age, of the 40 who responded, the vast majority fell into the 46-65 range, with some 65 and older and some 26-45. No respondents indicated they were 25 or younger.

The demographics from the survey would indicate diversity, but the total number of respondents suggests that the results are limited. Additional engagement of a broader cross-section of the community, ideally in community dialogues, would better clarify the community priorities. Much work would need to go into convening such dialogues to ensure robust participation. Though significant efforts were made to convene the dialogues as part of this initiative, the turnout clearly indicated that more work needs to be done. Despite the public outreach done, which included Facebook postings, town website notifications, and flyers throughout town, additional

outreach using modes such as radio, television, and mail may be helpful. Stronger partnerships with other community organizations could also assist in bringing the community together. Any actions taken going forward should include community input and participation.

MOPC Recommendations

The MOPC facilitation team offers below its recommendations for potential actions by town staff, officials, and the broader community. The recommendations are guided by and stem from the information gathered across the entire initiative: interviews, surveys, dialogues and conversations.

It should be noted that although the Town Manager position is in transition, the issues raised in this civil discourse initiative have existed for a while and will continue to do so until the Provincetown community decides to make changes and address these together. Efforts should be collaborative in nature, whether town staff or community members are leading them.

1. **Create Rules of Engagement and explicit expectations and consequences for online activity.** Town Talk and the online environment are the driving force for this civil discourse initiative, and people recognize a need to make some changes in order to improve the experience and discourse as well as have more people participate. Most note that it is a relatively small number of participants who initiate the incivility experienced overall, but it is challenging to balance freedom of speech and creating a productive online environment. The majority of the community engaged in this initiative does not desire to eliminate Town Talk entirely because it serves as a convenient and accessible source of information and interaction. People also generally support keeping communication open on the group over eliminating comments altogether. However, people do want to see changes made to the group. Several options exist that are not mutually exclusive:
 - a. Create and adopt Rules of Engagement with explicit expectations for conduct and consequences for violating the rules (e.g., warnings, suspension, removal.) Make them highly visible and transparent by posting them on the Town Talk Facebook Group “Discussion” and “About” section.
 - b. Create official Board/Committee Facebook accounts which members of each board or committee must use in their official capacity. This would separate people’s personal from official profiles and address stated concerns about access to official information.
 - c. Improve moderation. In order to enforce these new rules of engagement, better moderation of the comments and posts on Town Talk is needed. Different ways have been suggested: increase staff time for moderation or have a staff person dedicated to moderation; create a team of moderators consisting of part town staff and part community members; or shift to a model consisting solely of community members. Moderators should receive training in carrying out this role so consistency and neutrality are achieved.

- d. Create and support more empowerment for participants to flag inappropriate comments. Put the power in the hands of participants to help identify and point out violations of the rules. Other participants should support one another in calling out improper conduct (e.g. liking comments or commenting themselves). This will create a culture of shared responsibility for fostering civility online.
2. **Improve access to Town information.** The MOPC team heard repeatedly in interviews and surveys that it can be a challenge to find information and understand it and thus people disengage. Notices of meetings and documents can be hard to find, meeting summaries and reports are often very formal or technical which can be difficult to understand and digest, and it can take weeks for meeting minutes to be posted online. In order for people to participate more fully in town decision-making, they need clear, timely, and easily accessed information to assist them in making decisions. Several suggestions surfaced:
- a. Town Talk has been noted as a good resource for posting meeting notices and sharing information. Postings should be repeated often to ensure optimal visibility.
 - b. People may not know that they can subscribe to board newsletters as ways to keep up-to-date. Share this opportunity with the community via Facebook, on the town website, etc.
 - c. Include 1-2 pages summaries with the most pertinent information for lengthy and/or technical reports.
 - d. Provide a town bulletin board in front of Town Hall where notices, agendas and meeting summaries can be posted.
 - e. Periodically set up an information booth in front of the library or Town Hall as a way to provide information about big topics.
 - f. Post documents in the shortest time possible to help the community stay up-to-date.
 - g. Have PTV tape more meetings and improve the sound of recordings.
3. **Provide leadership and public engagement skills training for town officials and staff.** Many people observe a lack of respect and poor communication among many town officials and also between town officials and the community. People have witnessed infighting, use of uncivil language and tactics, and a lack of interest and belief that community members have something valuable to contribute. These behaviors come at a high cost to Provincetown as people disengage in town affairs and do not want to run for office or serve on boards and committees. Official meetings are often seen as time consuming and ineffective. People recognize that issues are at times due to individual personalities and in part due to lack of skills. The Town has already taken a first step in this direction by engaging consultant Jeff Nutting, former Town Administrator for Franklin, MA to work with the Select Board on July 10, 2019.

Trainings for town officials and staff in areas such as conflict resolution, effective meeting management, collaborative governance, and how to deploy social media in an official capacity could help improve internal and public relations and improve decision-making processes in town.

4. **Explore ways to give more voice to part-time residents.** Early in the initiative, MOPC heard from part-time residents that they want more voice in town affairs and decision-making. They desire being seen as more than just a tax revenue source. Many part-time residents feel viewed only as vacationers, but many reside in Provincetown for a significant period of time each year. Currently, the Town Charter states that they can serve as alternates on non-regulatory boards and committees.

Having a “voice” can mean multiple things: voting in town affairs, serving on boards and committees, speaking at Town Meeting, and feeling welcomed and valuable. Full-time residents are split with regards to how much influence part-time residents should have. Many recognize them as long-time community members who love Provincetown and also have valuable insights and time to engage. However, just as many feel that since they are only part-time in the community, they should not be able to participate in decisions that affect full-time residents.

5. **Explore alternative voting methods to increase participation in town decision-making.** Some community members are concerned about retaliation and/or ridicule for their voting at town meeting, as the hand raising process offers no privacy. Some community members express a desire for alternative means of voting which would reduce this fear. Likewise, people note that alternative means may allow for greater participation, if people are able to vote remotely. Alternative methods may include voting in advance, voting by mail, and/or using ballots or electronic audience response devices to vote privately.
6. **Find opportunities to bring community together around common interests.** Nearly everyone in Provincetown can cite a plethora of factions or groups who feel at odds with others, or simply disconnected from them entirely. Divisiveness can make it easy for people to blame others for issues in town, and this fosters the incivility which keeps the community separated. There is an expressed desire to break down some of these barriers and create more opportunities to bring the community together. Suggestions included:
 - a. **Common Interests.** The strongest common denominator among everyone in the community is their devotion to Provincetown. People shared with MOPC the love they have for the town and the desire to keep it vibrant, protected, and inclusive. A visioning board in the Library or at Town Hall could collect insights from people centered on a few focused questions (e.g., what do you love about Provincetown? what can we do to make it even better?). Organizing opportunities for people to come together to support the town, such as community clean-ups

and fundraisers for a common cause are other ideas mentioned by community members as a way to help build connections. Provincetown already has many events, but most are specific to groups; few celebrate the town as a whole. The upcoming Mayflower anniversary, for instance, could be such an opportunity.

- b. Community Dialogues. In order to foster connections, ongoing informal conversations among community members is a simple approach which does not require much in the way of resources. Models, such as Conversation Cafe (www.conversationcafe.org) provide a basic structure for conversation and can be adapted to any question or topic of interest. No trained facilitators are needed, as the instructions are open-sourced and simple. They require only bringing a small group together around a topic and using the instructions to help guide the conversation. This model could be used to help bring community members together across some of these divides to build connections and improve understanding of one another.
- c. Connection to Town Staff/Officials. Creating more informal opportunities for people to meet with town staff and officials can create an exchange of information and improved understanding. This can help people gain a better sense of the people behind the positions, how government works and its opportunities and limitations, what resources exist and are available, and what members of the community can do to address important issues. This could involve events where the public can meet with officials and staff, potlucks, tabling at community events or in public spaces, or holding open office hours.

Conclusion

This Civil Discourse Initiative surfaced many valuable insights and perspectives from residents and town officials on the incivility issues that the Provincetown community has been grappling with. This public engagement process also generated many suggestions supported by community members for addressing and improving this situation and building more trust and respect towards each other and government institutions. It is hoped that the findings and recommendations from this report can be used as a resource for making improvements and supporting the community in building a vibrant future for the town.

Appendices

- A. Provincetown Summary Report of Survey and Interviews
- B. Dialogue Issue Guide
- C. Themed Responses from Initial Community Survey
- D. Themed Responses and Charts from Second Community Survey