



Community for Understanding and Healing

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Executive Summary of Dialogue Sessions

The purpose of this document is to summarize the key outcomes of four public open forum meetings sponsored by the Community for Understanding and Healing. The public meetings were held at various Kirkwood locations between February 23rd and May 3rd, 2008. Notes from group discussion facilitators and verbatim comments from participants were collected following each meeting and will be summarized below.

History of CFUH

In effort to foster understanding and healing throughout the Kirkwood community following the tragedy of February 7, 2008, the Meacham Park Neighborhood Improvement Association initiated a call for the formation of a community reconciliation group. The group formed in February 2008 and chose the name “Community for Understanding and Healing” (CFUH), and it is led and peopled by community volunteers who believe that any problem in America can be solved if caring Americans respect the dignity of all other human beings in our society and work together in a journey for peace, healing, and reconciliation. (Steering committee members are listed on the CFUH.org website.)

Mission of CFUH

The steering committee identified the following mission statement:

“In the quest to transform the Kirkwood Area into a prejudice-free community of highly respectful individuals, CFUH will initiate ongoing dialogue and social interaction to create an environment of understanding and healing.” -- Community for Understanding and Healing, May, 2008

Dialogue Session Attendance

The first objective of CFUH was to provide an open forum for Kirkwood residents to meet and talk with each other about the February 7th tragedy in order to seek understanding and to identify ways to heal, move forward and grow. To date, four open dialogue sessions have been achieved and the dates and attendance data are listed below.

Date	Location	Large group attendance	Small group dialogue attendance
Feb. 23, 2008	Kirkwood Baptist Church	200	163
March 8, 2008	St. Louis Community College, Meramec Campus	250	243
April 12, 2008	Kirkwood United Methodist Church	260	247
May 3, 2008	Grace Episcopal Church	170	158

Summary of Dialogue Sessions

The first two CFUH dialogue sessions were structured as an open discussion format with only two rules: (1) be honest, (2) be courteous. At these initial two dialogue sessions, three primary themes were identified as issues affecting the Kirkwood community requiring action or additional understanding/discussion or solutions: 1) relationships between citizens and the Kirkwood city government; 2) racism; 3) Meacham Park history and land annexation issues; 4) other.

Based on the discussion in the first two dialogue sessions regarding the perception in the community that the February 7th tragedy involved racial issues and the proximity of April 2008 city elections, the CFUH steering committee arranged for the third and fourth dialogue sessions on April 12th and May 3rd to focus on racism. Additional dialogue sessions are planned to address additional themes.

Date	Dialogue Topic	Outcomes
Feb. 23 and March 8, 2008	Open forum, whatever participants wanted to talk about.	Three key themes emerged: 1. Issues regarding relationship between citizens and city government. 2. Issues regarding racism. 3. Issues regarding Meacham Park History and land annexation.
April 12, 2008	Racism	
May 3, 2008	Racism	

Theme 1: Kirkwood city government

Participants in the dialogue sessions identified a number of concerns and suggestions related to citizen interaction with the Kirkwood city government. The key comments included:

Summary of concerns offered by dialogue participants

1. There is a perceived heavy-handedness, arrogance of power, and lack of listening/understanding by officials.
2. There is a perceived lack of representation for all Kirkwood neighborhoods. Pros and cons of a ward system were discussed.
3. There is a perception of elitism and “old guard” power structure, not open to newer residents.
4. Boards/committees/commissions: There is poor communication exchange between residents and boards/commissions; Mayor and administration control committee and commission appointments and unfairly block certain people; Mayor/council rejects committee recommendations.
5. Problems reported by citizens left unresolved. Lack of follow-through from city boards and commissions.
6. City attorney being perceived as biased, polarizing figure.
7. Citizens being rude to city officials during public meetings.
8. Rules and regulations followed inconsistently by city officials.
9. Bureaucracy, too many hurdles to get something done.
10. Harassment (not just against Blacks) by city government, for example, with making home improvements.

Summary of suggestions offered by dialogue participants

1. Establish ombudsman/mediator position or committee to deal with citizen complaints more effectively than current system.
2. Form a blue ribbon commission/panel to research issues and propose solutions.
3. Provide diversity, communication, sensitivity, and win-win negotiation training to city council and government employees.
4. City council to sponsor town hall meetings, focus groups, etc. to air citizen concerns with follow-through. Periodically hold City council meetings in Meacham Park.
5. Inform city council that citizens want diverse community and businesses.
6. Establish new city position to help citizens navigate city government bureaucracy.
7. Consider impact of “McMansions” as a threat to diversity and cultural mix.
8. Find ways to empower Human Rights Commission.
9. Revise Kirkwood charter. Change rules/laws.
10. Provide a “citizen’s attorney” or funding for legal representation for residents who can’t afford.
11. Video tape council meetings for transparency.

Theme 2: Racism

Participants in the dialogue sessions identified a number of concerns and suggestions dealing with racism in the Kirkwood community. The key comments included:

Summary of concerns offered by dialogue participants

1. Historical and institutional discrimination towards Blacks in Kirkwood never gets duly addressed regarding treatment of residents by city officials and local businesses, and this causes distrust of city government.
2. There is a concern about the lack of black-owned businesses in Kirkwood.
3. Education system: lack sufficient numbers of Black teachers; lack sufficient Black parent participation (perhaps because they feel they are not welcome). The “Black experience” is not taught in schools. Schools and many teachers do not take on social interaction and integration issues.
4. Segregation: voluntary segregation exists in everyday social interaction, church congregations, in the business district and in the schools (for example, at the lunch table).
5. Perception that Kirkwood’s affluent resident majorities do not understand or fully recognize “white privilege”.
6. Black youths in Kirkwood perceived as having a sense of hopelessness, apathy, and discouragement, less so for athletes; Black youths perceived as not feeling as comfortable at Community Center.
7. There is a perception that the local media may be biased, portraying Blacks negatively.
8. There is a perception that Blacks are more frequently harassed by police and the perception that this may be ordered or encouraged by city officials.

Summary of suggestions offered by dialogue participants

1. Provide tools and resources to inform and educate community residents on racism (for example, use tools and resources from groups like the Anti-Defamation League, Focus St. Louis, Diversity Awareness Partnership, book bibliographies, recommended reading lists and web sites).
2. Provide community social events to encourage cross-racial interaction especially in one-on-one settings.
3. Encourage social integration in churches, businesses and schools.
4. Hire more Black teachers.

Theme 3: Meacham Park history and land annexation issues

Participants in the dialogue sessions identified a number of concerns and suggestions dealing with Meacham Park history and land annexation issues in the Kirkwood community. The key comments included:

Summary of concerns offered by dialogue participants

1. Perception that the annexation of Meacham Park to Kirkwood negatively impacted residents of Meacham Park. For example, property values increased and there is limited affordable housing; some homeowners ended up with 3 concurrent part-total 30-year mortgages which carried termination restrictions and perceived them as 90 year mortgages; some homeowners feel they were not justly compensated for land buyout and allege possible eminent domain/TIF abuses.
2. Perception that Meacham Park is separate and isolated from Kirkwood. Big Bend creates a dividing line between the two communities. Local newspapers and food not delivered.
3. Issues of Meacham Park are not just racially based. Economics plays a big part. Less affluent need jobs, education opportunities and health care opportunities.
4. Perception that Meacham Park residents take less pride in their community than Kirkwood residents. Majority of Meacham Park residents are renters and less likely to participate in neighborhood association.
5. Perception that Meacham Park is haven for crime and drugs.
6. Perception that redevelopment of the Turner School does not serve the Meacham Park community.

Summary of suggestions offered by dialogue participants

1. Compile and publish history of Meacham Park and annexation and include Meacham Park residents in the process.
2. If wrongdoings occurred regarding land annexation, provide acknowledgement and seek reconciliation.
3. Find ways to change perception that Meacham Park is a crime and drug haven.
4. Find ways to encourage greater access and connection to Meacham Park to eliminate separation and isolation.
5. Provide programs on violence prevention.

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