

# IMAGINE FOX CITIES

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## ***What We Heard...***

Late in 2017, a group of community members met to discuss how the Fox Cities might benefit from looking ahead a generation or two and imagine what kind of community we might want to be. What would we want for our children and grandchildren as they live their lives in this place? What if, as a community, we could really give some thought to our place and what we value here and then actually plan for the future we want? Could we, as a community of diverse individuals, create a shared vision and work toward that? Just imagine what we might accomplish for the next generations if we tried. So we decided to do just that: ***Imagine Fox Cities.***

We started by gathering a diverse group of 32 community members and planned how we could take the pulse of the region. We then set out to listen. We listened to understand why people like it here. We listened to how people celebrate our past and what we have accomplished. We listened to learn of ongoing efforts to strengthen our community. We listened to understand what we could collaboratively improve. We listened to each other grapple with challenges faced here. We listened to learn people's dreams for their children and grandchildren who might make this their home. We listened in order to reflect, to imagine the Fox Cities in years to come, and bring that to life.

The Imagine Fox Cities listening process used multiple approaches and was conducted over a six-month span. We conducted a well-being survey with nearly 3,000 community members that reflected our community demographics. The survey was offered online in English, Spanish, and Hmong. It was also printed and distributed in public locations and via local organizations. Not only did this create a baseline for our collective and individual well-being, it also gave people a way to give straightforward feedback to open-ended questions.

Twenty-eight facilitators convened 81 small group conversations with people from many walks of life. They asked a series of open-ended questions, "How do we feel the Fox Cities measures up in providing us a place to live that maximizes our well-being? What do we love about our community, where are we falling short, and why might we feel that not all are thriving here? What would we want to change for the future? What might we work to retain?" We sought to listen to as many different perspectives as possible so that our vision would be true to who we are, from Kaukauna to Neenah and everyone in between. We also started using a "community digital hearth" technology that can capture conversations automatically in the voice of the speaker and create an even more authentic way to learn about our community. Fourteen community members used the Appleton Public Library as a central, public space to review and display thousands of comments from the conversations and surveys, place them on sticky notes, and combine them to find key themes.

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The logo consists of a red square containing the words "IMAGINE", "FOX", and "CITIES" stacked vertically in a white, sans-serif font. "IMAGINE" is at the top, "FOX" is in the middle, and "CITIES" is at the bottom.

IMAGINE  
FOX  
CITIES

## HERE ARE THE KEY THEMES WE HEARD AND LEARNED:

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### 1.) We Have a Strong Sense of Community, but Not All Are Feeling It

The desire to live in a community where people feel as if they belong and are supported was a common sentiment. Overall, people see the strong sense of community as one of the hallmarks of living in the Fox Cities. Many people expressed how they feel supported and cared about by fellow community members. However, there were also many who felt or experienced the Fox Cities as not welcoming to all community members. Some of us worry that growth, technology, and societal changes are posing a threat to this key community attribute.

#### ***Maintaining community organizations and spaces that connect us...***

We have many local institutions in place to support our sense of community, such as strong local neighborhoods, community-based organizations like the YMCA, places of worship, libraries, and farmers' markets. All of these are critical for connecting us, and we do not want to lose them. We also have room for real growth, to create places, spaces, and events that encourage the participation of our diverse community. This is critical "social infrastructure" that helps us maintain real relationships when the digital age sometimes divides us and undermines our empathy and sense of humanity.

#### ***Supporting family is big for us, and it's changing...***

Our community has always put a strong value on family. We think that strong families are as important as ever. We want to expand opportunities to prepare and support parents as they guide children across the developmental phases, ensuring that all families have the ability to thrive.

➔ ***"Many of the events are family-focused with narrow definition of what 'family' is: all related by blood, straight, with two kids."***

#### ***Recognizing that it's time to advance equity and inclusion...***

Our community has a more diverse population than it did a generation ago. While many long-time residents and the majority, white population consider the Fox Cities to be an open and accepting place, racial and ethnic minorities, as well as members of the LGBTQ community, don't always experience it this way. We need to create more physical and organizational "spaces" that reflect our diversity and where everyone belongs. There is a real opportunity to be inclusive and to advance equitable prosperity.

➔ ***"I feel that there are a large variety of businesses that support people's interests. It makes people feel they belong when there are specialty stores that are akin to personal interests."***

➔ ***"Not very open to outsiders or new people; the predominance of white people who haven't spent much time in more diverse groups/cities."***

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### 2.) We Prize Our Cultural and Natural Assets

Our community has an abundance of cultural and natural physical assets. It's what distinguishes us from other regions, and many of us take full advantage. We recognize that these assets will not automatically maintain themselves; we need to support and fund them. We need to be mindful to ensure these cultural venues and outdoor opportunities meet the needs of an increasingly diverse community.

#### ***Providing many, different cultural experiences is a source of pride...***

We value our arts institutions such as the PAC and Bergstrom Mahler Museum, as well as other cultural offerings such as Mile of Music, Octoberfest, Bazaar After Dark, food truck rallies, and concerts, such as PorchaPalooza in Menasha. We want to build on this culture, which is such a big part of our quality of life—and a real plus for attracting and retaining talent.

- ➔ ***"We are a small enough community to feel connected to one another and large enough to have amenities that improve life."***
- ➔ ***"We have a small town feel with big city options".***
- ➔ ***"Lack of initiative on creating public events. Outside of local bars on Friday and Saturday nights, people go elsewhere to experience fun filled events like Madison, Chicago, or St. Paul."***
- ➔ ***"One of the better examples is Bazaar After Dark being moved from town to town within the community, which promotes people to visit other towns that they may never had thought of isiting."***

#### ***Growing appetite for more and different cultural outlets...***

We are interested in continuing to expand and diversify opportunities and places to connect, find entertainment, and learn—from new eateries, art of all kinds, repurposing of underutilized real estate and vacant store fronts, intergenerational and youth led activities, celebrating Pride, enhanced multicultural programming at schools, community gardens, and activities to include options for persons of differing abilities.

- ➔ ***Bold Idea: "Build a Multi-Cultural Community Center."***
- ➔ ***"Community events that bring together a diverse group of people to share ideas and engage with each other. Community art, education and health initiatives all play an important role in this aspect."***
- ➔ ***"As a new parent, I love how family friendly the Valley is and the festivals/activities always going on. I also appreciate the constant updates throughout the city."***

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### ***Engaging in outdoor activities is a big part of who we are...***

The Fox Cities are surrounded by natural beauty and opportunities for relaxation and outdoor activity. From the Fox River itself to the many parks and growing number of bike trails to Lake Winnebago and nature preserves, there is plenty available for the outdoor sports enthusiast, for families, and for anyone to spend time outside.

- ➔ *"We have all four seasons. Bike paths are beginning to connect and be more usable. Access to rivers, trails and parks, like Heckrodt Wetland Reserve and 1000 Islands Environmental Center in Kaukauna. We are close to other things, not in the Fox Cities, such as state parks and lakes."*
- ➔ *"The Fox Cities are a wealthy set of communities, but the long-term planning for ecological sustainability is not there. We need more stringent regulations on industry in the area, including paper companies and large-scale agriculture that both have potential harmful effects to the water supplies. ... With the wealth we have we should be a national leader on sustainability."*

### **3.) There Is a Will—and We Are Looking for Ways—to Ensure Meaningful Employment and Livable Wages**

While our community sees the current employment environment as an asset, we acknowledge that it is important to continuously diversify employment opportunities and strengthen wages. Our future generations will only be able to flourish if they can access good jobs, across the community, with healthy work environments—and our businesses must thrive in order to provide them.

### ***Attracting employers to enliven traditional industries...***

While we have a strong foundation of employers, we need to continue to attract businesses that will increase the number of stable and rewarding jobs for high school and college graduates.

- ➔ *"We need better tax scenarios to attract business. Becoming an attractive community to lure more business and industry."*
- ➔ *"We have lots of trade school options. I came from out of state, and these options were not available back home. I know people who recently graduated and are now making a great living."*

### ***Meeting the needs of the whole employee...***

Many businesses in the Fox Cities provide well-paying jobs that support our community members in providing for themselves and their families and help set the stage to enjoy a strong quality of life. Our employers increasingly recognize the needs of the whole employee and are offering workplaces that are healthy, safe, and supportive.

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- ➔ *“Employers not realizing how childcare cost and quality affects the workers’ mental health and productivity while at work.”*
- ➔ *“Educated workforce—Jeremiah program is supporting single parents pursuing higher education.”*

### **Planning for the jobs of the future....**

Our communities must deepen our commitment to training/re-training the existing workforce to prepare for greater automation. We need to expand our approaches to on-the-job training, mentorship, and partnerships with educational and vocational institutions. Increased support for entrepreneurship and growth of tech jobs could help diversify the types of companies and positions available. Our region has the opportunity to innovate to provide more benefits such as a Fox Cities Retirement Plan, a living wage, and 30-hour workweeks to help combat part-time employment and low/stagnant wages.

- ➔ ***Bold Idea:** “Add a position at the middle schools/high schools for developing programs to teach the value of hard work and preparation for future. I know there is career planning, yet it is a one-off session. We need ongoing touchpoints with students as a whole to help them understand and learn that their futures are dependent on what they learn and do (work, lead, join clubs) now.”*
- ➔ *“I worry about the brain drain leaving our community. Many of our young people go off to school and do not return.”*

### **4.) Education Is a Critical Bridge to Our Shared Future**

Our many educational institutions are some of our community’s greatest strengths. Our local schools are a draw for businesses recruiting new employees. Many families have choices for enrolling their children in the type of school they feel will be the best fit. There also exist disparities across school districts around funding, arts and other enrichment activities, as well as student supports.

### **Engaging the family and early childhood education are essential...**

We want to support parents in preparing children to be lifelong learners. Our families’ work schedules, competing priorities, and understanding of what practices can be most impactful influence student readiness. We want all children in the Fox Cities to have access to high quality early childhood education. To achieve this we recognize resources will be needed to improve access opportunities and more adequately compensate early childhood educators.

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- ➔ *“Promoting and funding education at all levels. Education creates opportunities for people to evolve and grow at all ages.”*
- ➔ *“Children are not receiving necessary early childhood experiences in a time of critical brain development.”*

### **Prioritizing inclusion and innovation...**

We recognize education as fundamental to experiencing high levels of health and well-being and want to meet different types of learners where they are to help ensure all children have the opportunity to thrive. Our online classrooms, vocational tracks, expanded language options, and access to technology provide a good start. Focusing on student strengths, using multiculturally representative curricula, and expanding supports for first generation college applicants and those poised to pursue employment immediately after high school graduation are among the bold ideas for the future.

- ➔ *“We need to improve the cultural sensitivity in our teachers. We have a general sense of multicultural incompetence.”*
- ➔ *“STAR (Scholars on Target to Achieve Results) is an academic engagement intervention program for middle & high school black / African American students in the Appleton and Menasha school districts.”*
- ➔ *“Too much focus on the higher education 4-year option opposed to tech schools.”*

### **Supporting the whole child to thrive in a changing world...**

Our students arrive at school as more than just learners. We want to support the whole child by providing a well-rounded education that fosters a culture of respect, prepares them for the activities of daily living, and develops values-driven citizens. We endeavor to celebrate every child's uniqueness and support children in matching their gifts to a purpose-filled life. There are pockets of effective programs and student resources, and we need to lift up the best of these and launch others.

- ➔ *“Music is a birthright!”*
- ➔ *Bold Idea: “Life skills training throughout K-college (spread from Winnebago County).”*
- ➔ *Bold Idea: “IEP for every student (academic, social, emotional).”*

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### 5.) Our Mental Health Is Clearly on the Collective Radar

We have a concern about the decline in mental health across the nation and our region. We are also concerned with how it has been stigmatized. We recognize that mental health is more than an issue or a disease—mental illness is part of being human, and we can be proactive about boosting mental well-being. Our community is starting to take some important steps to better understand mental health and address some of the contributing factors such as trauma, anxiety, financial or physical insecurity, and isolation.

#### ***Realizing it's time to talk about mental health...***

Many in our community named the need to broaden the conversations about mental health. It is a topic that is difficult because of longstanding stigmas associated with individuals suffering from mental health challenges. Not talking about mental health merely perpetuates and escalates the challenges for those suffering in silence.

- ➔ ***“Everyone in the Fox Cities is ‘happy, happy, happy.’ It’s such a great place to live. I would agree, we have a good community, but many feel they need to put on their ‘happy face’ and hide all mental health issues. There are a lot of stigmas that need to be broken, and people need to feel OK to open up about how they are truly feeling. Mental health is a major concern.”***

#### ***Improving access to various mental health services...***

Many people reported that health care in the Fox Cities is easy to access and of excellent quality. Mental health care was another story. Even those who have access to good physical care find somewhat limited resources for behavioral health services, and what is available may well be unaffordable. The most vulnerable among us are most likely to experience less affordability and access to sustainable, quality care. There is strong support for early identification and a network of services to help manage the impacts of poor mental health.

- ➔ ***“Catalpa was developed to provide greater access to mental health resources for our youth.”***
- ➔ ***“Mental health access (appointments have a RIDICULOUS wait time!), actually being able to access the support that is needed in this area, and all support related to deaf and hard of hearing needs, especially mental health!”***

#### ***Boosting mental health and resilience...***

We recognize there are many drivers of our mental health. One challenge that cuts across all groups—a real sense of connection and belonging—is especially challenging for our marginalized populations. We’re interested in being proactive in promoting good mental health and growing resiliency skills for people at all ages/stages and through the engagement of our schools, places of worship, and employers. We are also interested in finding ways to connect vulnerable or isolated people to the larger community.



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- ➔ *“NEW Mental Health Alliance is helping to understand mental well-being at a system level.”*

### **6.) The Future Will Require New Ways of Thinking, Learning and Working Together**

Many of us consider the Fox Cities region to be a very collaborative place. We have plenty of examples of projects that demonstrate our ability to come together and get results. The big challenges and opportunities we are sure to face in the future will demand new and deeper forms of collaboration—across institutions, geographies, and between people.

#### **Maximizing regional collaboration and maintaining local autonomy...**

We are a community that encompasses multiple smaller governmental units. There is a strong identity and history with each of our communities, which serves us well and creates real and perceived barriers around turf. It can sometimes feel as if the bigger communities, particularly Appleton, are where all the interest and power rest. Wrestling with regional tensions is not new. Many feel it's time to find new mechanisms or processes to effectively solve problems and plan for future generations together—including considering ways to moderate redundancies in services.

- ➔ *“I love that the greater Fox (Cities) area is made up of many small communities. We have access to a lot of great ‘big city’ opportunities, but are able to raise our family in a ‘small town’ feel.”*
- ➔ *“The extreme level of Balkanization of local governance in the area. There are just waaaay too many cities, villages, townships, counties, school districts, etc. for the population that they serve, and there are too many hard feelings between them.”*

#### **Growing the culture of people helping people...**

Institutions can provide essential services, but people can care for each other. In other words, we can't just rely on our institutions, with limited budgets, to do the work that members of our community can do: for example, raising our kids into caring neighbors and citizens, supporting new parents, and engaging isolated seniors. These behaviors are part of a culture.

- ➔ *“When crap happens, we're great at helping each other out. Power down? Your neighbor fires up his generator and runs a single extension cord to several houses so the refrigerators all keep running. Kid with cancer? We'll have a fundraiser to help mom and dad pay the bills. Flat tire on the side of the road? Someone will stop and help - someone with tools and the knowledge how to use them. That willingness to help your neighbor helps us all.”*
- ➔ *“Removing stigma from leveraging programs of support.”*



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### ***Sharing a stake in our desired future...***

While this region has benefited from strong civic leadership, including business, nonprofit, and governmental leaders, it is usually the same actors who are shaping decisions. We need and have the opportunity to share leadership with the next generation and groups of people who have not had a strong say or felt a stake in the future. We have a lot of untapped leadership capacity here that we should make space for and help to cultivate.

- ➔ *“I hear many leaders in our community say ‘this is how we do things’ or they say they want new blood, but still want things done their way. They don’t actually listen or make space for opportunities. The social capital of this community is one I’ve become less interested in being a part of.”*
- ➔ *“Continuous striving for well-thought-out growth, openness to new ideas, engaging young leaders, caring for the needs of all ages of residents, quality education, environmental preservation, seeking input from people of all ages, encouraging of healthy and active lifestyles, among other issues.”*
- ➔ *“We need to identify who is not at the table and bring the table to them. Decisions made in our community seem to be made by, and for, white and upper-middle-class people. If we want all to prosper, we need to shift our thinking to all people.”*



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